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**Family, Sex Addiction and Marriage:  
A Reading of John Cleland's Fanny Hill,  
Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure**

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## Introduction

«Sex is a very powerful, beneficial and necessary stimulus in human life, and we are all grateful when we feel its warm, natural flow through us, like a form of sunshine»<sup>1</sup>.

«Pornography is the attempt to insult sex, to do dirt on it [...] as soon as there is sex excitement with a desire to spite the sexual feeling, to humiliate it and degrade it, the element of pornography enters»<sup>2</sup>.

Borrowing D. H. Lawrence's words, which come from one of his major essays entitled *Pornography and Obscenity* (1929), this thesis tries to deal with the much-discussed issue of pornography in literature. By taking into examination one of the major successes of this particular kind of writing, which has not always been defined as an estimable literary genre, my aim is to analyse John Cleland's well-known novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, commonly known as *Fanny Hill* (1748-49).

This study begins by contextualizing this novel, with a general overview of European erotic-pornographic literature from Classical Greek and Latin authors to Eighteenth-Century works of prose fiction.

Before turning to a specific author as an example of this literary genre, it is important to define pornography and to establish where the boundary between the end of eroticism and the beginning of pornography lies. When in a text sex is depicted in its various forms and colours but does not obstruct

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<sup>1</sup> LAWRENCE, David Herbert, *Late Essays and Articles*, edited by James T. Boulton, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 240.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 241-243.

other human traits, such as emotions, we are probably dealing with an erotic text. On the contrary, when the author's fantasy is limited to the crude description of the sexual act and the characters' traits are nowhere to be found, in short, when sex is everywhere and its primary function is that of arousing and stimulating a physical reaction, then, we are dealing with pornography.

Before arriving at the written form, pornography was expressed through images. Among the first documented pornographic images left by our Eastern ancestors, we find in the greatest of all sexual manuals, the *Kama Sutra*, which is obviously the most popular ever. It was not only Eastern people who liked to depict sexuality. The Westerners people also amused themselves through the depiction of the sexual act. In fact, it must be specified that the word *pornography* has Greek origins and that initially it was used by the Greeks to refer to those artists who painted the sexual life of prostitutes.

Therefore, the first chapter of this thesis will firstly look at the major authors of both the Greek and Latin worlds. It will then analyze works written during the Middle Ages, more precisely the French *fabliaux* and those belonging to the tradition of 'courtly love'. A brief analysis of Boccaccio's *Decameron* will be essential for the understanding of the concept of 'dirty sex' during the Renaissance. Moreover, it will be demonstrated how Italy, thanks to the excesses of Pietro Aretino's writings, represented one of the major centres specialising in pornographic literature. Following in chronological order, the British Sex Comedies of the Seventeenth Century are briefly mentioned as they provide an interesting approach towards sexuality and especially because of their fundamental role in the revitalization of English theatre during the

Restoration. Then, moving on to the next century, this first part of my thesis also includes a quick reference to the French philosopher the Marquis de Sade and his thought.

Assessing the various stages of erotic-pornographic literature in the introductory chapter, the second will focus entirely on John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, which, published between 1748 and 1749, has been considered to be the first pornographic work in English prose. Since it appeared when the genre of the novel was still in its early stages, Cleland's novel deserves the same recognition as its successful contemporaries. As it will be seen, unfortunately, Cleland did not enjoy the same benefits afforded to other writers, in fact he had to clean up his novel by omitting its most scandalous parts. Cleland's life must not have been an easy one and the publication of *Fanny Hill* brought him more troubles than anything else.

The novel tells the story of a young orphaned girl, who, moving to London ends up becoming a prostitute in a bawdy house. After having experienced sex in all its various forms (accounts of lesbianism, sadomasochist sex, orgies), she then abandons prostitution and becomes the faithful wife of her first lover.

As *Fanny Hill* seems to show parallelisms with Richardson's *Pamela*, this thesis will investigate whether Cleland, through the parody form, had planned an Anti-Pamelist novel. It will also look at how sexual materialism is treated in the text and how much Cleland's account of the sex trade differs from real eighteenth-century reports of prostitution.

Another fundamental issue which will be later examined regards the novel's linguistic style and its prevalent phallogentric discourse.

Since in the second chapter I have tried to follow the development of the novel through an analysis of its most significant component parts, I will also examine here the most extreme sexual acts in order to provide explanations for the theory which will be discussed in chapter three.

Considered for many years as just a pornographic novel, Cleland's masterpiece probably contains an hidden meaning which can be explained by the heroine's moralising words at the end of the novel. From pornography to marriage, from sexual freedom to monogamy, from female emancipation to patriarchal repression, that is how, according to masculine ideologies, female sexuality should be controlled.

By examining *Fanny Hill* through the eighteenth-century patriarchal perspective, the third chapter of this study will investigate how male fantasy in literature and male domination in real life may influence female sexuality.

The fact that *Fanny Hill* places itself within a literary tradition is an argument in favour of its worth as a piece of literature. Far from writing in a bubble to exculpate himself of debt, as Cleland would have us believe, *Fanny Hill* is a considered response to a tradition of writing which is as old as literature itself and mostly male-centred.

## **CHAPTER 1: Expressions of eroticism and pornography from the Classical authors to XVIII-Century representations.**

Pornography did not emerge in the Twentieth Century. Its origins go back to the Ancient Greek and Latin world, when neither the website YouPorn nor the American magazine Playboy existed. Today, even though pornography, in its various forms (literature, photography, videos), is recognized as an expression of art, it still remains a difficult subject to deal with. What I will try to do here is to understand pornography as a historical and cultural phenomenon, as the product of different social relationships which have occurred in different places and times.

Even today, among some writers and in some countries, pornographic literature is considered a difficult subject to tackle. First, we must explain what pornography is and what it is about. The word *pornography* derives from the Greek word *pornē* which means 'prostitute' and the word *graphein* meaning 'illustration'. The notion of pornography is already attested in Greece in the Second Century after Christ, when the rhetorician and grammarian Athenaeus used the word 'pornographer' to refer to the artists who represented the theme of bodily love<sup>3</sup>. According to the Oxford English dictionary, the word *pornography* refers to material that «*describe[s] or show[s] naked people and sexual acts in order to make people feel sexually excited*»<sup>4</sup>. As well as stimulating erotic desires, pornography, had also a didactic function in the

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<sup>3</sup> LAURENT, Martin, «Jalons pour une histoire culturelle de la pornographie en Occident», in *Le Temps des Médias* n°1, automne 2003, p.13.

<sup>4</sup> WEHMEIER, Sally, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, London, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 981 [my italics].

past. As the Roman poet Ovid wrote in his *Ars Amatoria*,<sup>5</sup> it is extremely important to offer pleasures and increase one's knowledge of sex and seduction. In Book 3 of the *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid appeals to women because they can satisfy the pleasures of the flesh of the opposite sex. Nevertheless, there is nothing to make us think that there is a domination by men over women. According to Ovid, one person's pleasure is that of the other, especially if it is simultaneous<sup>6</sup>.

Ovid's writings are obviously to be considered among the first steps towards Erotica as a genre, but the first erotic play is ascribable to the Ancient Greek world and belongs to the playwright Aristophanes, author of the masterpiece *Lysistrata*.

In the first chapter of this study I would like to propose an unbiased approach towards erotic literature. Since pornography is a complex topic, due to ethical and moralistic discussions which arose over the centuries, in this chapter I will only focus on the erotic writings from Greek-Roman times to Eighteenth century. I will not bring into discussion negative comments and judgments. The goal of this research is not to start a debate on pornography's legitimacy in the past literary traditions, but rather to analyse pornography through John Cleland's novel *Fanny Hill, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748-1749). In addition, I would like to study the historical, cultural and social aspects of this hugely widespread, universal and timeless topic.

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<sup>5</sup> OVID, *The Art of Love*, quoted in LAURENT, Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> LAURENT, Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 15.



## 1.1 The Greek Erotic World

Born around the year 446 B.C. near Athens, Aristophanes wrote many theatrical comedies, two of which dealt with the theme of sexuality. The first, *Lysistrata* tells of the attempt by the women of Athens to end the war in the Peloponnese by implementing a sort of 'sex strike'. Lysistrata's plan is to arouse sexual desire in Athenian husbands and then deny them any intercourse. The frustration felt by the men leads to peace, and so Lysistrata and her great sense of pacifism will triumph. This play is characterized by its use of a rich and varied vocabulary which is able to express even the most extreme obscenity tastefully. The very names of some characters refer to the sexual sphere, like *Myrrinhe*, which is a vulgar name for female genitalia, or *Kinesias* which refers to sexual intercourse. The names used for the genitals are also unusual: the penis is referred to by allusions such as *chickpea*, *clove*, *bull*; the female genitalia are called *kitchen*, *swallow*, *sea urchin*. Female sexual secretions are called *dew* or *juice*<sup>7</sup>.

The second comedy, *Ecclesiazusae*, translated as *Women in Parliament*, is charged with a sort of feminist ideology where the advent of the woman in the political and male sphere is represented. We have again the character of the woman leader who pushes other women to take arms against men in order to seize power. The woman in this case is Praxagora, who is married to the old and unpleasant Blepyrus. She and other Athenian women, disguised as men, go to the *ekklesia* (the popular assembly) and establish that

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<sup>7</sup> ALEXANDRIAN, Sarane, *Storia della Letteratura Erotica*, Milano, Rusconi libri, 1994, p. 14.

the government will be ruled by women. As a consequence, they will be free to have sexual intercourse with every man they please. The specification of this new government is that every man must be satisfied, with the ugliest ones coming before the rest. The same rule is applied to men, who must have sex with unsightly women before going to bed with the prettier ones. As we have seen in *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes reopens the subject of women involved in political activity and once again depicts the fulfilment of an utopian situation, which inevitably has both positive and negative results. However, it is the comedy arising from unlikely situations such as these, which makes Aristophanes' plays true masterpieces of the past.

As regards the works in prose of the Ancient Greeks, the *Milesian Tales* (unfortunately lost) represent another key step in the development of the erotic genre. These richly erotic short stories, which were originally transmitted orally, were later collected in a book by Aristides of Miletus, and translated into Latin by Lucius Cornelius Sisenna as *Milesiae fabulae*.

Another protagonist of the Greek erotic scene worth mentioning is Sotade, who demonstrated unequalled boldness in his writings by even attacking the Pharaoh Ptolemy Philadelphus, who had married his sister Arsinoe. His licentiousness went so far as showing the temerity to write lines such as: «You're sticking your prick in an unholy hole.»<sup>8</sup> The same licentiousness cost him his life: he fled to the island of Caunus but was caught and then thrown into the sea in a leaden box. Much of what was produced after Sotade, and which was inspired by his obscenity, has been defined “sotadic”.

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<sup>8</sup> ALEXANDRIAN, Sarane, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

An example of this kind of composition is offered by another poet of that age, who devoted himself to works of an erotic nature. His name was Meleager of Gadara. His *Garland* constitutes the first anthology of erotic epigrams dedicated mainly to women, although Meleager was known for his homosexual tendencies.

Gradually, the Ancient Greek world built what for us today forms the basis of erotic-pornographic literature. It is in this very productive context that another prominent figure of that period created what might be considered the oldest pornographic book. The *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, composed by Lucian of Samosata, a Greek writer of Syrian origin, are a total of fifteen dialogues, all of which are very free and filled with realistic details. However, the theme of sexuality is treated with sobriety and Lucian never indulges in tasteless vulgarities. On the contrary, since Lucian is a passionate scholar of Sophistry, in his famous *Dialogues*, he manages to combine philosophy and comedy with a biting tone and a light style<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> LUCIAN, *Lucian Selected Dialogues*, A new translation by C. D. N. Costa, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

## 1.2 The Latin Erotic World

Latin erotic literature makes its first appearance about two centuries later than its Greek counterpart. Although with Plautus, who lived in Rome in the Second Century BC, we have confirmation of the pre-existence of bawdy comedies, it is thanks to Catullus that the erotic literature spread<sup>10</sup>. Born in Verona in 86 BC, Catullus moved to Rome at an early age and became in his adulthood the lover of Clodia, wife of the consul Quintus Metellus Celer. He devoted many of his compositions to her and celebrated her under the name of “Lesbia”. He mostly wrote love poems, but when he discovered that he had been betrayed by the beautiful Clodia, the fiery poet made use of the most obscene language to take revenge upon her.

Also belonging to the time of Augustus, the *Priapeia* are poems dedicated to Priapus, the god of fertility. The *Priapeia* are about ninety poems, divided into two series. The first includes speeches by Priapus who praises his penis. The second one contains a number of votive offerings addressed to the god Priapus so that he will satisfy them. The dedicators are mostly fishermen, courtesans and horticulturalists<sup>11</sup>.

Then comes another Latin author, perhaps the one who best describes the relationship between men and women in the past: Ovid. Born in Sulmona in Abruzzo, he visited several countries including Greece and Egypt, and later moved to Rome. His poetic vocation prompted him to write a collection of poems, entitled *Amores*, a work in which he reveals the secrets of adultery, and

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<sup>10</sup>ALEXANDRIAN, Sarane, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup>PARKER, W. H., *Priapea: Poems for a Phallic God*, London, Croom Helm, 1988.

in particular the intimate secrets of his relationship with Corinna, a married woman. The *Amores*, though centred on a licentious topic, are not vulgar. Ovid represents erotic situations with delicate allusions. As a strong supporter of love, Ovid later wrote the three books consisting of his most famous work, *Ars Amatoria*. The three volumes are a real manual on how love works, how a woman should be approached, and how a man must behave to avoid losing his lover. Constant admiration, eternal devotion and finally tips on how to induce an orgasm in women, are the main pieces of advice offered by Ovid. His recommendations are not intended only for men but also for women. In fact, Ovid teaches them the art of pleasure, telling them which are the best positions during the sexual intercourse. The woman should participate actively and contribute to the success of the relationship, showing all her ardour and uttering soft moans to prove her pleasure, thus creating a climax of passion<sup>12</sup>.

If Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* is a masterpiece of ancient eroticism, *Satyricon* by Petronius is hardly less so, as it is the manual of Latin libertinism. The complete text of his work has not survived, consequently its analysis becomes difficult and is as fragmented as the work itself. The title is misleading because it does not allude to the satirical novel, but to the *satura lanx*<sup>13</sup>, a term used to indicate a mixed platter of fruit and vegetables and often used to refer to the literary genre of the satirical *pastiche*. The main protagonists are Encolpius and Ascyltus, both leading a dissolute life together with a young boy named Giton, who is repeatedly sodomized by his two seniors. The two, who commit a sacrilege in the temple of Priapus, are discovered by the matron Quartilla, and

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<sup>12</sup> ALEXANDRIAN, Sarane, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

punished by flogging and sodomizing, while Giton is forced to rape a seven year-old girl. Many other adventures are narrated in this lewd hotchpotch, many of which are extremely indecent.

Another writer, who stands out in Rome in the first century AD, for his excellent qualities in describing the immorality of his contemporaries is Juvenal. Author of the *Satires*, Juvenal described in detail the various depravities of his characters, some of which are really creepy and disgusting and vent their passions in endless orgies. In addition to the adventures of Empress Messalina, also known as the *Augusta meretrix*, that is the imperial prostitute, another good example is Satire VI, which is considered an expression of misogyny, with its description of the feast of “Bona Dea”. A party for women only, this celebration becomes a stage for fiery lesbians, who in the end will have sex with men too. Besides women, homosexuals are also ironically attacked by Juvenal, in particular in Satire IX.

During the same period in which Juvenal lived, Martial devoted some of his *Epigrams* to the sexual depravity. These, however, were even more racy. Martial picks on lesbians, because they are so arrogant that they want to replace men, as in the case of Filelide, who lifts huge weights in the gym, eats and drinks wine till she vomits, and finally goes to bed with girls. Moreover, Martial lashes out against homosexuals with sarcastic remarks like this: *Mentula cum doleat puero, tibi, Naevole, culus, non sum divinus, sed scio quid facias*<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28; «The boy’s penis is hurting him and, Naevolus, your arse is hurting you. I’m not a sorcerer, but I know what you have done» [my translation].

Reading Martial, we realise through his often indecent and explicit language, how many of the writers of the past conceived sexuality. Often it had no limits.

Considered a masterpiece of Roman decadence, and in the vein of the Milesian Tales, *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius is undoubtedly one of the greatest achievements of erotic literature. Consisting of eleven books, and originally entitled *The Metamorphoses*, and later called *Asinus aureus* by Augustine who read them during the years spent in Carthage, *The Golden Ass* is a text pervaded by eroticism. Here is the plot: Lucio, the protagonist, goes to Thessaly and finds hospitality at Milo's, a man married to the sorceress Panfila. Thanks to the maid Fotides, Lucio witnesses some magic spells. He sees Panfila turn into a bird and he asks Fotides to be transformed into a bird too. But as the maid uses the wrong ointment Lucio is transformed into an ass. The only remedy for him is to eat roses, but unfortunately Lucio is kidnapped by a gang of thieves. From this moment on the adventures of the ass begin with him passing from one master to another, taking part in and hearing various stories along the way.

Although being the work of an ancient trained rhetorician, with a cosmopolitan education (Carthage, Athens, Rome), this astonishing novel looks more like the work of a medieval painter. What is amazing is Apuleius's ability to give humanity and strength to his characters. Witches, adulteresses, murderesses, quacks, cooks, robbers and so on, they are not cardboard figures, but all have solid backs<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> APULEIUS, *The Golden Ass*, with an English translation by W. Allington (1566), London: Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1965.

### 1.3 The Middle Ages, and the flesh

The first attempt to represent pornography in ancient times was clearly different from what followed during the Middle Ages, a period which had inherited from the past the Christian conception that the body and the flesh were perilous instruments of sin. Among the many vices which offended the Christian ethic, lust, also one of the deadly sins, was the most feared and at the same time willingly described during the Dark Ages. Medieval literature reflected this trend, and through the French *fabliaux*, shows us how the Middle Ages enjoyed society's debauchery and licentiousness<sup>16</sup>. Often centred on the theme of the adultery, the *fabliau* is a comic tale full of obscenity and immoral behaviour, in which the main characters are often monks and nuns.

Among the best known *fabliaux* we report here the summary of the *fabliau De trois dames qui trouvèrent un vit*:

Three women on a journey find a large penis on the ground. There ensues a quarrel about which woman will keep it. To settle the argument, they go to a nearby convent to ask the advice of the abbess. The latter examines the object with considerable interest and announces that it is the recently lost bolt from the convent door and that she will therefore keep it. The women, displeased to have their property confiscated, swear never again to solve disputes in that manner; rather, she who finds such an object will keep it and treasure it as a valuable relic, of the sort honored by all women<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> ALEXANDRIAN, Sarane, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> LACY NORRIS, J., *Reading Fabliaux*, Birmingham, AL Summa Publications, 1999, p. 131.



Thanks to these small samples of medieval lust, we see how the fabliaux mocked religion. *L'Evesque qui benei le con*, tells the story of a bishop who has arranged a rendezvous with a bourgeois. The bishop is ready to have intercourse but the lady refuses to have sex with him if he does not bless her vagina first. The 'benedictio vulvae', already indicated in the title, and the solemn 'Amen' pronounced at the end of the bizarre ritual, clearly contribute to add an ironic tone to the story<sup>18</sup>.

However, the characters of these feudal stories are not always men of the church. In the fabliau *Du Chevalier qui fit les cons parler*, translated as *The Knight Who Made Cunts Speak*, the main protagonist is, as the title itself suggests, a glorious knight who has received by three fairies, the gift of making vaginas speak. This power enables the knight to win a bet with a countess, who incredulous, put some cotton in her genitalia. But as the fairies recommended, if in the case of an impediment, the arse would then answer<sup>19</sup>.

However, we cannot define the Middle Ages solely as the epoch of lust and depravity, in fact it is also and above all, the age that saw the flowering of the concept of the *courtly love*. The invention of this concept can be traced back to William of Aquitaine, who argued that love was a divine mystery and not a sin, and that the woman was a goddess to worship. Obviously, the woman had to demonstrate a good deal of virtue in order to be adored. Thus emerged the first troubadour poets, particularly in southern France, Germany and England. Although they dedicated their poems to women married to feudal lords, their purpose was not to possess the ladies. All they asked was to see

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<sup>18</sup> HERTOOG, Erik, *Chaucer's Fabliaux as Analogues*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 1991, p. 204.

<sup>19</sup> ALEXANDRIAN, Sarane, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

them or receive a pledge from them<sup>20</sup>. The figure of the woman dominates the poetry of the troubadours, who thus place themselves in a state of total submission. Love is understood as a feudal service rendered to the woman, whose moral code is based on three principles: virtue, honour and fervour<sup>21</sup>.

Rules and advice on how to woo and love a woman in the Middle Ages were codified by the theorist Andreas Capellanus<sup>22</sup>, which wrote a manual of erotology entitled *De Amore*, and then translated in English as *The Art of Courtly Love*. This is certainly not the first attempt to present the theme of love in the form of a code of conduct, as it has already been discussed in the previous pages of this research, we have examples of the almost same practice in classical antiquity with Ovid's *The Art of Love*, which Capellanus almost certainly took as a model.

The *De Amore*, divided into three parts, takes the form of a long letter of advice from the author to a fictional character named Walter. In the three books Capellanus tells us how to find love, how to preserve it and finally how to be cured from its wounds. In addition, Capellanus distinguishes three kinds of love: pure love, mixed love, and mercenary love<sup>23</sup>.

A colossal figure of the period that saw the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance is undoubtedly the Florentine Giovanni Boccaccio. Born in 1313, the son of a Florentine merchant, Boccaccio was gifted in the arts and literature from an early age. In approximately 1336,

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<sup>20</sup> BISHOP, Clifford, *Sex and Spirituality: ecstasy, ritual and taboo*, London, Thorsons Pub., 2004.

<sup>21</sup> CHINES, Loredana, *Dalle origini al Cinquecento*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2007, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> The English translation of this name would be Andrew the Chaplain. But the Latin version Andreas Capellanus is preferred.

<sup>23</sup> ALEXANDRIAN, Sarane, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

whilst in love with Maria d'Aquino, nicknamed Fiammetta, he wrote her the novel *Filocolo*. After witnessing and surviving the terrible plague of 1348, Boccaccio began writing the *Decameron* in 1349. This brilliant work, which makes him one of the greatest writers of his time, along with Dante and Petrarch, was conceived with an original framework<sup>24</sup>. The novel is set near Florence during the period in which the city was devastated by the plague. A group of rich youths decide to flee from the infected Florence to an abandoned villa in the countryside. Here they start telling stories to kill time. One hundred novellas divided into ten days compose the *Decameron*. The structure and the framework are not the only innovations in Boccaccio; the way in which he breaks with past Italian literary tradition as regards the role of sexuality is undoubtedly one of his main skills<sup>25</sup>. As Boccaccio belongs to the Early Renaissance, a period which saw a profound interest in human desires, his novellas highlight the spontaneity of love and lust. We find several examples of this careful mix in almost all the stories, and to better understand Boccaccio's purpose, we quote here the fourth story of the first day of the *Decameron*:

In a monastery crammed with monks and holiness lived a young monk whose youthful vigor neither fasting nor vigils could subdue. One day about noontime when all the other monks were asleep, he was walking near his church when he saw a very beautiful young girl, perhaps the daughter of some neighboring labourer, gathering herbs in a field. After striking up a conversation

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<sup>24</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> MAHONEY, Edward P. (ed.), *Philosophy and Humanism: Renaissance essays in honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, Leiden, Brill, 1976, p. 340.

with her, he was able to lead her unseen into his cell. And while he was sporting with her less cautiously than he should have, they were overheard by his abbot. Thinking that he heard the shuffling of feet outside his door, the young monk peered through a little crack in the door and saw clearly that the abbot was standing there. But he saved himself from punishment by a clever stratagem. After a short while he went to the abbot and told him that he was going out to finish gathering some wood he had cut. During his absence the old abbot went to the monk's cell to take a look for himself at the girl who was there. A short while later the young monk was able to reverse their former roles as he spied the two of them through an opening, the old abbot lying on his back and the young girl on top of him. Later when the abbot scolded him and ordered him imprisoned the young blade of a monk promptly retorted, «Sir, forgive me! I have not been a member of St. Benedict's order for long enough to know every detail of it. Besides, you had not yet shown me that women should lie as heavily on men as fasts and vigils. But now that you have shown me, forgive me, and I promise never to sin that way again. Indeed, I will always do as I have seen you do!». Stung by these words, the abbot pardoned the monk and they quietly put the girl out of the monastery – but then, Boccaccio in concluding his tale adds, «you may be sure they let her in again, many a time thereafter»<sup>26</sup>.

The fourth novella of the fifth day, to which critics often refer to as *The Song of the Nightingale*, is a funny tale in which the protagonists are two young lovers named Ricciardo and Caterina. Caterina, kept under the constant watch of her father, hatches a plan to see her lover at night: she persuades her father to move her bed near the balcony so that she could fall asleep listening a

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

nightingale singing. Ricciardo would then join her. At dawn, the two of them burnt out by the passionate night spent together, fall asleep. When in the morning Caterina's father discovers them naked and exposed, insisting that they now have to marry, with a humorous metaphor he declares that «the nightingale shall prove to have been put in his own cage and not in that of another»<sup>27</sup>.

Most of the novellas are permeated with comic eroticism, but sometimes it turns into tragedy, as happens to the friar (Brother Alberto) who seduces a woman (Lisetta) making her believe that he is the Archangel Gabriel and that he is in love with her. When the sexual affair is discovered by the community, Brother Alberto is humiliated and then imprisoned ( Fourth Day, second Tale )<sup>28</sup>.

Unfortunately, Boccaccio's licentiousness was not appreciated and shared by many of his contemporaries. Only few recognized his talent in representing a subject so rich in realism; as the humanists of the time preferred reading erudite works rather than familiarize themselves with the *Decameron*, its influence in Italy was belated. Even in France its reception was late and vague; translated in 1414 under the title *Caměron*, the work of Boccaccio did not receive the credit it deserved<sup>29</sup>.

Thirty-six years after the *Decameron*, in England, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote one of the greatest books of the Middle Ages: the *Canterbury Tales*. The

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<sup>27</sup> BOCCACCIO, Giovanni, *Decameron*, English translation by RIGG, J. M. 1903, found in *Decameron Web*, project of the Italian Studies Department's Virtual Humanities Lab at Brown University, [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/index.php](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/index.php) [accessed on October, 15th 2012].

<sup>28</sup> ALEXANDRIAN, Sarane, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 59.

*Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories told by a group of pilgrims who make their way to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket. Given that several documents prove that Chaucer had been in Italy to carry out diplomatic missions, we can assume that he had read or at least heard of the *Decameron*. Between the two works in fact, there is a clear similarity in terms of the structure. However, Boccaccio and Chaucer had different purposes. If in the first it is possible to see an interest in innovation and a strong motivation to deepen the understanding of human desires, in the second, although a great work, the interest lies elsewhere.

#### 1.4 The Italian Renaissance and the growing market for eroticism

Considered a central figure of the Italian Renaissance, Pietro Aretino is commonly remembered, studied, appreciated and possibly hated for being the author of obscene writings. As Aretino's assaults spared no one, his contemporaries usually referred to him as the possessor of «the most horrible, vituperous and ribald tongue ever born».<sup>30</sup> Aretino, actually, owes his reputation to two works in particular: the *Ragionamenti*, known also as the *Dialogues*, and the *Sonetti Lussuriosi*.

The *Ragionamenti* appeared in two parts, the first in 1534, the second in 1536. The protagonists of these dialogues are two courtesans, the young Antonia and the more experienced Nanna. The subject of the conversation concerns the future of Nanna's daughter, Pippa, who is approaching womanhood. Having herself been a nun, a wife and a whore, Nanna wonders which is the best condition for a woman. Recounting her past experiences, Nanna, tries to compare them to decide which is the most beneficial<sup>31</sup>. Among the many supporters of the libertine vision inaugurated by Pietro Aretino, was the young patrician Lorenzo Venier, author of the pornographic poem *La Puttana Errante*. The poem, consisting of four chants, is addressed to the prostitute Elena Ballarina, accused of stealing the author's bag. Apparently, Venier liked to blame prostitutes in his writings. In the poem *La Zaffetta*, in fact, the author lashes out against a prostitute who denies him the sexual

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<sup>30</sup> FRANCO, Niccolò, *Rime contro Pietro Aretino con la Priapea*, quoted in HUNT, Lynn, *The invention of pornography: obscenity and the origins of modernity, 1500-1800*, New York, Zone Books, 1993, p. 51.

<sup>31</sup> MOULTON, Ian Frederick, *Before pornography: erotic writing in early modern England*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 130.

intercourse. Both the two poems contain strong violence and a use of rough metaphors.<sup>32</sup>

At the end of the fifteenth century, thanks to the advent of printing, the genre of representation that we commonly call *pornography*, no longer needed to hide itself in the many manuscripts that circulated privately. A considerable contribution to the spread of the concept of *pornography* also came from the engravings of some artists of the time, including Marcantonio Raimondi and Agostino Carracci.<sup>33</sup> Of course, the printed erotic and immoral materials that started to circulate in the Renaissance society represented a danger for the main authority, namely the Church. So it was that in 1559 the Index of Forbidden Books was established.<sup>34</sup>

Although the main purpose of the censorship was to annihilate prohibited literature, the result was, instead, a consolidation of the emerging genre. Actually, the Index, by banning the circulation of the licentious texts, did nothing but increase the interest of the readers. For this reason, many texts and engravings, like Raimondi's *The Sixteen Pleasures* or *The Postures*, had to exist in manuscript form. Their existence, even though placed at the margins of the new print culture, largely contributed to the growth of pornographic culture.<sup>35</sup>

As pioneers of the illicit porn market, Aretino and Raimondi with their cleverness, managed to combine their talents by merging together sonnets and images.

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<sup>32</sup> VENIERO, Lorenzo, *La Puttana Errante*, Paris, Isidore Liseux, 1883.

<sup>33</sup> HUNT, Lynn *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 55.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58.





Figure 1 Reproduction of Aretino's first posture from the original engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi (1524)<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p.68.

### 1.5 British Sex Comedies in the Seventeenth Century

After listing the various erotic works of Greek-Latin antiquity, Middle Ages and Italian Renaissance, this study will now analyse the works of English libertine literature in the Seventeenth Century. Obviously, it is essential to consider the context in which they emerged.

The Seventeenth Century was the century of monarchical changes (the Commonwealth's period), and religious conflicts between the Anglican and Catholic Churches. Religion was a very popular topic in the literature of the time. *Paradise Lost* (1667) by J. Milton and *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-1684) by J. Bunyan are obvious examples of this religious trend. When the Commonwealth was abolished in 1660, and Charles II, after the long exile in France, came back to England to take back his throne, he brought with him the theatrical French tradition. As during the Interregnum, theatrical activity had been banned, when Charles II regained his throne, theatres re-opened and English writers started to look for new models to follow. French libertine theatre was the model par excellence.

Restoration theatre, with its sex comedies, reflected the new spirit of the time. With the first women actresses on the English public stage, comedies started to express new necessities and also implied new visions of the theatre itself. Actually, the presence of real and most of the time half-naked women on the stage, generously contributed in charging the comedies with sexuality and eroticism.

Among the many plays which exploited the introduction of female actresses, probably William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675) and George Etherege's *She Would if She Could* (1668), are to be considered great examples of the new Restoration theatre in which, adultery, fornication and promiscuity were the main subject matters. The success of the first actresses was also due to the *breeches parts*, which were seduction scenes in which the actresses, disguised as males, showed the audience their naked breasts. The plays contained a strong erotic language and explicit suggestions to the male audience to interact with the actresses after the spectacle. Indeed, some of the actresses had to please the male theatre-goers, not only with their acting, but also with forced prostitution<sup>37</sup>.

In addition to the introduction of the first actresses, the success of Restoration theatre was also due to the development of a certain kind of comedy, more precisely the *comedy of manners*, that is a play in which the main purpose was to satirize the manners and customs of Seventeenth-century society. Arriving almost at the end of the Restoration period, the author who most demonstrated both the characteristics and topics of this new genre was William Congreve. His works, still nowadays considered as masterpieces, are very interesting as they combine both the *comedy of manners* and the *comedy of intrigue*. The comedy *Love for Love* (1695) may function as a demonstration of Congreve's ability to explore the complexities and deceptions of contemporary society. Full of *witty conversations*, the play deals with issues such as sexual conquest, class and gender relations and ultimately with marriage.

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<sup>37</sup> Actually, during the Restoration, actresses were usually considered prostitutes and men could have sex with them. This happened with the consent of the company's manager, who believed that this kind of exploitation was a successful means of attracting audiences.

Though it may seem frivolous, Restoration theatre has left a rich literary heritage and has contributed to prove the greatness of the English theatre. Despite this, Restoration writers had to suffer the attacks of many critics such as Jeremy Collier, who in 1698 published the pamphlet *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*. Praising the Roman and Greek theatres and condemning the English one, thus, in the preface the critic confesses that: «I have no Ceremony for Debauchery. For to Complement Vice, is but one Remove from worshipping the Devil»<sup>38</sup>.

However, during the Seventeenth Century, not only the theatre was filled with eroticism, in fact, English poetry was too, making use of a satirical and light tone, expressing its support for licentiousness.

Famous for his dissolute lifestyle, the poet John Wilmot, second Earl of Rochester, was a prominent figure of Charles II's court. His immoral conduct as well as his writings, many of which were full of unorthodox and pornographic contents, cost him several expulsions from the court. Anyway, his fame, associated primarily with offensive and profane works, deserves a place in the history of English literature since he was a very talented pioneer of the verse technique. Among his major works it is worth mentioning his satirical poem *A Satire Against Mankind* (1679), and *Artemisia to Chloe* (1679). Moreover, a work entitled *Sodom, or the Quintessence of Debauchery* was also attributed to Wilmot but, as it seems that no reliable sources exist, its authorship may be questioned.

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<sup>38</sup> COLLIER, Jeremy, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, New York; London, Garland Publ., 1972.

As pornography and satire often go hand in hand, modern critics sustain that authors such as Wilmot had to attack social conventions in order to help people understand and recognize their own sinful inclinations.

## 1.6 The Lord of French Machlosophy: de Sade

In the previous pages of this research, through the analysis of the *fabliaux*, it has been argued that sexuality was a widespread topic in French literature. Indeed, French erotic literature reached its highest level of obscenity during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, becoming the real fashion of the *ancien régime*. The production of the pornographic literature that we still read today, increased in particular in the period from 1770 to 1800, when many obscene writings found approval from men like Diderot, Rousseau, Montesquieu and Voltaire<sup>39</sup>. The libraries were no more common libraries; they were specialized pornographic libraries in which readers could satisfy their strong sexual appetite by devouring the lewd books which established the new genre of *machlosophy*<sup>40</sup>.

*Dirty literature* is very vast, and the French contribution is undoubtedly one of the most prolific of all times. Among the many French writings it is worth mentioning *Thérèse philosophe* (1748) by the Marquis d'Argens, Diderot's *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (1748) and Choderlos de Laclos *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782).

Although these books have contributed to the growth of the erotic literature, they remain soft sensual books and reading them does not lead to the corrupted road of pornography. If we imagined pornography as a road, then we should think of it as a path full of sins and vices. Thence, it can be said that, the

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<sup>39</sup> BLOCH, Iwan, *Marquise de Sade: His Life and Works*, Amsterdam, Fredonia Books, 2002, p. 45.

<sup>40</sup> The term *machlosophy*, an adaptation of the German word *Schmutzlitteratur*, means *dirty literature*. See BLOCH, Iwan, *op. cit.*, pp.46 and ff.

18th-century philosopher, the outrageous man who walked this road with such a fearless spirit was, unquestionably, the Marquis de Sade.

Author of the licentious *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue* (1791), *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785), and many other writings, de Sade is the writer whose main thought is based on the idea that man is a machine aimed at the realization of endless sexual pleasure. Against any form of religion, which denies this pleasure, de Sade bases his morality on a single principle, that is, instinct. The instrument that leads to the total fulfillment of human passions is, according to his thought, rationality. Denying the existence of God, and claiming that nature is the only existing force, de Sade suggests in his works, to surrender to its will, to do only what instinct dictates, without fear of being punished by a God who does not exist. Various studies on the Marquis find that his work is built on a completely antithetical system and that it is almost impossible to study it without first contextualizing it in the historical period in which it is born. Therefore, for scholars specializing in de Sade's work, it is of the utmost importance to concentrate on the social context of the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that is the great French Revolution, rather than to understand the Marquis as a detached and paranormal individual<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> BLOCH, Iwan, *op. cit.* p. XIV.

## 1.7 The Novel: A phenomenon of Eighteenth-Century England

The Eighteenth Century is commonly recognized as one of the most productive centuries in the history of the English literature. Since it is the century that saw the birth and growth of a new literary genre, which would become dominant over the years, we might pause a little to examine the context in which the English Novel emerged.

It is common knowledge that the Eighteenth century has been the century of the rise of the middle classes due to the growing commerce of the English nation, which, with the Act of Union in 1707 became the so called “Great Britain”. This favourable situation encouraged English writers to depict the reality of their time through their pens. The novel, with its authenticity and its regard for the psychology of the characters represented, obtained an extraordinary and probably everlasting success. Consequently, the novel seems to have been conceived to express the expectations of the emerging middle classes and to satisfy their inclinations. Additionally, the novel also offered readers new elements that inevitably have contributed to its increased popularity. Unfortunately, the 18<sup>th</sup> century’s novel could not build its success without condemning another genre to death or inactivity, for this reason English drama saw a considerable decline during those years.

Among the many writers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, are generally considered to be the fathers of the English novel. Their works, studied by many critics and scholars, still nowadays raise questions like these: is their work completely different from the



works in prose of the past? If so, why did this happen in England and not in another country? The same questions and an attempt to answer them is offered by Ian Watt's essay *The Rise of the Novel*, in which the authors claims:

Such large questions are never easy to approach, much less to answer, and they are particularly difficult in this case because Defoe, Richardson and Fielding do not in the usual sense constitute a literary school. Indeed their works show so little sign of mutual influence and are so different in nature that at first sight it appears that our curiosity about the rise of the novel is unlikely to find any satisfaction other than the meagre one afforded by the terms 'genius' and 'accident', the twin faces on the Janus of the dead ends of literary history. We cannot, of course, do without them: on the other hand there is not much we can do with them. The present inquiry therefore takes another direction: assuming that the appearance of our first three novelists within a single generation was probably not sheer accident, and that their geniuses could not have created the new form unless the conditions of the time had also been favourable, it attempts to discover what these favourable conditions in the literary and social situation were, and in what ways Defoe, Richardson and Fielding were its beneficiaries<sup>42</sup>.

As has been argued before, this favourable social situation was due to the rise of the middle class, and as a consequence, to the rise of new readers who had different tastes from those of the cultivated aristocracy. For this reason, English writers had to write mainly to satisfy the needs of the new readers with stories which represented their world: tradesmen, self-made men,

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<sup>42</sup> WATT, Ian, *The Rise of the Novel*, Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, London, Chatto & Windus, 1957, p. 9.

manufacturers and so on. Moreover, the new compulsory school system that England adopted, the growth of newspapers, and the amelioration of printing, largely contributed to the proliferation of a class of learned people, whose principal aim was to improve its education.

In this context of social and economic development, not only readers changed their profile, but writers too. Since the printing boom was spreading in England, as a consequence, a profitable book market started to grow. Obviously, writers began to gain from their position and tried to exploit their skills by writing novels that the readers would almost certainly read.

It is no accident that the novel that this thesis is going to analyze, has been written by a man while he was in prison for debts, nor is it an accident that the success that the novel obtained, allowed the author to get out of prison. Thus, thanks to the liberating adventures of a prostitute, John Cleland, author of the well-known pornographic best seller of 18th-century England, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, also known as *Fanny Hill* (1748-1749), regained his own freedom for a while. Actually, the novel, considered too outrageous, was soon banned and both the author and the publisher were arrested. The integral version of the novel was thus condemned to an illicit circulation, while an expurgated version of *Fanny Hill* found its legal path on the shelves of many English libraries in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Before starting to analyse *Fanny Hill*, it is necessary to explain how and why the novel became so acclaimed by the new readers. Firstly, it must be said that the novel is not the first work of prose fiction. Actually, before the advent

of the novel, the *romance*<sup>43</sup>, thanks to its descriptions of extraordinary worlds, attracted the readers. This genre, which aims to fascinate the reader, is opposed to the novel, which instead tries to seduce the reader by plunging him in contexts and situations which he would define as real as life itself. Since the two genres often cause confusion, it is necessary to reiterate what makes the novel so original. In this regard it must be said that its main value lies in its realistic component that leads the reader to identify himself with the characters. Although it could be argued that eighteenth-century readers were able to identify themselves with the characters of the *romances*, this hypothesis seems to be weak. The effect of the realism of the novel had no precedents and as a consequence, its consumption increased more and more.

During the dynamic Eighteenth Century, significant writers shaped the structure of the English novel. Critics, who generally agree on identifying the fathers of the English novel, recognize mothers too. Among these mothers, this thesis will shortly mention those to whom considerable recognition has been given.

Thanks to the publication of *The New Atlantis* (1709), Mary de la Rivière Manley (known to be a Tory supporter), achieved a widespread popularity as she, through her novel, depicted the scandalous life of the Whig politicians.

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<sup>43</sup> The term *romance* refers to the continuation of the epic genre in literature, more precisely it refers to the *medieval romance*. Since the adventure is a fundamental aspect of the *romance*, it generally occurs that the plot has to do with heroes who, in order to re-establish the order, have to face difficult situations. Generally the protagonist who is separated from his home, family and friends, manages to overcome a number of challenges until the happy ending concludes the story.

Considered as one of the major founders of the English novel, Eliza Haywood has been undoubtedly a prolific writer of amatory fiction. Her first novel, *Love in Excess* (1719-20), considered scandalous because of its strong sensuality, as well as being a great success, it falls within the emerging female literary production of eighteenth-century England. Her writing career proved to be very successful, even though sometimes she had to publish anonymously. Actually, she is also the author of *Anti-Pamela* (1741), that is the critical response to Richardson's *Pamela*.

Actually, as the publication of *Pamela* caused many written reactions, it is easy to find in the literature of the time works attacking the theme of hypocrisy and social climbing and which borrow from Richardson the heroine's name. *Pamela* actually became the main target of those satirical writers who criticized Richardson's false virtuosity. Though being attacked several times, *Pamela* is generally considered to be the first heroine in English fiction of which its everlasting spectacular success is undeniable proof. The various attempts to laugh at Richardson's heroine, even though widely studied, have never overshadowed the real protagonist of the English narrative.

Fielding too, through parody, tried to ridicule *Pamela* by reversing Richardson's sentimentalism and by creating the hypocritical character of *Shamela* (1741). Whereas Richardson describes the innocence of virtue and the female desire to be respected by men, Fielding represents an unprincipled girl who tries to obtain benefits and advantages exploiting her sexuality. Fielding's aim was to show Pamela's real intentions and how Mr. B, (in *Shamela* he becomes Mr. Booby), has been cheated by Pamela's apparent innocence.

Since Richardson's success generated the so called Pamelist and Anti-Pamelist debate, it results very difficult to establish whether Pamela was a genuine or false subject. However, as this study cannot provide such an answer, it will now resume its initial topic concerning erotic literature and will delve into a more accurate analysis of John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*.

## CHAPTER 2: Reading sex in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*

The first volume of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, known also as *Fanny Hill*, appeared around November 1748, the second was published after few months. As it was immediately considered a lewd book, author, publisher and printer had to face trial and spent many days in prison.

Considered the first and major work of English pornographic literature, *Fanny Hill* is the story of a young country girl who, after losing her parents, is forced to become a prostitute. Set in London, the sexual adventures of the young heroine represent the major steps towards the psychological growth of the central character. At first ignorant and innocent, Fanny's discovery of sex is gradual: starting her sexual education in a brothel, she will experience Sapphic pleasures in order to get acquainted with lust. She then encounters a young boy and she soon falls in love with him. As circumstances are not favourable for the two lovers who are separated soon after, Fanny becomes a prostitute. Initially perplexed and worried, Fanny soon learns how to be an happy mistress. Her ability to adapt helps her to enjoy mercenary sex without feeling any remorse.

The epistolary form, the heroine's social situation and its didactic purpose, are undoubtedly to be seen as common elements of the 18th-century novel. Writings such as *Pamela* by Richardson or Defoe's *Moll Flanders* are to be considered among Cleland's principal models. What makes the difference is the author's attitude towards virtue. Therefore, Cleland, through Fanny's voice,

imagines an ideal world of prostitution where women are satisfied only when they give vent to their sexual fantasies.

Fanny's erotic adventures are numerous, and each of them always seem to add something to the novel's reading. Moreover, the many details which enrich the story, follow the tradition of the pornographic literature. Starting first with lesbianism, continuing with heterosexuality, adultery, flogging, fake deflorations, male homosexuality, and lastly concluding with an orgy, *Fanny Hill* reaches its erotic climax by painting a cheerful world of prostitution where everything is pretty perfect and sex is sublime.

Fanny's attachment to sex is definitely new to the eighteenth-century canon of female sexuality. Celebrating a female unrestrained sexuality, Cleland creates the perfect model of the prostitute, that is the curious woman who is willing to approve men's most perverse desires.

The second chapter of this research provides an analysis of the novel by examining its aspects which are most important for its understanding. As we shall see below, the issue of prostitution in the Eighteenth Century will be studied and compared with Cleland's account of whoredom. The ultimate goal of this research will be to determine whether female sexual freedom had already begun to emerge in Cleland's time, or if Fanny's adventures were in stark contrast with the principles of virtue inculcated in Cleland's contemporary readers.

## 2.1 John Cleland: the renegade writer and the making of *Fanny Hill*

Son of the Scottish colonel William Cleland, John was born around the year 1710 in Kingston upon Thames, but actually grew up in London where he attended Westminster College. After his studies, probably withdrawn, he went to Smirne as a console and then joined the British East India Company in Bombay. Following a dispute with the same company, he was forced to return in England. Once back in his home country, Cleland faced economic difficulties which led him to spend a year in the notorious debtor's prison, the Fleet Prison.

To get out of this situation, Cleland resumed a novel that, according to his own later statements, he had begun in 1730. Thus, between 1748 and 1749 appeared, in two volumes, the well known novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* also known as *Fanny Hill*. Cleland sold the manuscript to the publisher Ralph Griffith for twenty guineas. At first uncertain of the readers' response to his sexually frank novel, Cleland realized that he had written an obscene bestseller and a novel that was going to get him arrested again because of its scandalous contents. Along with the printer and the publisher of the *Memoirs*, Cleland was arrested for obscenity on November 8, 1749. However, they were not prosecuted. The following year Cleland's expurgated version of *Fanny Hill* came out and apparently he got arrested again but never prosecuted. It seems that, because of so many legal troubles and the moralizing scorn that Cleland had to face after the novel's publication, he started to show disdain for



his book, which he wanted to be ‘buried and forgot’<sup>44</sup>. Paradoxically, Cleland, who for most of the time has remained in the shadows, is remembered mostly for his notorious *Fanny Hill* and not for his following novels such as the *Memoirs of a Coxcomb* (1751) or *The Woman of Honour* (1768). It follows that, *Fanny’s* literary immortality has been built on the same opprobrium that the novel itself seemed to cause.

Writing during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century must not have been easy, especially for an author like Cleland, who saw his career destroyed by financial and ethical struggles. The history of Cleland’s failure as a well recognized author on the one hand, and the everlasting success of his heroine Fanny Hill on the other, makes him worthy of our attention today. Clearly, his marginal role in the literary scene of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, largely contributed to subsequent representation as the modern self-exiled man<sup>45</sup>.

After the publication of *Fanny Hill*, Cleland launched into others literary fields such as drama, scientific research and linguistics. However, Cleland’s attempts to become a successful writer and journalist were completely ignored by 18th-century readers. Actually, his later works were overshadowed by his previous book.

Unfortunately, *Fanny Hill* began to acquire literary fame too late. Destitute and alienated, Cleland died in Westminster in January 1789.

Unfortunately we have contradictory versions concerning the origins of *Fanny Hill* and the author’s intentions. Cleland, actually, claimed at first to have written the novel to get out of prison, but once arrested for ‘corrupting the

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<sup>44</sup> GLADFELDER, Hal, *Fanny Hill in Bombay: The Making and Unmaking of John Cleland*, Baltimore, Maryland, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

morals of the king's subjects', he declared that the author was an anonymous man and that he only revised the novel a bit and prepared it for the printer. After many years he changed his version again. In an encounter with the diarist James Boswell, Cleland reported that he had originally written the novel when he was very young and that he had then decided to publish it when he was in jail because he needed money to get out<sup>46</sup>.

Unfortunately, Cleland got only twenty guineas for his novel. The rest of the money went directly into his publisher's pockets. As more than 250 years have passed, it seems that the truth about the making of *Fanny Hill* will never come out. We can only try to give our opinion on this subject. Considering that being an artist means to be a gifted man, it is difficult to believe that Cleland had written his novel only to solve financial problems. No man could take on the role of a novelist, and in Cleland's case, that of a pornographer, if not led by a strong passion and a strong need to represent his truth, or his 'naked truth'.

Of course, Cleland had to find a way out, a solution not to be arrested for the second time on charges of being an immoral writer. Clearly, given the prospect of a life in prison, it was easier to say that he was not the author of the *Memoirs*, rather than to admit that he was the creator of one of the most interesting examples of the English novel.

Later on, Cleland offered a new account on how the novel came to exist. In a letter addressed to a law clerk to the secretary of state, Cleland wrote that «The plan of the first Part, was originally given me by a young gentleman

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<sup>46</sup>*Ibidem.*

of the greatest hopes that ever I knew, (Brother to a nobleman now Ambassadour at a Foreign Court) above eighteen years ago, on an occasion immaterial to mention here»<sup>47</sup>.

In March 1750 appeared the abridged version of *Fanny Hill* where the sexual details were omitted and the passage representing sodomy was cut. As this bowdlerised version had to redeem Cleland's honour, the 1760s editions of the novel probably did much harm to both the author and the novel. Actually, the many engravings which represented Fanny's sexual intercourses, contributed to relegate *Fanny Hill* to the realm of 'pornography' and to harm Cleland's reputation<sup>48</sup>.

Denigrated and often considered as an 'immoral book', scholars of literature have been slow in recognizing *Fanny Hill*'s literary value. One may assume that the sexual aspects of the novel have supplied significant reasons to confer negligence and oblivion on the text. Unfortunately during the past centuries, human sexuality, especially if portrayed in literature, seems to have been considered as negative and perilous, and mostly as a revolutionary medium whose main purpose was to attack religious and political institutions.

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<sup>47</sup> Excerpt taken from a letter by John Cleland to the law clerk Lovel Stanhope (November, 13<sup>th</sup>, 1749), quoted in GLADFELDER, Hal, *op. cit.*, p.16.

<sup>48</sup> CLELAND, John, *Fanny Hill or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, Edited with an Introduction by Peter Wagner, London, Penguin Books, 2001, p. 15.



**Figure 2 Engraving of *Fanny Hill* by Edouard-Henri Avril<sup>49</sup>.**

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<sup>49</sup> Edouard-Henri Avril (1849-1928) was a French painter and illustrator. He is notoriously remembered for having illustrated the major works of European Erotica. From Aretino to Cleland, knowing how to satisfy the readers of such a genre, Avril has undoubtedly contributed to the success of the erotic novels. Actually, by combining words and images, the success of certain novels has proved to be everlasting. Just like the *Kama sutra*, Avril's illustrations provide the 'visual pleasure' largely appreciated by the consumers of pornography.

## 2.2 Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure or Fanny Hill. The Plot

Inspired mostly by the French libertine novels<sup>50</sup>, to write *Fanny Hill*, Cleland took as a model a real woman of the time, such Fanny Murray, a very popular prostitute among visitors of the renowned Rose Tavern<sup>51</sup>. Cleland, through two letters addressed to an unknown “Madam”, gives voice to his heroine, who promising to tell only the “truth! Stark naked truth!”<sup>52</sup>, retraces her past lewd experiences. Obviously, these words not only suggest that Fanny’s experiences are true, but also inscribe the novel in a particular literary genre, that is, the genre of realism.

As an orphaned teenager and with no economic resources, Fanny leaves her small village in the countryside near Liverpool, to go to London with a rascal friend, named Esther Davis, «in order to seek [her] fortune»<sup>53</sup>. Once in London, her life will completely change and she will lose her initial innocence. Seduced at first by the scoundrel brothel-keeper, Mrs. Brown, Fanny relies on her new family unaware of the kind of life she is going to start. Assigned to the cares of the prostitute Phoebe, the still virgin Fanny, will be initiated with a Sapphic approach to the pleasures of the flesh.

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<sup>50</sup> Cleland’s novel contains all the elements belonging to the genre of the ‘whore biography’. As Cleland must have been acquainted with this tradition, it is easy to find similarities with Hogart’s famous work *A Harlot’s Progress* (1732). Just like Hogart’s heroine Moll Hackabout, *Fanny Hill* tells the story of an orphaned girl who is forced to become a prostitute in the perilous London. Anyway, Hogart’s story is not the story of an happy prostitute. On the contrary, through the many detailed engravings which enrich Hogart’s work, the reader sees how eighteenth century prostitutes suffered misery and venereal diseases. In this respect, Fanny’s success is extraordinary as well as unreal. Rising from poverty to the middle-class position of the ‘respectable’ wife, Fanny’s prosperity seems to mock the moral warnings suggested by other heroines of the English fiction.

<sup>51</sup> ALEXANDRIAN, Sarane, *op. cit.*, p. 189

<sup>52</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41.

Treated as a trophy, considered as an object whose value is very high, Fanny is manipulated by the matron, who would like to sell her virginity to the client who offers most. As Fanny is very pretty, a lot of men show an eager interest in her. Mrs. Brown decides to sell Fanny's virginity to the old and ugly Mr. Crofts, but Fanny refuses and she is nearly raped. After this shocking trauma, one day, Fanny spies on Mrs. Brown having sex with a man. Little by little she starts to get interested in sex, and spying on another prostitute of the house having sex with an Italian man, Fanny realizes she is ready for sex. Thus, the watching of heterosexual couples having sex stimulates Fanny's fantasy, which slowly falls prey to simple masturbation.

Just when Fanny understands that sex could be enjoyable, she meets Charles, a young nobleman, and they soon fall in love. They escape the brothel and start a new life together. At this point of the novel, Fanny loses her virginity with the man she loves and after many months spent together, Fanny becomes pregnant. When everything seems to be perfect for the young lovers, an inconvenience occurs: Charles disappears. Kidnapped by his father, Charles is sent overseas, away from Fanny.

With no news from Charles, Fanny miscarries and falls into despair. Pushed by Mrs. Jones, the landlady, to become a prostitute to survive, Fanny has her first experience of remunerated sexual intercourse with the rich Mr. H. On this occasion, with the aid of an aphrodisiac drink, Fanny discovers that it is also possible to have sex just for pleasure.

Although missing Charles, Fanny starts to appreciate her new life as a kept mistress and especially the benefits she gets. After many months, Fanny

finds out that Mr. H. has sex with her maid too. Annoyed by this revelation, she decides to punish her lover doing exactly the same. She seduces Will, Mr. H's servant, and has sex with him. According to Fanny's description, the proportions of Will's penis largely exceed those of any other man. Thus, taking an intense pleasure, Fanny has sex with him several times, until Mr. H. discovers them and stops keeping her under his protection.

A new chapter of her life now begins in the brothel run by the mistress Mrs. Cole, where Fanny befriends the other three young prostitutes: Emily, Harriet and Louisa. This second part of the novel is probably the richest part of Fanny's sexual experiences, and probably also the part to which Fanny refers to as the «whirl of loose pleasures [she] had been tossed in»<sup>54</sup>, in the first pages of the novel. Followed by her friends, Fanny actually takes part in an orgy and starts a relationship with the impotent and would-be rapist Mr. Norbert, who later in the novel, dies. Moreover, to appease her strong desire for sex, Fanny allows herself a little escapade with a sailor outside the brothel. Then, Mrs. Cole introduces a new visitor to Fanny, such a Mr. Barville, a bizarre masochist who enjoys sex through whipping.

From now on, Fanny's account of her sexual life, even if still vivid and interesting, is more mild. In the final part of the novel, Fanny is more a spectator than an active participant in sexual life. Actually, she watches others having sex, like two men having anal sex, or Louisa with a young retarded boy.

Probably sick and tired of this life, at a certain point, Fanny retires and decides to live on her savings. She meets an old man who receives her in his

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39.

house as a daughter. When the man dies, Fanny inherits a small fortune, which she uses to ensure a comfortable life.

After many months, she decides to go on a journey near Liverpool, and then the miracle occurs: on the way to Liverpool, she meets Charles, her true and only love. Thus, after many adventures, they are finally reunited so that they can fulfill their intimate dream of living together in the one version of mutual love approved by their contemporary society, that is marriage.



### 2.3 *Fanny Hill*: an ‘Anti-Pamelist’ novel?

There is nothing like *Fanny Hill* before *Fanny Hill*. Of course, it is possible to remark some similarities with previous novels of the first decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Among these novels, a strong reference to Defoe’s heroines Moll Flanders and Roxana is clear. Like these two “fallen women”, Fanny goes to London in search of fortune. Blinded by hope, Fanny trusts the promises made by Esther and convinces herself that the journey to London is the best way for a young poor maid to make good fortune. When she thinks about what might happen to her in London, as an innocent dreamer, Fanny sides with the moral principles she has learned at home and inevitably trusts the more experienced Esther, who makes her believe «that by preserving their VARTUE, some had taken so with their masters, that they had married them, and kept them coaches, and lived vastly grand and happy; and some, mayhap, came to be duchesses; Luck was all, and why not I, as well as another?»<sup>55</sup>.

If with these first statements we can compare Fanny’s naïveté with Richardson’s heroine Pamela, going on with the reading, Cleland’s alignment with Fielding’s *Shamela* (1741) is almost immediately revealed, especially at the levels of language and style<sup>56</sup>. The use of the parodic term ‘vartue’, and the choice of alternating past and present tenses, at a certain point of the novel, clearly suggests which side Cleland took. Supporting Fielding’s joke, Cleland extends the parody on *Pamela* (1740). However, he occupies a controversial position in the history of the Anti-Pamelist debate.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41.

<sup>56</sup> HAMMOND, Brian, REGAN, Shaun, *Making The Novel. Fiction and Society in Britain, 1660-1789*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 128.

The very beginning of *Fanny Hill* reflects a similar situation to the one we find in Richardson's *Pamela*. Cleland, as Richardson does, presents a young girl who perceives the threat of the wild society. It is easy to see how direct or indirect references abound in Cleland's novel. Here is an excerpt taken from the beginning of *Fanny Hill*: «As I had now nobody left alive in the village who had concern enough about what should become of me to start any objections to this scheme, and the woman who took care of me after my parents' death rather encouraged me to pursue it, I soon came to a resolution of making this launch into the wide world by repairing to London in order to *seek my fortune*, a phrase which, by the bye, has ruined more adventures of both sexes, from the country, than ever it made or advanced»<sup>57</sup>.

Probably unconscious of being later considered among the fathers of the genre of realism, when Richardson wrote his *Pamela*, he had the perception that society was degenerating into immorality and that the church was no longer able to teach men how to fight against sinful inclinations<sup>58</sup>. Therefore, Richardson's novels, and *Pamela* in particular, can be seen as an attempt to reestablish lost virtuous conduct. Furthermore, the overt didacticism in *Pamela* pleased the majority of 18th-century readers, who generally appreciated and expected to find it in their contemporary literature<sup>59</sup>.

Nevertheless, there were more cynical readers whose taste differed and who considered Pamela an hypocritical character, a false innocent girl, a sort of

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<sup>57</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41, [my italics].

<sup>58</sup> HAMMOND, Brian, REGAN, Shaun, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>59</sup> HUNTER, J. Paul, *Before Novels*, quoted in HAMMOND, Brian, REGAN, Shaun, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

social climber. For this reason *Pamela* soon became the target of many satirists and literati, who liked to tease Richardson's heroine.

However, Cleland's intentions must not have been so brutal as those of Fielding with *Shamela*. Actually, if the former jokes a little on Pamela's language, the latter operates in a harsher way on the whole of the novel. Considering that *Fanny Hill* and *Pamela* have very little in common in terms of plot, it is fairly clear that Cleland was not planning a pornographic satire of *Pamela*. Therefore, the two novels may share another kind of similarity, which concerns the idea of female character during the Eighteenth century<sup>60</sup>.

As the female character occupied a central role in the literature of the Eighteenth Century, Cleland's choice of using a first-person narrator, as Richardson did with *Pamela*, clearly suggests that Cleland was inspired by a new ideology of female subjectivity. Moreover, in the case of the *Memoirs*, a double world of fantasies is represented: one concerning the prostitution and the other concerning full devotion towards only one man, Charles. We see Fanny moving between these two opposite spheres, the mercenary and the sentimental.

Divided into two long letters to an unnamed "Madam", although the *Memoirs* are written in the first-person narrator, they portray moments in which Fanny is not really conscious of what is happening around her. When sexual pleasure is so intense as to transport Fanny "out of herself", who is really speaking? Therefore, these moments create gaps in the technique of self-narration. Fanny, who actually claims to be "out of [her] own possession"

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<sup>60</sup> KIBBIE Ann. Louise., *Sentimental Properties: Pamela and Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, ELH Vol. 58, No. 3 (Autumn, 1991), p. 561.

when experiencing orgasm, should not in this case be able to recount such an experience. Moreover, Fanny's reactions to sexual pleasure seem to place her away from both the body and the mind.

Centered mainly on sex, Fanny's sexual autobiography is full of details which describe Fanny's participation, consideration and connection to it, and interestingly not a single obscene word is employed to describe Fanny's experiences.

As it has already been said, although they may seem very different, *Pamela* and *Fanny Hill* have some points in common. The use of the technique of "writing to the moment", widely used by Richardson, has also been adopted by Cleland. Obviously, the difference between the two novelists lies in the different use of this technique. Whereas Pamela speaks in the present tense to describe Mr. B.'s attacks to her virtue, Fanny instead, portrays precisely those sexual details experienced with Charles at the time of their reunion.

Here we find an excerpt taken from *Fanny Hill*: «I see, I feel! the delicious velvet tip! - he enters me might and main, with - oh! - my pen drops from me here in the ecstasy now present to my faithful memory!»<sup>61</sup>. On the contrary, Pamela's description of her unhappy condition stands in stark contrast with Fanny's account of her present joys.

We read below one of the most famous passages which shows Pamela's affliction: «And pray, said I, walking on, how came I to be his Property? What

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<sup>61</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

right has he in me, but such as a Thief may plead to stolen Goods?---Why, was ever the like heard, says she!---This is downright Rebellion, I protest!»<sup>62</sup>.

Once again, while Richardson aims to instruct the reader, Cleland, instead, becomes a provocateur and seeks to inflame his readers.

Fanny and Pamela, although approaching sexuality differently, share another similarity, which is the happy ending. Actually, in the end, they are both “rewarded” and find the blissfulness of mutual love. Fanny’s pre-marital sex is thus rewarded as well as Pamela’s preservation of her “Jewel”. As *Fanny Hill* tries to investigate the mystery of femininity, Cleland represents a woman who after having experienced the “fall from grace”, will then emerge as virtuous and married as Pamela. In other words, since virtue is a state of mind which has nothing to do with sexual behaviour, Fanny is thus allowed to preserve her innate morality<sup>63</sup>. In one fundamental passage of the novel, the reader will maybe understand Fanny’s situation. Actually, when Charles disappears and Fanny is forced to become a prostitute, the real difference between Fanny and Pamela finally occurs. Therefore, as Fanny’s virtue is defeated by a series of adverse circumstances and by her lack of options, prostitution becomes the only solution to survive. Fanny’s first sexual experience with Mr. H. is, in all respects, rape. Fanny’s account narrates non-consensual intercourse in which she has played the role of the passive victim.

Interestingly, something special happens to Fanny as a result of this event: since her body reacts throughout “all [her] animal spirits” that “rush

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<sup>62</sup> RICHARDSON, Samuel, *Pamela: or Virtue Rewarded. In a Series of Familiar Letters from a Beautiful Young Damsel to Her Parents*, London, Harrison and Company, 1786, pp. 81-82.

<sup>63</sup> MUDGE, Bradford K., *The Whore’s Story: Women, Pornography and the British Novel, 1684-1830*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 203.

mechanically”, Fanny grasps the reality of her body as a certain kind of interior knowledge. Purely physical sex is thus understood and explained by Fanny as the mere pleasure of lust, which has nothing to do with the far superior joy of “mutual love passion”<sup>64</sup>.

Unlike Pamela, Fanny’s morality does not represent an imperative; as a consequence, she emerges as a “real” character. Her sexual experiences fascinate the reader who feels them not only as real, but also as an inexorable part of human life.

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 204.

## 2.4 Fanny: a material girl

*“Les divers Etats de l’âme sont donc toujours corrélatifs à ceux du corps”*<sup>65</sup>.

When it comes to sexual fantasies in the world of prostitution in *Fanny Hill*, it seems that they are mostly related to the “egalitarian possibilities of sexuality” between men and women. In the well-known essay *Fanny Hill and Materialism*, the American scholar Leo Braudy says that: «In Fanny's world of class, it is sexuality that makes all men and women equal»<sup>66</sup>. To support his theory, Braudy will then refer to a particular episode of the novel, that is, the sexual intercourse between Fanny and the servant Will. Fanny in fact, does not despise the servant for being socially inferior. On the contrary, Fanny admires Will's ability to give her intense sexual pleasure. Furthermore, this egalitarian celebration of sexuality has implications. By locating Will's merits in his enormous penis size, Fanny reduces Will to a mere sexual object. As a consequence, individuals become the object of aesthetic judgements<sup>67</sup>.

In the same essay, Braudy speaks of the materiality of *Fanny Hill* arguing that Cleland probably supported the emerging concept of material nature, which had already been discussed, one year before the publication of *Fanny Hill*, by the French philosopher La Mettrie.

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<sup>65</sup> LA METTRIE, Julien Offray, *L'Homme Machine*, Paris, Frederic Henry Librairie Editeur, 1865, p. 47.

<sup>66</sup> BRAUDY, Leo, *Native Informant: Essays on Film, Fiction, and Popular Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1991, Reissued by Figueroa Press, 2008, p. 89.

<sup>67</sup> GAUTIER, Gary, “Fanny Hill's Mapping of Sexuality, Female Identity, and Maternity”, in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Restoration and Eighteenth Century (Summer, 1995).

Published in 1748, *L'Homme Machine* by La Mettrie has long been a difficult book to appreciate and understand because of the inhuman hypothesis that the book itself suggests. According to La Mettrie, man is made up only of the body, and nothing else. There is no soul, and all that man can experience, like feelings, happiness and pain, comes from the body. Encouraging this point of view, it is natural to think that, if man is only body, then it should be only the body to enjoy all the pleasures it is able to experience.

Thus, it seems that Fanny's pleasure derives from this materialist theory of the flesh. Sex in Fanny's mercenary liaisons is absolutely mechanical, and the language too, clearly refers to the mechanic world. It is no accident that Fanny often calls the penis "machine"<sup>68</sup>.

However, if the representation of the penis-machine is materialist, Cleland refers to the female genitalia in a different way. Women's bodies are actually represented as landscapes – «I threw myself into such a posture upon the couch as gave up to him, in full view, the whole region of delight, and the luxurious landscape round it»<sup>69</sup>. Women's bodies are, therefore, represented both as aesthetic objects and natural resources. Moreover, Cleland's materialism diversifies male and female sexuality<sup>70</sup>. In one description of Fanny's sexual intercourse with Mr. H, we clearly understand what happens to Fanny while she is making love: «he soon gave nature such a powerful summons down to her favourite quarters that she could not longer refuse repairing thither; all my animal spirits then rushed mechanically to that center

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<sup>68</sup> BRAUDY, Leo, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>69</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>70</sup> HASLANGER, Andrea, *What Happens When Pornography Ends in Marriage: The Uniformity of Pleasure in Fanny Hill*, Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press, ELH, Volume 78, Number 1, Spring 2011, p. 176.



of attraction, and presently, inly warmed, and stirred as I was beyond bearing, I lost all restraint»<sup>71</sup>.

In this passage, Fanny speaks of “animal spirits”<sup>72</sup> which have induced her to abandon herself entirely to the pleasure of the body, even if her current lover is not the beloved Charles. Therefore, the body reacts impulsively to sexual stimuli and as happens in Fanny, it loses control.

From this loss of control however, it is possible to obtain benefits. Actually, as Fanny loses her self-consciousness, through sexuality, she comes to know herself better. This theory is confirmed by a passage in the novel in which Fanny talks about masturbation: «Here I gave myself up to the old insipid privy shifts of my self-viewing, self-touching, self-enjoying, *in fine*, to all the means of *self-knowledge* I could devise, in search of the pleasure that fled before me, and tantalized with that unknown something that was out of my reach»<sup>73</sup>.

Masturbation in *Fanny Hill* is therefore abolished because considered unsatisfactory. In this regard, it should be clarified and explained how the practice of masturbation was conceived during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Since solitary sex has remained in the shadow for many centuries, speaking of it is not an easy task. Today, what we know of the practice of masturbation in the past

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<sup>71</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>72</sup> During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the term ‘animal spirit’ played an important role. It was believed that some fluids were present in the human body and that they governed everything that people felt, did and pronounced. Famous eighteenth century philosophers used to refer frequently to the animal spirits in their works claiming that these fluids could control also human imagination and perception. According to David Hume: “All our perceptions are dependent on our organs and the disposition of our nerves and animal spirits”. John Locke too treated the animal spirits in his major work *Treatise Concerning Human Understanding* (1698). According to Locke, as the animal spirits are also present in the brain, they undoubtedly influence the formation of ideas.

<sup>73</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 146, [my italics].

comes mainly out of the religious preoccupations raised against it. Brutally condemned by the church, who saw in it a dangerous form of sin, (male semen should not be wasted and procreation always preserved) masturbation, was a problem that therefore concerned both the morality and the health. No wonder so many pamphlets and treatises on this subject were published and translated into many languages to spread the idea that “masturbation is not good”. A significant example of this struggle against solitary pleasure is offered by the anonymous pamphlet published in 1710 and entitled *Onania, or the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution and All Its Frightful Consequences in Both Sexes, Considered with Spiritual and Physical Advice*. The book argued that masturbation was deleterious because it provoked gonorrhoea, epilepsies, loss of erection, premature ejaculation and infertility<sup>74</sup>.

Thus the historian Lawrence Stone speaks of *Onania*: «despite its vapid moralizing and implausible stories of resulting disease, the book was a great success. By 1760, thirty-eight thousand copies had been sold in nineteen English editions. It had also been translated into French and German, so that it clearly struck some hidden area of anxiety in early eighteenth-century Europe»<sup>75</sup>.

It is difficult to determine whether Cleland had heard of or read this book, which treats the subject in a scientific manner. Cleland’s interest in this practice is however very limited. According to Fanny’s descriptions of it, masturbation is only a prelude to greater pleasure. Therefore, solitary sex

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<sup>74</sup> ABRAMSON, Paul R., PINKERTON, Steven D., *With Pleasure: Thoughts on the Nature of Human Sexuality*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 170.

<sup>75</sup> STONE, Lawrence, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, London, Penguin, 1979, p. 320.

allows knowledge of the self, but complete heterosexual intercourse enables an even greater understanding of the psychological nature of the human mind.

The sexual act, not only allows a deeper understanding of the self, it also involves a psychological enrichment and an ennobling of the self<sup>76</sup>. This process of ennobling is located in another passage of the novel, more precisely in the sexual experiment between Fanny's friend Louisa and the retarded boy Dick.

As Fanny spies the two having sex, she remarks that something special is happening to Dick: «He seemed, at this juncture, greater than himself; his countenance, before so void of meaning, or expression, now grew big with the importance of the act he was upon. In short, it was not now that he was to be played the fool with. But, what is pleasant enough, I myself was awed into a sort of respect for him, by the comely terrors his motions dressed him in, his eyes shooting sparks of fire, his face glowing with ardours that gave another life to it; his teeth churning; his whole frame agitated with a raging ungovernable impetuosity, all sensibly betraying the formidable fierceness with which the genial instinct acted upon him»<sup>77</sup>.

Thus, returning to the concept of “egalitarian sexuality” contemplated by Braudy, it appears that it occurs in many of the descriptions of the sexual act. Fanny acknowledges she has respect for Dick, precisely when she realizes that the boy's expression is no longer “void of meaning”.

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<sup>76</sup> BRAUDY, Leo, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>77</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

## 2.5 Commerce and Prostitution in *Fanny Hill*: Cleland's world of "filles de joie"

When studying Cleland's novel, the descriptions of the city of London, should not be neglected. When Fanny leaves her small village in the north of England to reach the magnetic capital, she does not know how things work there. Accustomed to the calm of the countryside, once in London, Fanny will discover a frenetic world in which business is the basis of everything, even human relationships.

When Fanny arrives in London, she is immediately struck by its charm: «It was pretty late in a summer evening when we reached the town, in our slow conveyance, though drawn by six at length. As we passed through the greatest streets that led to our inn, the noise of the coaches, the hurry, the crowds of foot passengers, in short, the new scenery of the shops and houses, at once pleased and amazed me»<sup>78</sup>.

Despite the city's charm, Fanny will soon be warned of the dangers that the city hides. After she has been lured in by the brothel-keeper Mrs. Brown, Fanny learns: «that London was a very wicked, vile place, that she hoped I would be tractable, and keep out of bad company»<sup>79</sup>. Obviously, Fanny is still too innocent to realize that the woman who is hosting her, is actually an hypocrite businesswoman dealing in the lewdest desires of "respectable" men in London.

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<sup>78</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45.

The relation between Fanny and Mrs. Brown is based on a principle of interest. Fanny, with no money, needs a place to stay and a guidance. Mrs. Brown needs a young virgin girl to sell to the client who offers most money. Unfortunately, Fanny naively trusts Mrs. Brown, who presents herself as a mother and thus believes her mistress who says: «that she had not taken me to be a common servant, to do domestic drudgery, but to be a kind of companion to her; and that, if I would be a good girl, she would do more than twenty mothers for me»<sup>80</sup>.

Nowadays, suggesting prostitution to a young girl is considered bad advice. Centuries ago, however, prostitution was not regarded as an entirely reproachable business. Of course, being a prostitute in a brothel in the Eighteenth Century must not have been easy at all, while, being a mistress under the protection of a noble man, must have been a privileged position to obtain.

Fanny's initial position is that of an inexperienced girl in the hands of a very cruel woman who, through an "unrighteous contract" with an old man, tries to put her defloration on the market. Miraculously escaping from being raped, little by little, Fanny realizes that being a maiden brings economic benefits, thus the value of her virginity is high. After the short romantic love affair with Charles, Fanny prepares to become a prostitute, first as the kept-mistress of Mr. H, then in Mrs. Cole's brothel. At this point of the novel, Fanny is fully aware that she has to trade with men if she wants to live happily.

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 46.

Luckily for her, Mrs. Cole's skillfulness at conducting such a kind of profession, is not at all like her previous experience at Mrs. Brown's brothel. Mrs. Cole's cleverness lies in her clear understanding that the public sphere should be secretively separated from the private one. By forming what Mrs. Cole often defines as "the little family of love", Fanny, knowing that she is in a safe place, will enjoy the profession of prostitute. In other words, Mrs. Cole's brothel operates like a cooperative in which collective welfare is the top priority<sup>81</sup>.

In this imaginary market of prostitution, besides recognizing themselves to be mere objects of exchange, Cleland's women also know how to earn more by selling their bodies. This theory is supported in one interesting passage, that is, when Fanny pretends to be a virgin with the bizarre Mr. Norbert. Fanny's recitation of the "never touched" girl turns out to be successful, not only for her acting skills, but also for the help and support of her fellow prostitutes. Therefore, Fanny's awareness "that a false virtue" can be, in certain circumstances, as advantageous as a "true" one, is a fundamental step in the learning of sex trade<sup>82</sup>.

It is generally acknowledged that criticism regarding *Fanny Hill* accuses the author of having deliberately depicted an utopian world of prostitution. In a sense, this reflection seems to be true, especially if we agree with Tassie Gwilliam's argument that, reading *Fanny Hill*, we are deceived by

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<sup>81</sup> FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *Launching Fanny Hill: Essays on the Novel and Its Influences*. New York, AMS Press, 2003, p. 14.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

a «fantasy vision of prostitution that keeps Fanny and other whores from having babies or contracting venereal disease»<sup>83</sup>.

It cannot be denied that, Fanny's adventures are quite unreal, or rather that her ability to go from one bed to another, without contracting the much feared French Pox, or becoming the mother of several children, is surprising. Certainly, contemporary prostitutes, as well as eighteenth-century mistresses, must envy this in Cleland's heroine.

Everything is pretty perfect in Fanny's accounts of her sexual experiences. However, this perfection is maintained by the fact that Fanny is not a common street-walker. On the contrary, she is the emblem of the "respectable whore", the smart seller of herself, who, with a lot of money, will be able to retire at the age of eighteen.

Cleland's depictions of prostitution are expressed in two kinds of brothel: the establishments of Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Cole. If the latter constitutes an idealized scenario, Mrs. Brown's brothel, on the contrary, seems to represent the average brothel of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The situations in which Fanny finds herself in London, not only represent stereotypes and clichés of the dangerous London, but also add real circumstances.

Once in London, Fanny arriving from the countryside, is soon picked up by Mrs. Brown in an intelligence office. The pimp's strategy, to secure the girl as one of her prostitutes, is to steal her money in order to prevent her from

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<sup>83</sup> TASSIE, Gwilliam, *Female Fraud: Counterfeit Maidenheads in the Eighteenth Century*, quoted in FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 82.

leaving the brothel, then to provide second-hand clothes and accessories, which she could accuse the girl of stealing if she decided to abandon the brothel<sup>84</sup>.

Another aspect of the eighteenth-century sex market which Cleland includes in his novel, rendering it arguably quite realistic, is the use of the physical violence in the scene of the rape-attempt by Mr. Crofts. In fact, violence was very common in brothels and often prostitutes could not defend themselves from aggressive clients.

Perhaps the most convincing example of 18th-century prostitution can be found in secondary characters such as Phoebe and Mrs. Brown. These characters show exactly how prostitutes behaved and what Fanny's career would have been like if she had stayed in Mrs. Brown's brothel<sup>85</sup>. Whereas we do not know nothing of Phoebe's choice of becoming a prostitute, however, we clearly understand that by the time Fanny arrives in the brothel, she has a lot of experience of the realm of whoredom. The last step towards full knowledge of this lascivious world, inevitably, leads us to Mrs. Brown, the whore par excellence. Old and ugly, Mrs. Brown is the incarnation of the "graduate" prostitute who, after a long career as a prostitute, has managed to become a bawd, a successful manager of the sex market<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup> FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 90.



## 2.6 Sapphic Pleasures and Phallocentricism

Dating from the same year as *Fanny Hill*, the pamphlet, *Satan's Harvest Home*<sup>87</sup> appeared in England in 1749. Published anonymously, it gives a vivid account of degenerate society in 18<sup>th</sup> century England.

Denouncing the immoral attitudes of contemporary society, the pamphlet mainly condemns the new sexual tendencies which consisted in prostitution, sodomy, effeminacy and female homosexuality. According to the author, London was governed by prostitutes who populated its streets. The number of the brothels was frightening, and the condition in which prostitutes had to live was not encouraging. Although the title may be misleading, it suggests that Satan represents the cause of people's moral corruption and therefore he represents the major enemy to fight. Although nothing is known about the author, one might assume that the author was involved with the widespread Christian movement and that in writing the pamphlet he was attempting to save corrupted souls. Obviously then, by denouncing the depravity of eighteenth-century society, *Satan's Harvest Home* provides both a moralistic approach and a proto-sociological reading. By targeting mostly homosexuals, the pamphlet offers a potential study on homophobia, which is known to have been strongly inculcated in religious culture.

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<sup>87</sup> Here the full title: *Satan's Harvest Home: or the Present State of Whorecraft, Adultery, Fornication, Procuring, Pimping, Sodomy, And the Game of Flatts, (Illustrated by an Authentick and Entertaining Story) And other Satanic Works, daily propagated in this good Protestant Kingdom.*

Among the most interesting stories listed in *Satan's Harvest Home*, we quote here the one set in a Turkish bathhouse and entitled "The Game of Flatts":

It happened one time that at the public baths for women an old woman fell in love with a girl, the daughter of a poor man, a citizen of Constantinople; and, when neither by wooing nor flattering her, she could obtain that of her which her mad affection aimed at, she attempted to perform an exploit almost incredible. She feigned herself to be a man, changed her habit, hired an house near the maid's father, and pretended he was one of the *chiauxes* of the Grand Seignor; and thus, by reason of his neighbourhood, she insinuated herself into the man's acquaintance, and after some time acquaints him with the desire of the daughter. In short, he being a man in such a prosperous condition, the matter was agreed on, a portion was settled, such as they were able to give, and a day appointed for the marriage. When the ceremonies were over and this doughty bridegroom went into the bride-chamber to his spouse, after some discourse, and plucking off her head-gear, she was found to be a woman. Whereupon the maid runs out and calls up her parents, who soon found that they had married her not to a man but a woman. Whereupon they carried the supposed man the next day to the General of Janizaries, who, in the absence of the Grand Seignor, was governor of the city. When she was brought before him he chid her soundly for her beastly love. "What," says he, "are you not ashamed, an old beldam as you are, to attempt so notorious a bestiality, and so filthy a fact?"

"Away, sir" says she, "You do not know the force of love, and God grant you never may." At this absurd reply the governor could scarce forbear laughter, but commanded her presently to be packed away and drowned in the deep. Such was the unfortunate issue of her wild amours<sup>88</sup>.

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<sup>88</sup> CASTLE, Terry, *The Literature of Lesbianism: A Historical Anthology From Ariosto to Stonewall*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003, p. 293.

This story of unrequited homosexual love contains a passage in which the lesbian woman is overtly teased by society, and by men in particular. Moreover, the title “The Game of Flatts”, refers to the practice of tribadism, that is, sex between women<sup>89</sup>.

In his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault analyzes the discourse around sexuality which appeared during the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Foucault argues that during that time sexuality did not constitute a separate category, it was not a private aspect of an individual life<sup>90</sup>; on the contrary, it was placed in the social context of the Eighteenth century England.

However, female same-sex desire and male homosexuality in eighteenth-century erotic literature were treated differently. If the former was considered as an introduction to heterosexual love, the latter did not receive the same tolerance. In one important passage of *Fanny Hill*, sodomy is considered an abhorrent act. Lesbian sex during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, on the contrary, was much more tolerated, probably because it represented what Emma Donoghue has called the “examples of male objectification of women”<sup>91</sup>.

In addition to the issue of female homosexuality, what attracts the reader’s attention in *Fanny Hill* is its phallogentric language. The 18th-century erotic literature was full of direct references to the male genital organ, and

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 292.

<sup>90</sup> EECKHOUT, Hannah, Investigating the ambiguities and contradictions in the representation of female same-sex desire in eighteenth century erotica, particularly, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, BA Paper for the degree of “Bachelor in de Taal-en Letterkunde: Nederlands-Engels”, supervisor Prof. Dr. Gert Beulens; Prof. Dr. Sandro Jung, Ghent University, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, May 2011. [Pdf consulted on line on [www.english.ugent.be/studentpublications](http://www.english.ugent.be/studentpublications), at 13 December 2012].

<sup>91</sup> DONOGHUE, Emma, *Passion Between Women: British Lesbian Culture, 1668-1801*, London, Scarlet Press, 1993, p. 184.

*Fanny Hill* in particular could be considered one of the main phallogocentric texts in English pornographic literature. In fact, its descriptions of the male sexual organ constitute a good portion of the entire text. Not only are Cleland's descriptions of the penis numerous in his novel, but they serve to reinforce the idea that the penis is fundamental to the sexual act. Therefore, sex without the penis results in being deficient, poor, or, using Fanny's words, «rather the shadow than the substance of any pleasure»<sup>92</sup>.

Consequently, Cleland's several descriptions of the heterosexual act and in particular of the penis, serve to exalt the heterosexual desire over the homosexual one and to assert that real pleasure can only be attained by having penetrative sex<sup>93</sup>. Therefore, Cleland's phallogocentrism pervades most of the novel. This theory is confirmed by a series of recurrent terms, which reinforce the idea that Cleland was quite obsessed with the male genital organ. The main terms used are «machine», «instrument», «weapon», «member», «engine», «staff» and many others. Moreover, the choice of the adjectives that accompany such terms contributes to emphasize the male genital organ. Here is a short list: hard, enormous, erected, large, long, oversized, terrible, formidable, wonderful, sweet, master, etc.

Reading the erotic adventures in *Fanny Hill*, may be exciting, but we cannot forget that the author of this novel was a man, and that the fantasies that the story evoked were therefore also male. It seems therefore that phallogocentrism creates another issue, namely the phallogocentrism<sup>94</sup>, that is the

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<sup>92</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>93</sup> EECKHOUT, Hannah, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>94</sup> The term *phallogocentrism* is a neologism coined by Jacques Derrida. He uses this term to refer to the male domination in the construction of meaning, and creates this word by fusing

discourse which refers to the phallus. If the first indicates the centrality of the phallus, the second refers to male domination in the form of the 'discourse', and so every speech concerns the male genital organ.

As Fanny's descriptions of the phallus are always enthusiastic, it seems that there will be no pleasure without admiration of the "wonderful machine". As a consequence, a male voice, actually Cleland's voice, pervades all the text and celebrates both male sexuality and male genital organ<sup>95</sup>. Even though extolling the female pleasure, it results that Cleland's use of a phallogocentric language serves more to emphasize male sexuality than the female one.

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the terms and concepts of *logocentrism* and *phallogocentrism*. In so doing, Derrida claims that the meaning of reality, centred on *logos*, is strongly influenced by the masculine and patriarchal systems.

Although being explicit, the presence of a phallogocentric discourse in *Fanny Hill* does not make the text more phallogocentric than other texts. It may be suggested, in fact, that a strong phallogocentric language may be found mostly in texts in which the male element operates in order to organise a sort of male hierarchy. As the examples of male social order in literature are various, it is sufficient to cite works like *King Lear* or Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines* to understand that a text does not have to contain explicit references to the phallus to be defined as a phallogocentric text. In this sense, phallogocentrism can also be conceived as the expression of the male dominance in the political and social structures.

<sup>95</sup> KAHN, Madeleine, *Narrative Transvestism: Rhetoric and Gender in Eighteenth-Century English Novel*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 155.

## 2.7 Sexual apprenticeship, voyeurism and deflorations

As the pamphlet *Satan's Harvest Home* brutally condemns homosexual relationships among women, it is interesting to see how lesbian homosexuality was treated by Cleland in his novel. Before analyzing Fanny's initiation, here is a short examination of the main texts which probably influenced Cleland.

As French erotica was largely diffused in England, we have reason to believe that Cleland must have heard of such books as *L'Académie des Dames* (1680), *L'École des Filles* (1655), and *Venus dans la Cloître* (1683). These three texts, like Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, consisted of a dialogue between an adult woman and a young virgin girl<sup>96</sup>. Almost the same situation is represented in *Fanny Hill*, where Fanny's sexual awakening starts with Sapphic intercourse with her fellow prostitute Phoebe. Moreover, a series of voyeuristic episodes are narrated, which largely serve to give to the novel a "climax of erotic crescendo".

Early in the novel, the reader witnesses one of the most important scenes of lesbian seduction. Fanny is soon initiated into sexuality by her bedmate Phoebe, whose task it is to "break in" young virgins into heterosexual prostitution. It must be said that Phoebe perfectly manages to awaken Fanny's sexuality, and that their brief sexual experience only serves as a prelude to something greater. As a consequence, female homosexuality in Cleland's novel only constitutes an exciting warm-up before getting on to heterosexual intercourse<sup>97</sup>.

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<sup>96</sup> FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>97</sup> CASTLE, Terry, *op. cit.*, pp. 286-287.

Sexual deviations in *Fanny Hill*, and in particular those referring to her lesbian approach to sexuality, are nonetheless weak. Even though Fanny does not condemn such pleasures, she soon understands that in this “kind of sex” something is missed.

Probably, with those descriptions of Sapphic love, Cleland’s intentions were to prepare not only Fanny to the vast world of heterosexual love, but the reader too. As Fanny, looking back to her personal experiences, defines sex with Phoebe as “the first sparks of kindling nature”, it is almost clear that Fanny, growing older, prepares herself to encounter the “scepter-member”, which she will later idolize in each of her sexual affairs.

Little by little, Fanny’s sexual arousal increases, both thanks to Phoebe’s incitement, and through spying on others couples having sex. When Fanny spies on Mrs. Brown having sex with the young Horse-grenadier, she is almost shocked by the sight of an erect penis. Fanny, probably terrified by the unpleasant sight of the naked body of the old Mrs. Brown, refers to the boy thus: «Her sturdy stallion had now unbuttoned, and produced naked, stiff, and erect, that wonderful machine, which I had never seen before, and which, for the interest my own seat of pleasure began to take furiously in it, I stared at with all the eyes I had»<sup>98</sup>.

Later on, when spying on sexual intercourse between Polly and the Italian boy, Fanny is again struck by an unstoppable enthusiasm. In a sense, Polly’s expressions of ecstasy incite Fanny’s innermost desires and awaken her ardent spirits. At this point of the novel, Fanny is ready for sex.

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<sup>98</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

Here, is a section from the passage quoted above: «For my part, I will not pretend to describe what I felt all over me during this scene; but from that instant, adieu all fears of what a man could do unto me; they were now changed into such ardent desires, such ungovernable longings, that I could have pulled the first of that sex that should present himself, by the sleeve and offered him the bauble, which I now imagined the loss of would be a gain I could not too soon procure myself»<sup>99</sup>.

As this loss would soon arrive, it could be said that Fanny will have the opportunity of being deflowered twice, the first time in a true sense and then by pretending to still be a virgin with one of her clients.

Fanny is, undoubtedly, fortunate. She could have lost her virginity with the ugly Mr. Crofts, but this does not happen. The rape attempt by the old man is unsuccessful, not only because of Fanny's protests, but primarily because of a male physical problem, that is, impotence. In a sense, Mr. Crofts' premature ejaculation saves Fanny from rape.

Fanny's first sexual intercourse takes place outside the brothel in which she has encountered her lover Charles. Having escaped from the evil Mrs. Brown, the two lovers discover the happiness of mutual love in fervent intercourse.

Her first sexual experience is quite painful for Fanny, who declares that "I arrived at excess of pleasure, through excess of pain". Fanny's pain is shown by her description of the intercourse until she faints. Recovering her senses,

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 69.



Fanny awakes in the arms of her dear lover and refers to him as to the “murderer of my virginity”.

Eighteenth-century society showed a strong interest in the act of defloration, which was mostly portrayed as a battle, an assault on the female virgin body<sup>100</sup>. As heterosexual penetration could cause female bleeding, it was common to find sexual instruction manuals which explained the process of female initiation<sup>101</sup>.

As female bleeding after the first sexual penetrative experience was considered proof of the woman’s virginity, it was common among prostitutes to deceive their clients by pretending still to be virgins. To obtain the desired effect, sex guides suggested that women insert dried animal’s blood into the vagina<sup>102</sup>. By this way they would deceive men. Fanny does exactly the same with Mr. Norbert.

Here is the passage which describes her scheming strategy: «In each of the head bed-posts, just above where the bedsteads are inserted into them, there was a small drawer so artfully adapted to the mouldings of the timber-work that it might have escaped even the most curious search; which drawers were easily opened or shut, by the touch of a spring, and were fitted each with a shallow glass tumbler, full of a prepared fluid blood; in which lay soaked, for ready use, a sponge that required no more than gently reaching the hand to it,

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<sup>100</sup> In this respect it is interesting to remark how eighteenth-century literature represented the theme of the loss of virginity. Since female sex was usually depicted as a «castle» or «battle», a bellicose language was therefore used to represent defloration.

<sup>101</sup> FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162.

taking it out, and properly squeezing between the thighs, when it yielded a great deal more of the red liquid than would save a girl's honour»<sup>103</sup>.

However, another example of defloration occurs when Fanny has sex with Mr. H-'s servant. Here, Fanny does not pretend to be virgin. Nevertheless, the enormous size of Will's penis, serves to deflower Fanny for a second time. The description Fanny offers of Will's penis is absolutely amazing: «... I saw, with wonder and surprise, what? Not the plaything of a boy, not the weapon of a man, but a maypole of so enormous a standard, that had proportions been observed, it must have belonged to a young giant. Its prodigious size made me shrink again;» and then concludes with «that monstrous machine of his, which had now triumphed over a kind of second maidenhead»<sup>104</sup>.

Fanny's deflorations represent an interesting aspect of the novel. As defloration often reflects a male heterosexual fantasy, for the male reader of *Fanny Hill* it would be difficult to identify with Mr. Crofts or Mr. Norbert, as they both represent unsuccessful intercourse, or rather a ridiculous attempt to show their masculinity.

After having shown Fanny's real and fake deflorations, Cleland manages to arouse sexual desire in his readers by passing to the narrative technique of representing defloration in a series of stories told by Fanny's friends Emily, Harriet and Louisa.

At this point of the novel, as the reader already knows Fanny's experience, the three girls describe how they came to lose their virginity.

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<sup>103</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 109-112.

Therefore, Fanny has no story to tell, she is, like at the beginning of the novel, a listener, a passive spectator.

As has been suggested by Slepian and Morrissey in their famous essay *What is Fanny Hill?* (1964), the descriptions of the loss of virginity are so frequent because Cleland gives this theme a strong symbolic value<sup>105</sup>. Actually, virginity does not refer to sexual innocence only, but also to the personal experiences which lead to adulthood. In a sense, Fanny is innocent and immature until she loses her virginity and only then becomes aware of corrupt society.

Interestingly, Fanny's loss of sexual innocence, which we observe in the first part of the novel, goes together with the heroine's downfall. However, the second part of the novel shows a sort of reparation of Fanny's nature. Therefore, it could be said that through experience, Fanny learns how to achieve self-control<sup>106</sup>.

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<sup>105</sup> SLEPIAN, B., and MORRISSEY, L. J., "What is Fanny Hill?" *Essays in Criticism* 14 (1964), p. 67.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 68.

## 2.8 Fanny's sexual deviations: flagellation and the orgy

Before *Fanny Hill* English erotica was less concerned with the depiction of obscene and bloody scenes. English writers had borrowed many sexual topics from the French pornographic tradition and therefore included references in their novels to the sexual initiation and defloration of the main characters represented.

However, such erotic games as flogging or group sex were not commonly treated before the publication of *Fanny Hill*. Cleland's novel is actually one of the first English erotic texts to depict flogging<sup>107</sup>. Fanny experiences flogging with the bizarre Mr. Barvile, a young client of Mrs. Cole's brothel. As the young boy needs to be flogged in order to reach orgasm, Fanny agrees to be sexually dominated and to try on her own skin the pleasure induced by repeated whippings.

Here is Fanny's account of her masochistic experience: «At last he twigged me so smartly as to fetch blood in more than one lash, at sight of which he flung down the rod, flew to me, kissed away the starting drops, and, sucking the wounds, eased a good deal of pain»<sup>108</sup>.

It seems that the practice of flogging, which was largely diffused in seventeenth-century public grammar schools, started to be considered unfruitful in terms of pedagogy and psychology<sup>109</sup>. As regards the sexual sphere, brutal flogging was mostly adopted by old men. In fact, it was thought that flogging was used to stimulate circulation and therefore that a penis

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<sup>107</sup> FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>108</sup> CLELAND, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

<sup>109</sup> STONE, Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

erection could be possible even after a certain age<sup>110</sup>. Therefore, considered a contemporary issue, flagellation scenes started to be more and more widespread in literature of the time. Dating probably from 1777, the erotic text *Exhibition of Female Flagellants*<sup>111</sup> represents stories in which flagellation between women is portrayed as a method of discipline and a feature of female sexual initiation.

The flagellation scene in *Fanny Hill*, however, is placed towards the end of the second volume of the book. At this moment of the novel, Fanny has already experienced many sexual encounters, all of which have added something to her sexual education. Curiosity and a strong desire to exceed the limit push Fanny to accept the masochist conditions required by Mr. Barville. Fanny is not forced to endure flagellation, on the contrary, she freely offers her body to such a “party of pain”. Moreover, Fanny admits that taking part in a flagellation encounter, as well as being a caprice, is also a way of obtaining recognition from the brothel keeper Mrs. Cole. Thus, it could be argued that Fanny’s approval of being whipped by Mr. Barville comes from her secret wish to obtain respect and admiration from the other prostitutes of the brothel<sup>112</sup>. This will also be proved in another passage of the novel.

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<sup>110</sup> FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 169.

<sup>112</sup> Sadomasochist sex is obviously a strong component of the pornographic literary tradition. Fanny’s account of the fetish sexual encounter in which she takes part may, apparently, show parallelisms with de Sade’s descriptions of this cruel practice. However, if one tries to find similarities between *Fanny Hill* and *Justine*, it will soon be remarked that these two works, even though both pornographic, have very little in common. Actually, whereas *Justine* is a victim who, according to her ethic and generosity, endures flogging without complaining, on the contrary Fanny represents the utilitarian woman who submits herself to flogging in order to be rewarded. Appeared in 1791, *Justine* represents the accumulation of endless misfortunes in order to assert that virtue is useless and that moral principles may be reversed. Whereas *Justine* never surrenders, Fanny realizes instead that vice may be rewarded, perhaps even more than virtue. On the perverse ethic in de Sade, see Slavoj Žižek, *Kant and Sade: the Ideal Couple*,

If the mutual flagellation scene in *Fanny Hill* renders the heroine both a dominatrix and a slave, on the contrary, the group sex scene which welcomes Fanny in Mrs. Cole's brothel, is a powerful example of equal sexual exchange. Orgy is, in fact, a happy party where everyone can take part freely. Interestingly, the representation of group sex was probably one of the most significant elements of the pornographic tradition. Clearly then, examples of group sex are to be found in the major erotic texts from the Classic authors to the late eighteenth-century writings of the Marquis de Sade, which undoubtedly represents the most brutal example in this category.

As the orgy scene in *Fanny Hill* is long enough to capture the reader's attention (a dozen pages in the Penguin edition), it provides a detailed description of the various encounters during which many women and men spend a long night together. Fanny's turn is thus reported: «Now all the impressions of burning desire, from the lively scenes I had been spectatress of, ripened by the heat of this exercise, and, collecting to a head, throbbled and agitated me with insupportable irritations: I perfectly fevered and maddened with their excess [...] lifted then to the utmost pitch of joy that human life can bear, undestroyed by excess, I touched that sweetly critical point, when, scarce prevented by the spermatic injection from my partner spurting liquid fire up to my vitals»<sup>113</sup>. Few lines later it follows Fanny's description of how Emily, Harriet and Louisa react to her public test: «the girls, too, kissed and embraced me, assuring me that for that time, or indeed any other, unless I pleased, I was

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Lacanian ink, Vol. 13, 1998, <http://www.lacan.com/zizlacan4.htm>, [accessed on February 8, 2013].

<sup>113</sup> CLELAND, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

to go through no further public trials, and that I was now consummately initiated, and *one of them*<sup>114</sup>.

Fanny's arrival in Mrs. Cole's brothel is thus celebrated with a public and promiscuous "sex party" where each of the prostitutes takes part and where Fanny, the latest arrival, seems to be the most feted. Orgy then, seems to be a ritual of initiation which inaugurates Fanny's affiliation to what the superior mother-mistress Mrs. Cole has justly called "the little family of love". This example of membership may help explain how Cleland had tried to reinforce the idea that being part of a community was essential for a prostitute and that her career depended a great deal on it. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Mrs. Cole's scenario represents for Fanny the opportunity to climb socially.

Setting aside Fanny's possible intentions, it remains that Cleland's undisputed transgressions, in the second part of the *Memoirs*, are indispensable for a successful pornographic narration. They serve to create that essential crescendo, without which the novel would be just unemotional repetition of meaningless sex<sup>115</sup>.

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162, [my italics].

<sup>115</sup> In this respect, it must be added that the flogging scene, though representing an heterosexual intercourse, it implicitly alludes to the cruel punishment inflicted to homosexuals. Actually, as homosexuality was considered immoral and linked to perversion, religious and social homophobia was very widespread during the past centuries. Among the many punishments reserved to the so-called 'mollies', that of flogging was the one much adopted in England. Believing that the novel hides such an allusion, it may be afforded a possible hypothesis which would sustain that Cleland, through Fanny's perversions, was attempting to insult and punish homosexuals.



**Figure 3 Engraving of Fanny Hill by Edouard-Henri Avril**



## 2.9 The end of pornography: marriage and the educational novel

The analysis of the sentimental frame which encloses Cleland's work is essential for the comprehension of the text, and to silence the many debates that the novel itself has raised.

Condemned immediately after its publication, *Fanny Hill* has for a long time been considered purely as a pornographic novel. Of course, the purpose of this research is not to deny the explicit content of the pornographic material, rather to analyze the romantic element of the text, which allows Cleland's work, not only to be recognized as literary, but also allows the novel to be part of the process of development of the early English novel.

The marriage between Fanny and Charles at the end, gives the *Memoirs* the characteristics of a standard novel, where this main theme is developed and supported. Observing Fanny's sexual journey, the reader notes that her love story with Charles follows a circular design. Initiated by him both to the sexual and to the sentimental sphere, Fanny will conclude her amorous experiences with the same man she has declared to love at the beginning of the novel.

Though being a "whore biography", *Fanny Hill* represents the theme of pure and obstinately persevering love. Of course, during Charles' absence (practically the entire second half of the novel), Fanny's sexual activity increases. Forced to become a prostitute, Fanny abandons herself to the pleasures of the flesh, while keeping in mind that her heart will always belong to Charles.

Now rich and no longer a prostitute, Fanny thinks of him thus: «But, alas! how easily is the enjoyment of the greatest sweets in life, in present possession, poisoned by the regret of an absent one! But my regret was a mighty and just one, since it had my only truly beloved Charles for its object. Given him up I had, indeed, completely, having never once heard from him since our separation; which, as I found afterwards, had been my misfortune, and not his neglect, for he wrote me several letters which had all miscarried; but forgotten him I never had: and amidst all my personal infidelities, not one had made a pin's point impression on a heart impenetrable to the true love-passion, but for him»<sup>116</sup>.

Infidelity does not count in *Fanny Hill*. That is why Fanny asserts that “our virtues and our vices depend too much on our circumstances”. As destiny finally reunites the two lovers, Charles, having been himself a pawn to fate, will understand and forgive Fanny's immoral conduct<sup>117</sup>.

Fanny's anarchic sexuality ends with a monogamous marriage in which virtue finally succeeds. Though remaining a pornographic text, concluding the novel with a marriage, Cleland renders it an educational work. Moreover, Fanny's marriage indicates that her attitude differs greatly from those of other heroines of erotic literature and in particular from the French precursors, such as *L'École des Filles*. However, it is difficult to think that such a text could be considered as the model on which Cleland based his work. The difference between the two texts lies in the different approach towards pornography.

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<sup>116</sup> CLELAND, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

<sup>117</sup> SLEPIAN, B., and MORRISSEY, L. J., *op. cit.*, p. 71.

According to Peter Sabor in his introduction to *Fanny Hill*: «French erotic fiction [...] uses explicit vocabulary to describe the body and sex acts and is entirely amoral in its enthusiasm for all forms of sexual encounters»<sup>118</sup>. On the contrary, *Fanny Hill* though being a pornographic novel, does not make use of indecent words to express the pleasures of the flesh. Obscenity in *Fanny Hill* is represented through witty metaphors which make reading enjoyable.

As Fanny's innocence is never completely turned into materialism, and as she is aware of the difference between virtue and vice, Cleland's alignment with the heroines of the English novel is confirmed. Fanny's strong belief that experience is fundamental to the psychological growth places the *Memoirs* among those novels of the Eighteenth century which had a didactic purpose and which are generally referred to as *Bildungsroman*.

Fanny's initial innocence and ignorance end up being indispensable in the process of moral growth. The episode with Mr. Crofts proves that Fanny needs to experience bad circumstances in order to improve her position. Once she gets used to her sexuality, Fanny will then express sincere delight in mercenary sex, but she will finally choose the path of virtue. Therefore, choosing honor and respectability for his heroine, Cleland celebrates conjugal love and the «infinitely superior joys of innocence»<sup>119</sup>.

Probably, *Fanny Hill* would not have been judged as a controversial novel if its ending had represented the heroine's regret, instead of her exaltation of the pleasures of sex. Though Fanny puts an end to prostitution and

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<sup>118</sup> CLELAND, John, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, edited by Peter Sabor, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. xviii.

<sup>119</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

chooses marriage, she does not deny having fully enjoyed pre-marital sex. In her final “tail-piece of morality”, Fanny exalts virtue and compares it to unfading roses, while depicts vice as an evil enemy of the human nature.

The marriage at the end of the novel allows Fanny to gain respectability. In addition this happy ending highlights a fundamental aspect of the novel, which will be investigated in the following chapter of this research.

Reading *Fanny Hill* we often wonder whether it is a novel that extols female sexual freedom or whether it is nothing more than traditional pornography whose main purpose is to objectify and, as a consequence, degrade women.

Since during the Eighteenth Century, patriarchal ideology still played a key role in the shaping and development of society, Cleland’s novel may be studied as a novel which emphasizes the male domination over women.

Therefore, retracing Fanny’s erotic adventures, this research will try to determine whether Fanny is the conscious subject of her own sexual encounters, or whether she is only the object of the male fantasy.

### CHAPTER 3: Patriarchal power and female reification

As has already been stated in the previous chapter of this research, *Fanny Hill*'s main characteristic is that it is the first English prose of pornographic literature. The arrival of the novel as a genre which established the Eighteenth Century as the most productive century of all time, undoubtedly helped Cleland to break with the past tradition of erotic writing.

Given that *Fanny Hill* has no English predecessors, it could be argued that in writing his *Memoirs*, Cleland was exploring uncharted territory. He was attempting to combine pornographic subject matter with the novel form<sup>120</sup>. As a consequence, the structure of the *Memoirs* completely differs from the dialogue structure used by Pietro Aretino in his *Ragionamenti*.

Various essays and articles have been dedicated to this bold work of libertine literature which was also put on trial at the Supreme Court Drama of Massachusetts in 1966. Fortunately, the Supreme Court recognized the literary value of Cleland's novel, and allowed the book to be admitted in bookstores in its unexpurgated version.

After having analyzed in the first chapter various erotic writings of the past, and then focused our attention on Cleland's *Fanny Hill* in the second one, this study will now attempt to determine whether Fanny's free sexual frankness could be considered as signalling manifestation of female sexuality or if it is purely the result of masculine fantasy.

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<sup>120</sup> FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 49.

Whereas the first hypothesis provides the basis for what has been defined by Leo Braudy as the “egalitarian possibilities of sexuality”, the second suggests the victory of patriarchal power.

Since the novel provides examples that apparently satisfy both theories, a more detailed study of patriarchal society of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, will inform our understanding of whether or not Fanny really enjoyed being a “woman of pleasure” or if she needed to be rescued from prostitution.

Among the many recent social and historical works, including literary criticism, Lawrence Stone’s famous work *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (1979), has proved to be fundamental to the development of this research and in particular to the comprehension and integration of English patriarchal structure in a literary work such as *Fanny Hill*.

### 3.1 The relationship between patriarchy and prostitution

Historically, the term “patriarchy” was used to designate the authoritarian control held by men over women, in particular it referred to the head of the family, that is the father. Nowadays, it has a wider connotation and it refers mainly to the power held by men in different social systems.

The feminist movement which grew out of the Eighteenth Century, protested against the subordination of women to men, denouncing the negative results that this old concept had triggered over the centuries.

According to feminist theories, prostitution is actually the product of the patriarchal system which considers women as objects whose main task is to satisfy men’s desires.

The patriarchal structure is based on male domination and on the idea of a male centrality, while women are considered as powerless or the “weaker sex”. For this reason, political and social systems are generally ruled by men. As a consequence, male supremacy controls women and confines them in institutions such as marriage or, denigrates them through sex exploitation.

In her famous book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1979), the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin argues that prostitution dehumanizes women and that pornography has only one meaning, that is «the graphic depiction of the lowest whores»<sup>121</sup>. In addition, the author states that prostitution exists only

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<sup>121</sup> DWORKIN, Andrea, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, New York, Plume, 1979, p. 200.

whereas a male sexual domination exists and that men have created the «reality of a woman as whore»<sup>122</sup>.

Obviously, feminists who are anti-pornography see prostitution as a male product and consider prostitutes as victims of the patriarchal system. However, a debate about the female involvement in prostitution has been raised by those feminists of the 1980s, who perceived prostitution as a free choice. According to them, it is the woman who consents to sell her body, and sometimes payment is not necessarily required.

However, all these debates concerning prostitution need to be contextualized in the period in which they have appeared. Certainly, contemporary pornography and prostitution deserve a different approach now due to the new media through which they are expressed.

Therefore, in order to provide answers to the previous questions about *Fanny Hill*'s objectification, the sex industry and patriarchal authority need to be analyzed together with the 18th-century social context.

The rise in prostitution in Eighteenth century England was due to different factors, the most important was undoubtedly poverty among the lower classes. Girls who chose to become prostitutes were usually uneducated, orphaned or abandoned by their families. Pushed by economic requirements and, still in the age of innocence, many young girls entered into prostitution either as independent streetwalkers or in organized communities, namely the bawdy houses. The conditions in which prostitutes lived must have been very

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 200.



unstable and unhappy. Among the many concerns that a prostitute could have, the greatest was the anxiety of contracting incurable venereal diseases.

The key problem in the issue of prostitution, that needs to be highlighted here, is the strong contradiction between patriarchy and prostitution. Considering that during the Eighteenth Century prostitution was clearly illegal, it is perhaps surprising to note that, at that time, there were no effective laws to prevent its diffusion<sup>123</sup>. Actually, it seems that the laws concerning prostitution were often inconsistent and that high levels of mercy softened the penalty for involvement in prostitution. It seems that the law did not completely stop prostitution, which until then had been partially controlled, for fear of generating a phenomenon even more complicated to manage. The fear of losing control over prostitutes, whose services were in growing demand, led the authorities to confine them to the margins of English society. Therefore, the relationship between the law and prostitution was based mostly on compromises. Furthermore, over the years, when it was becoming clear that the path of prostitution was chosen because of poverty, attitudes towards prostitutes started to change: they then became seen as the victims of the economic exploitation.

What is more surprising in this study on prostitution, is the bond that exists between the patriarchal system and the sex trade. Seen as an illegal, criminal and negative activity, prostitution is, despite this, a male product. If the male society had been able to offer women another option, such as an

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<sup>123</sup> HENDERSON, Tony, "Prostitution and the Law" in *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis, 1730-1830*, London, New York, Longman, 1999, pp. 76-103.

honest job, perhaps no women would have been willing to sell their bodies. Alas, it has never been so.

As Lawrence Stone has correctly observed in his work, it was difficult to find a chaste and poor girl at the same time. Actually, during the eighteenth century, many girls preferred to sell their bodies instead of working fourteen to sixteen hour days. He thus specifies that: «the harsh fact about eighteenth-century employment opportunities was that apart from slaving as a seamstress, those were the two major occupations open to an uneducated girl from a poor family. Because of the irregularity of employment, the two often tended to get mixed up»<sup>124</sup>.

In this respect it should be noted that Cleland's heroine's initiation into the world of prostitution is the result of the impossibility to find an alternative to poverty and imprisonment for debts. If Fanny had been offered a more virtuous solution, she would probably not have become a prostitute. However, had it been so, the *Memoirs* would not have been the first English pornographic novel.

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<sup>124</sup> STONE, Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 392.

### 3.2 Educating women in Eighteenth-Century England

One important aspect concerning women's status during the past centuries regards female discrimination and in particular their education. As women were not permitted to go to school, they were mostly educated at home but the result was not encouraging. In fact, their education consisted only in the skills of reading and spelling.

However, some sort of propaganda which suggested the improvement of female education spread during the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, or more exactly in 1675, when Mrs. Wooley declared in her pamphlet that «Vain man is apt to think we were merely intended for the world's propagation, and to keep its human inhabitants sweet and clean, but, by their leaves, had we the same literature, he would find our brains as fruitful as our bodies [...] Most in this depraved age think a woman learned enough if she can distinguish her husband's bed from another's.»<sup>125</sup>

Obviously, female education did not improve until the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when some boarding-schools for women were opened. However, the kind of education provided by these schools was not at all intellectual. Girls were primarily taught how to sort out housekeeping, while the study of the Classical authors was not considered part of their curriculum.

Being a good wife was still the main skill required in a woman during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, but little by little, intellectual skills started to be considered beneficial to a successful marriage. Slowly, learned woman advanced and her

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<sup>125</sup> STONE, Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

education started to include more subjects, such as grammar, geography, arithmetic and French.

The growth of women's culture is also confirmed by the presence of successful periodicals such as *The Ladies' Magazine, or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex*, and the increasing number of female writers writing in the main to encourage other women to elevate their social status. Therefore, the reading market represented a fundamental achievement in the process of female refinement, and by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, women's consciousness of their past educational inferiority was replaced by a strong need of improvement.<sup>126</sup>

However, as regards Cleland's account of female education in *Fanny Hill*, it is clear that schools for poor girls such as Fanny, did not provide any of the intellectual skills mentioned above. Here is Fanny's description of her school experience: «My education, till past fourteen, was no better than very vulgar; reading, or rather spelling, an illegible scrawl, and a little ordinary plain work composed the whole system of it.»<sup>127</sup>

As one can easily imagine, female education was not even supported by the family and in particular mothers, who probably did not understand the benefits of a proper education. Fanny expresses the same thought: «My poor mother had divided her time so entirely between her scholars and her little domestic cares that she had spared very little of it to my instruction, having,

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 232.

<sup>127</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

from her own innocence from all ill, no hint or thought of guarding me against any.»<sup>128</sup>

Therefore, it could be argued that Fanny's lack of education represents the cause of her fall from grace. Ignorance would then deny Fanny the ability to judge people and circumstances cautiously. Even her first sexual encounter, although dictated by love, represents the naive conduct of an untaught girl. The total ignorance of the contemporary customs is proof that Fanny is an innocent character, whose immoral conduct is not to blame.

This issue was also tackled by the philosopher John Locke, who in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), argued that «the ignorance and slowness of assent wherewith others receive [moral rules] are manifest proofs that they are not innate, and such as offer themselves to their view without searching.»<sup>129</sup>

According to the Lockean theory, there is no innate knowledge and people can only be educated through their experiences. Fanny's lack of knowledge, and more precisely lack of wisdom, is to be considered the main cause to determine Fanny's scandalous conduct. Without worldly knowledge, Fanny cannot make rational decisions. Moreover, Fanny's moral growth follows an inverse process of discovery: she experiences the world through her body and not through the absorption of right and moral principles. Therefore, learning to satisfy and please the bodily faculties first, Fanny will grow wiser through sexual gratification.

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40.

<sup>129</sup> LOCKE, John, *Human Understanding*, quoted in DENTON, Rance D. "Secrets of Sex and Innocence in Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure: A Profile of Purity Using Three Common Philosophies," *Colonial Academic Alliance Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 2, Article 7, 2001, p. 3.

### 3.3 Surrogate mothers: subjection and commercial bonds in *Fanny*

#### *Hill*

Considering that *Fanny Hill* begins with the loss of the heroine's parents, it could be suggested that Cleland used the 'orphan motif' to demonstrate how the absence of the biological mother largely influenced Fanny's conduct. Fanny's premature orphanage, even though not consciously mourned at the time when it occurred - «A little time, and the giddiness of that age, dissipated too soon my reflections on that irreparable loss»<sup>130</sup> - suggests that Fanny's narrative is mostly centered on her longing for a maternal bond. The problem with Fanny's relationships with her surrogate mothers is that they create mostly economic bonds, rather than sentimental ones.

After the loss of the biological parents, the first woman to show some "motherly care" towards Fanny is Esther Davis, who, without too many scruples, will tax Fanny, making her "bear all travelling charges". As Fanny is too young, she is not able to see and recognize the materiality of human relations. Once in London, alone and friendless, Fanny will soon see another "matron-like" in Mrs. Brown's attentions towards her. Mrs. Brown then conquers Fanny's sympathy and manages to submit the girl to her power in the bawdy house. Indeed, after Mr. Crofts' rape attempt, Fanny fears Mrs. Brown reproaches thus: «I dreaded the sight of Mrs. Brown, as if I had been the criminal and she the person injured»<sup>131</sup>.

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<sup>130</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58.

Fanny's longing for a maternal presence in her life continues in the second part of the novel, where the stand-in mother is Mrs. Cole, who, according to Fanny's statements: «She pretended that a strict resemblance she fancied she saw in me to an only daughter, whom she had lost at my age, was the first motive of her taking to me so affectionately as she did»<sup>132</sup>. Certainly more sweet and tender than Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Cole's attentions for Fanny are, anyway, regulated by an economic interest. This theory of economic bond is confirmed in one particular passage of the novel, after the sailor scene, where Mrs. Cole advises Fanny on the health risks which she could face, (and as a consequence the impossibility for Fanny to work in her brothel), instead of advising her about the moral implications of prostitution. It seems, in fact, that Mrs. Cole's fondness for Fanny has nothing to do with maternal warmth or friendship. On the contrary, the only possible bond is merely economic. In other words, more than being a daughter, represents a product to protect. Therefore, when Fanny engages in dangerous sexual encounters, there is no protective mother telling Fanny to stop.

The episode of masochistic sex with the fetishist, Mr. Barville, clearly shows Mrs. Cole's indifference towards Fanny. Even though Mrs. Cole uses many arguments to dissuade Fanny from taking part in flagellation, the sincerity of such advice seems to be doubtful. Therefore, it seems that Mrs. Cole's plan is to keep Fanny under her control and to preserve the financial benefits that her "temporal daughter" provides.

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 130.

Interestingly then, it seems that Mrs. Cole has a strong interest in the subjection of the girls who make up the “little family of love”, and that by preaching «very pathetically the doctrine of passive obedience»<sup>133</sup>, she manages to submit the girls and to make them her property.

The concept of maternity, however, needs to be understood within the social context of the Eighteenth Century. As has been argued in this subchapter, Fanny’s surrogate mothers think in terms of economic benefits rather than sentimental affections. Had Fanny’s biological mother lived, things would probably have been different.

Nevertheless, sentimental attachment towards members of the family, and daughters in particular, has not always been the same during the past centuries. What seems inconceivable today was the standard behaviour of our ancestors, who, accustomed to a very high mortality rate, did not invest too much on sentimentalism.

At the beginning of the novel, when Fanny says that «[her parents] had had several children, but none lived to any age»<sup>134</sup>, it results that one’s ability to talk of such a loss without being moved, inevitably confirms the conclusions drawn by Lawrence Stone in his famous work on the English family, according to which “family relationships were characterized by interchangeability”<sup>135</sup>, and that a kind of emotional distance was kept. As a consequence, dramatic circumstances such as premature death, allowed the development of a family type, which based its success on economic interests.

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<sup>133</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40.

<sup>135</sup> STONE, Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 88.



Considering that property was the only warranty against poverty, it is easy to see how Fanny's surrogate mothers base their relationship merely on the principle of interest. In contrast, Fanny's need to enter again the maternal space is so strong that she cannot see the trap: she will soon become a commodity exchanged between her temporal mothers and her clients<sup>136</sup>.

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<sup>136</sup> GAUTIER, Gary, *op. cit.*, pp. 473-491.

### 3.4 Bourgeois coding and encoding: the attack on sodomy, the ambivalence of lesbianism and the patriarchal sexual power

Among the most obscene scenes in *Fanny Hill*, the one that has contributed to the novel's censorship and to the author's imprisonment, is that of sodomy between two men. Located in the second part of the novel, this scene represents the culmination of eighteenth-century transgression. Fanny's account of the homosexual intercourse she witnesses clearly explains how this sexual deviation was considered "so disagreeable a subject" by the eighteenth-century society. Whereas Fanny's reaction refers to "rage and indignation", Mrs. Cole's words about homosexuals are even more sharp: they actually represent the «unsexed male misses»<sup>137</sup>.

Mrs. Cole, therefore, voices the dominant, eighteenth-century standpoint which saw the homosexuals, also called 'mollies'<sup>138</sup>, as depraved men. Condemned also by the Church, who emphasized the non-procreative aspect of this practice, sodomy and effeminacy were generally considered as a plague for the society, and a subject that, according to Mrs. Cole: «the less said of it was the better»<sup>139</sup>.

This need to silence it, presumably, represented the need to respect the current bourgeois coding which denounced homosexual acts as a violation of moral behaviour and a misogynist attitude. However, in England, sodomy was not feared as much as it was in the rest of Europe. Even though in sixteenth-

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<sup>137</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>138</sup> During the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the term 'molly' was used to refer to the effeminate men, who used to frequent the so called 'molly houses'.

<sup>139</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

century Europe, homosexuality was associated with the prosecution of witches, in England the attacks on both sodomy and witchcraft were not excessive<sup>140</sup>.

According to the historian Lawrence Stone, by the Eighteenth Century, cases of homosexuality were becoming more commonplace among the upper classes and people started to talk more openly about this practice. Nevertheless, homosexuals were still punished with pillory by contemporary society. It appears that it was the women who liked to punish homosexuals by shouting insulting words such as ‘cut it off’, ‘shave him close’, ‘flog him’, etc<sup>141</sup>. Anyway, these were mostly the reactions of the poor, while among the upper-classes the prejudices started to weaken.

Another key aspect of the eighteenth-century indulgence towards homosexuality concerned the rise in the number of male heirs. The necessity to beget a son, in order to ensure the continuation of the caste, was largely encouraged by both the State and the family. By the early Eighteenth Century, therefore, the growing number of homosexuals in the upper-classes was continuing to rise. It seems that men used to frequent homosexual clubs in London, and that the majority of them belonged to the wealthy class<sup>142</sup>.

However, from this greater tolerance towards homosexuals, a paradox, linked to the patriarchal structure of the English society, emerged. The need to preserve property and the unity of the land through male primogeniture helped to forge relations between the descendants of the noble families. These relationships that took place in a purely masculine and patriarchal context led,

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<sup>140</sup> STONE, Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 337.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibidem*.

in the long run, to a greater acceptance of homosexuality, which was then considered part of the same patriarchal system as a result.

Nevertheless, tolerance of homosexuality among lower classes, as has been demonstrated in *Fanny Hill*, was still far from widespread. An example of this rejection of sodomites, can be found in Mrs. Cole's reaction. Moreover, satirical remarks against this 'vice' were often expressed in the many pamphlets that circulated in England during the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. One of them, already mentioned in this research is the anonymous *Satan's Harvest Home* (1749) and *Hell upon Earth* (1729). This kind of prose fiction must have contributed to the violent reactions of the English crowds, who used to accompany the convicted to the pillory, where many cases of public lynching were registered.

However, one could argue that Cleland's personal attitude towards homosexuality meant to sustain and defend them. Indeed, following the homosexual scene, Cleland apparently punishes Fanny by letting her falling down the ladder and by allowing the two boys to escape unnoticed, and so not be punished. Obviously, in a real eighteenth-century context, the two boys would have been certainly punished by the bourgeois morality. Through Mrs Cole's condemnation of this sexual deviation, however, Cleland strongly emphasizes the patriarchal perspective of the text. Moreover, as has been argued by Luce Irigaray, homosexuality represents a threat to patriarchal system because: «once the penis itself becomes merely a means to pleasure, pleasure among men, the phallus *loses its power*»<sup>143</sup>.

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<sup>143</sup> IRIGARAY, Luce, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 193, quoted in FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, note 29, p. 70.

Obviously then, in a patriarchal system, where the myth of the penis is exaggerated, the phallus represents none other than the symbol of the masculine power. Cleland's obsession with the large male member thus reinforces the idea that women are controlled by men and that they are slaves to desire. It is no accident that Fanny refers to the penis as: «that peculiar scepter-member, which command us all»<sup>144</sup>.

As the homosexual scene represents merely a brief sexual deviation, it could be argued that Cleland's intention is the reinforcement of the patriarchal power through the exaltation of the heterosexual sex. As a result, every sexual deviation in *Fanny Hill* is shown to be weak, poor, negative and incomplete. Fanny's longing for "more solid food" after the lesbian intercourse, clearly explains how Cleland placed heterosexual and penetrative sex above the rest.

Lesbianism is considered a poor substitute: incomplete intercourse which can satisfy only the pleasures of touch. Interestingly then, the common use of dildos among female homosexuals is not even contemplated by Cleland, who must have imagined that there is no substitute for the penis. Moreover, as a talented pornographer, Cleland's use of the Sapphic motif in *Fanny Hill*, must have been considered a powerful means for the objectification of the heroine. As lesbian sexual intercourse notoriously satisfies male desires in the pornographic novel, it seems that Fanny is more the object of the *Memoirs*, than its subject.

According to many readers and critics, *Fanny Hill* presents itself as an innovative pornographic text which elevates the woman as an autonomous

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<sup>144</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

sexual being, but a closer reading actually discloses how Cleland had centralized his work on a series of accepted ideologies and mores which inevitably sustained the predominant English patriarchal structure of the Eighteenth century. In his well known article *Language, Power, and Sexuality in Fanny Hill*, Robert Markley claims that: «The novel flirts with something approaching an incipient feminism, with the possibility of a non-discriminatory sexuality, but it always returns to its dominant language of rationality, common sense, and phallogentric repression. In this respect, *Fanny Hill* becomes bourgeois mythmaking at its most disarming – and effective: it sustains a masculine mythology of power from within the guise of a feminine confession»<sup>145</sup>.

As a pornographic novel, it is easy to assume that the *Memoirs* were addressed, at the time they were written, to a predominantly male audience and that they were written to satisfy those male fantasies about women that an erotic text was expected to arouse. Thanks to this entirely masculine perspective, the objectification of the woman's body becomes the fulcrum of the novel. Moreover, an unequal relationship between the male spectator and the female object is revealed in the text. Interestingly, Fanny sees herself, and her body in particular, through an assumed male gaze<sup>146</sup>.

Throughout Fanny's many descriptions of her body and of her fellow prostitutes, Cleland offers detailed word pictures of the physical attributes of each character represented. Their psychological traits, however, do not count.

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<sup>145</sup> MARKLEY, Robert, "Language, Power, and Sexuality in Fanny Hill", *Philological Quarterly* 63.3 (1984), p. 345, quoted in FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>146</sup> FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 53.

The characters are described, evaluated and estimated only according to their remarkable bodies.

When talking about the objectification of the body, however, it should be specified that not only the female body in *Fanny Hill* is depicted as an 'object', but the male body too, and the penis in particular. However, a strong difference between female and the male objectification in the text is apparent. Indeed, if Cleland represents the female body as merely an object whose main purpose is to satisfy men's desires, then in contrast, through the glorification of the phallus, the male anatomy has at least two functions. Clearly, the first function is that of underlining the physical force of the man, while the second refers to the penis's ability to provide pain as well as pleasure<sup>147</sup>. Fanny's words confirm this theory: «I arrived at excess of pleasure, through excess of pain»<sup>148</sup>.

The many descriptions of the penis, together with the numerous defloration scenes in the text, have largely serve to reinforce the idea that the novel's main task is that of empathising with the purely male fantasy that power is strongly related to penis size<sup>149</sup>.

Sexual power in *Fanny Hill* refers to masculinity and to the men's ability to govern and subordinate women at will. Interestingly, since male social status does not seem to be essential to female subordination, the pretence at equality between the sexes in *Fanny Hill* is only a weak one.

Among the many cases which confirm this, there are two which seem exemplary as they clearly show how male physical dominance triumphs over

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

<sup>148</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>149</sup> FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 55.

women. Both examples have something in common: the enormous size of the phallus threatening the female characters. In the first case, we have Fanny, who in reference to the young servant Will, expresses the threat of the male member, which seems to exist only to destroy women's most "tender parts". In the second example, the victim-protagonist is Fanny's friend Louisa, who after having seduced a mentally handicapped boy and realising too late the inherent danger of such an encounter, is forced to endure his physical supremacy and to accept reaching orgasm, even through what could be defined a rape<sup>150</sup>.

If on the surface a liberating female sexuality seems to emerge, according to social and historical sources the process of female emancipation was far from taking place at the time the *Memoirs* were written. Therefore, Cleland's depiction of female sexuality was more likely to reflect the male fantasy which sees women as sex objects. Indeed, Pritchett's words would seem to support this point of view, arguing: «the book is, in this sense, an erotic fantasy - and a male fantasy, at that, put into the mind of a woman. The male organ is phenomenal to the point of absurdity»<sup>151</sup>.

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 61.

<sup>151</sup> PRITCHETT, V.S., "The Harlot's Progress" in *The New York Review of Books*, Volume 1, Number 5, October 31, 1963.



### 3.5 No more pornography: marriage and the triumph of male power

Considering that part of *Fanny Hill*'s huge success was due to the rich and arousing style which the author adopted for his novel, twentieth-century criticism is largely in agreement that Cleland's book absolutely deserves «its place in the history of literature, not in the history of smut»<sup>152</sup>.

Among the many sexual scenes the reader may admire in the text, the one which most seems to convey a certain literary value to the novel is undoubtedly Fanny's first sexual encounter. Unlike all of the other sexual accounts, which will soon follow in the narrative, Fanny's account of her love-making with Charles is not at all crude. As Fanny is truly in love with Charles, an emotional bond strengthens this relationship and makes it superior to all the other mercenary encounters, which are nothing more than meaningless sex, albeit sexually satisfying.

Here we read Fanny's description of what she felt soon after having made love with Charles: «My eyes, however, moistened with tears and languishingly turned upon him, seemed to reproach him with his cruelty, and ask him if such were the rewards of love. But Charles, to whom I was now infinitely endeared, by his complete triumphs over a maidenhead, where he so little expected to find one, in tenderness to that pain which he had put me to in procuring himself the height of pleasure, smothered his exultation and employed himself with so much sweetness, so much warmth, to sooth, to

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<sup>152</sup> *Ibidem*.

caress, and comfort me in my soft complainings, that breathed indeed more love than resentment, that I presently drowned all sense of pain in the pleasure of seeing him, of thinking *that I belonged to him, he who now was the absolute disposer of my happiness, and, in one word, my fate*»<sup>153</sup>. According to my interpretation of the text, this passage seems to be fundamental as it implicitly anticipates the happy and sentimental ending of the novel, that is the marriage between the two lovers.

However, rather than revealing the novel's ending, it could be argued that this passage empathizes the accomplishment of the patriarchal power, which as it has been previously demonstrated, pervades almost the entire text.

When Fanny refers to Charles as to “the disposer of [her] happiness”, Fanny thinks of herself as Charles's property. Accordingly, Fanny recognizes Charles's superiority and submits herself to his will. The main element which enables such a reading and interpretation of the text may be found in Fanny's twofold vision of sex: true and passionate love versus meaningless sex. Choosing the infinite joys of mutual love and giving up prostitution, it seems that what Cleland had in mind for his heroine was a sentimental ending to support his theory that is that no woman can enjoy libertinism and mercenary sex with the same insouciance as a man<sup>154</sup>.

Towards the end of the novel, when Fanny and Charles are finally reunited, Fanny exalts the value of virtue, through a eulogy where she refers to herself as a «tail-piece of morality»<sup>155</sup>, slightly confuses the reader who, for

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<sup>153</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 79, [my italics].

<sup>154</sup> FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>155</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

most of the reading of the novel has followed Fanny going from one client's bed to another.

However, it could be argued that the novel had to end in this way. Probably Cleland's readers expected such an ending because female sexual freedom was still too distant from their education, which certainly saw women as virtuous angels, slaves to their husbands, prostitutes to benefit their conjugal existence.

Cleland's promotion of patriarchal power in *Fanny Hill* is evident in other significant details contained in the final passage of the novel. Primarily, as Fanny has become a rich independent woman, Cleland had to make Fanny renounce her fortune by bestowing it upon Charles to dispose of as he wished. In fact, Fanny's economic independence would not have been accepted by English society, which would have criticized Fanny for the use of dishonest means. Therefore, all Fanny's money is given to Charles, who, being a man, can marry Fanny and make her an honest woman<sup>156</sup>. Thus, the total subordination to the husband explains how Cleland endorsed the patriarchal ideology according to which women represented male property and that their merits and privileges were acknowledged only where the *paterfamilias* agreed.

In the very last passage of *Fanny Hill* it seems that the heroine's justification of her past immoral conduct serves to exalt the more «infinitely superior joys of innocence»<sup>157</sup>. As a consequence, toning down the past lascivious sexual experiences, which have contributed to the heroine's moral growth, the reader may judge Cleland's change of attitude a bit extravagant.

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<sup>156</sup> FOWLER, Patsy S., JACKSON, Alan (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>157</sup> CLELAND, John, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

The difficulty of asserting whether Cleland was just a stylish pornographer or if he was much more concerned with morality and didacticism disappears if the reader takes *Fanny Hill* simply as a moralising erotic novel.

Choosing marriage and putting an end to pornography, licentiousness and prostitution, Cleland exalts domestic happiness. Moreover, in doing so, Cleland provides elements which support this hypothesis, including the theme of motherhood. Consequently, Fanny, who is now a respectable married woman, is also a mother and her son comes to represent the essence of the patriarchal system, which is the continuation of the caste through male primogeniture. This hypothesis may be adequately upheld in a previous passage in the novel, where Fanny, having had premarital sex with Charles, miscarries her first child. Following this line of argument, it could be suggested that the illegitimacy of Fanny and Charles relationship is punished by Cleland's hidden morality. Whereas, once they are married, the two lovers are given the opportunity to complete their family nucleus with a legitimate male heir.

As suggested above, the marriage plot at the end of the novel legitimates Fanny as a respectable wife who finally renounces her promiscuous encounters in order to be faithful to her legitimate husband. Therefore, since monogamy leads to happy everlasting marriage which in turn brings about the success of the English eighteenth-century family type, Cleland's decision to end his novel with a marriage seems to be as logical as it is powerful.

## Conclusions

Cleland's *most licentious and inflaming book* is obviously a novel about sex, but it is not mere pornography, or rather, it is pornography with a dual purpose: to arouse sexual excitement as well as to uphold the hypothesis that female enjoyment of prostitution is just a male fantasy.

Given that literary tastes alter over the centuries, the novel's reception and evaluation has been subject to its readers' changing judgement which was most probably influenced by the power of censorship while the book was confined to the realm of prohibited pornography. Since its literary value has been recognised, various studies have been conducted on it and critics have shown a growing interest in this extraordinary piece of eighteenth-century debauchery.

Reading the *Memoirs*, contemporary readers may find Fanny's sexual adventures arousing as well as comical. Compared to the hardcore pornography to which we are accustomed today, which often exceeds the limits of human decency, *Fanny Hill* is just an example of 'tamed pornography'.

However, relative to the standard, eighteenth-century narratives, *Fanny Hill* must have been a scandalous pornographic novel deserving of condemnation. Of course, a prostitute with such a degree of sexual frankness could not be considered an exemplary heroine. Whereas today the modern reader has a different approach. Indeed, judging differently, he can offer a reading which exceeds the novel's pornographic identity and which may justify the pornography itself as an antithetical element.

Reading the novel as a product of its time, when the patriarchal system still had a strong power and when prostitution often represented the only means of survival for poor orphaned girls, one can assume that *Fanny Hill* is not at all about female free sexuality. Rather, it is about male fantasy, male glorification and most importantly about male power.

To justify this hypothesis my thesis has offered a series of examples of how patriarchal repression subjected women. For instance, it has demonstrated how female education represented a near impossible ambition and how the lack of education contributed to women's 'fall from grace'. As female education could be seen as a recent phenomenon, the existence of a male discriminatory attitude towards women could explain the unfortunate position in which Cleland's heroine finds herself in early in the novel. Destitute and friendless, Fanny does not have a choice. Instead, she is subjected to someone else's choice.

Even though Cleland has his heroine appreciate sex, it does not mean that she appreciates prostitution as well. In my view, Cleland's choice of turning from prostitution to marriage at the end of the novel serves to reinforce the idea that no woman enjoys being a prostitute when it is brought about by poverty. Therefore, Fanny's accounts of her mercenary liaisons seem to represent a purely male fantasy, while Fanny's descriptions of her happy moments with her true love Charles represent virtuous female nature.

As has been demonstrated in chapter 3, the pornographic plot serves to submit women to male power. This subordination operates through the objectification of the female body which is rigorously depicted to satisfy male

lust. In addition, it must be observed that female bodies in *Fanny Hill* are objects both for the male characters of the novel and the male readers of the text.

As if spied by a male gaze, Fanny narrates her sexual encounters until she abandons prostitution. And here we find Cleland's final moment of inspiration: to conclude the novel, Cleland inserts the marriage plot. Following the interpretation I have outlined above, this choice is not accidental. On the contrary, it is the result of a preliminary calculation which uses such an ending to assert that women need marriage, or, more precisely, that they need the domination of a husband. Thus the heroine, when she is no longer a prostitute becomes her husband's property.

Thanks to its sophisticated and varied style, the book can seem to offer an apparently frivolous reading, and yet it deals with issues which are not at all trivial. If, on the one hand, it is possible to believe that Fanny is satisfied with her healthy sexuality, and that she fits perfectly the title of *Woman of Pleasure*, on the other, it seems that mercenary sex incites nothing but physical and mechanical responses. As a consequence, putting an end to prostitution, marriage makes the woman respectable, adequate and faithful to the husband, who therefore becomes her master.

According to our contemporary reading of the *Memoirs*, this thesis does not preclude the possible expression of female sexual freedom. However, an analysis of the text which takes into account its reception in the Eighteenth Century offers a very different reading and interpretation. By suggesting that the author's intention was that of exalting patriarchal power, the main purpose

of this research has been to highlight elements which lead to a more complex reading of the text.

As we can only hypothesize on what Cleland meant to communicate to his readers, we might finally argue that *Fanny Hill* represents an appealing and controversial novel, which though celebrating sexuality in its fullest form, at the same time commands its death.



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