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From Prostitution to Domesticity: Charting the Intersections fo Bodily Habituations and Conditions of Precarity in John Cleland's Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure

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From Prostitution to Domesticity: Charting the Intersection of Bodily Habituations and
Conditions of Precarity in John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*

by

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A Thesis

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Abstract

Contemporary theoretical criticism of John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* has undergone a shift, centering on reconsidering whether *Memoirs'* sexual politics is ultimately liberatory or oppressive. In light of this formulation, this paper deploys Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity and precarity to conceptualize how, while the surface politics of the body in *Memoirs* liberates libidinal energies that grant both the protagonist, Fanny, and the reader access to pleasure, it also participates in regulating and territorializing ambiguous bodies and erotic desire in the interest of an eighteenth-century English heteronormative ethics of pleasure. Charting the trajectory of Fanny as prostitute through the course of the text, I identify an emergent pattern: As Fanny ascends the prostitution hierarchy, she moves closer to the realization of a domestic fantasy. Along the way, she cultivates an alliance of fallen women that mitigates their collective state of precarity, and internalizes a discourse of taste, which allows her to eventually conform to established norms of embodiment that qualify her as a subject of recognition. She thus extinguishes her state of precarity and allows access to the benefits of patriarchy.

I. Introduction

Replete with vivid sexual encounters that run the gamut (masturbation, lesbianism, flagellation, sodomy), John Cleland's eighteenth-century epistolary narrative, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748-1749), popularly known as *Fanny Hill*, delicately crafts a lexicon of sexual euphemisms that bombard, stun, and inscribe the reader into a venereal landscape and a systematized pursuit of bodily pleasure. While the pornographic machinery of *Memoirs* installs pleasure as the text's principle hermeneutic, pleasure is contingent upon the performative power of the body: while there is no denying that the action of the text privileges pleasure, the performative role of the body (particularly Fanny's) is the conduit of pleasure. As Peter Sabor observes in his review that charts the critical evolution of *Memoirs*, there has been an impulse in recent queer theory criticism of *Memoirs* to rotate the theoretical axis from "the ethos of sexual liberation to that of gender trouble."¹ With this critical shift toward gender trouble, has come one of the central questions in criticism of the text: are *Memoirs*' sexual politics ultimately liberatory or oppressive?² Does the text's treatment of gender, sexuality and bodies advance radical or retrograde politics? While the theoretical currency of gender trouble offers compelling emancipatory possibilities for historically oppressed figures (particularly the prostitute) subject to exploitative forces of the hegemonic structures of

¹ Peter Sabor provides an extensive review essay of *Memoirs* that historicizes critical trends, maps out critical affinities that align with the agendas of gay, queer and feminist interpretations, and predicts that "the present decade might see a fruitful combination of gender and queer theory approaches to *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* with further historical research." See Peter Sabor, "From Sexual Liberation to Gender Trouble: Reading 'Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure' from the 1960s to the 1990s," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33.3 (Summer 2000): 561-578.

² On a more sustained meditation about the liberatory and oppressive capacities of the text, see David Robinson, "The Closeting of Closeting: Cleland, Smollett, Sodomy, and the Critics." *Closeted Writing and Lesbian and Gay Literature: Classical, Early Modern, Eighteenth-century*. (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 37-45.

heteronormativity—readings that intellectually align with a subversive agenda and radical politics—it would be misguided to assume that all exercises of gender performativity in the text lead to liberation. As Felicity Nussbaum prudently warns: we must recognize that “[g]ender fluidity may be enlisted in the cause of oppression.”³ In light of this formulation, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity offers one theoretical strand to further conceptualize how, even though the surface politics of the body in *Memoirs* liberates libidinal energies that grant the main protagonist, Fanny, and the reader access to pleasure (albeit ephemeral pleasure), it also participates in regulating and territorializing ambiguous bodies and erotic desire in the interest of an eighteenth-century English heteronormative ethics of pleasure.⁴

According to Butler, the theory of gender performativity reveals that the ontological premise of Cartesian subjectivity, the ontological integrity of a subject, is predicated upon a “foundationalist fable” that presupposes that an internal essence or inherent self exists before the law. As such, the Western conceptualization of an essentialized subjectivity conceals its constructedness through a compulsory system in which there is a tacit collective agreement to “perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders.”⁵ Moreover, Butler contends that “a stylized repetition of corporeal acts” sustains the illusion that a biological principle of organization locates an individual as an

³ Felicity Nussbaum, “Prostitution, Body Parts, and Sexual Geography.” *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives*. (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 113. Subsequent references to Nussbaum’s text will be parenthetical.

⁴ In his introduction to Vivant Denon’s *No Tomorrow*, Peter Brooks defines the ethics of pleasure as “pleasure considered, planned, staged, given, and received in a momentary exchange where the gift is all the more precious for its transience.” I have further adapted this term to consider how the register of pleasure can be deployed in the service of a heteronormative agenda. For more on this, see Peter Brooks, introduction to *No Tomorrow*, by Vivant Denon (New York: New York Review Books, 2009), vii.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 190.

essentialized male or female, heterosexual, homosexual or lesbian. What this means, then, is that the ontological conditions of one's persistence encode them into a regulatory system of power that is governed by a set of norms that confer recognizability and thus ultimately (re)produce or disavow personhood. Subjectivity, and by extension personhood, is discursively constituted through a complex convergence of social forces that are habituated within the somatic psyche and which ultimately determine "who can become produced as a recognizable subject."⁶ It is Butler's contention that no set of actions operates on the basis of a deliberate decision because "we are always in the grip of norms even as we struggle against them." In this way resistance or subversion becomes possible, according to Butler, only when "a certain historical convergence of norms at the site of [an individual's] embodied personhood opens up possibilities for action."⁷ It is precisely this historical convergence of norms through which Fanny momentarily resists bourgeois heterosexual signification and gains access to intense bodily and psychic pleasure. Thus, it will be the task of this paper to map out how the text's representation of Fanny's bodily performances contest norms of intelligibility and provide Fanny with momentary agency and pleasure because these performances operate at a historical site of convergence in which eighteenth-century vectors of heteronormative power were undergoing an epistemic shift. This paper will also trace how Fanny's bodily performances progressively produce her as a "subject eligible for recognition": an interpellation that gains her access to the benefits of bourgeois patriarchal domesticity,

⁶ These concepts were extracted from a lecture (2009) in which Butler re-examines how gender performativity informs and interacts with her idea of precarity, specifically in relation to nation-states. See Judith Butler, "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics," *AIBR* 4.3 (September 2009): i-xii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xii.

but that also inscribes and territorializes her body into a heteronormative regime of England's imperial power.

II. Sexual Ideology in the Eighteenth-Century

In order to fully understand how Fanny's bodily performances resist norms of heterosexual pleasure, it is important to contextualize models of human bodies and sexuality within the purview of eighteenth-century ideology. According to Thomas Laqueur, during the eighteenth century there was a paradigm shift in the way that human bodies were understood: "[s]ometime in the eighteenth century...an anatomy and physiology of incommensurability replaced a metaphysics of hierarchy in the representation of women in relation to men."⁸ Although the specifics behind Laqueur's account have been a point of critical contention, most scholars agree that during the eighteenth century there was an epistemological shift from a one-sex model of gender hierarchy to a two-sex model rooted in sexual difference which resulted in the emergence of sexual taxonomies and has had a profound influence on the formation of the modern political subject.⁹ Moreover, this particular sex/gender system was invented concomitantly with the emergence of the ideology of separate spheres. As Felicity Nussbaum observes, "[e]fforts to regulate sexuality at home in its more public manifestations urged a redefinition of femininity consonant with middle-class virtue."¹⁰

⁸ See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 6.

⁹ For a more sustained engagement about emergent points of contention in relation to Laqueur's theorization about the historical shift between the isomorphic one-sex model to the dimorphic two-sex model, see Annamarie Jagose, "'Critical Extasy': Orgasm and Sensibility in Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure," *Signs* 32, no.2 (Winter 2007): 460-461.

¹⁰ Felicity Nussbaum convincingly argues that "the eighteenth century has become increasingly marked as the originary moment for modern definitions of sexual difference as they are written on the body" and that "while the sex/gender system in the eighteenth century may seem to reduce to simple biological binaries, its various cultural transformations were diverse"(95-96).

Similarly Lynn Hunt claims, “the ideology of a separate, private sphere from women depended upon a reassertion of fundamental male and female sexual (and, therefore, social and political) difference.”¹¹ Thus, this new model of sexual difference constructed the identity of a subject by locating anatomical markers of distinction and particular behaviors that not only essentialized a male/female binary but also reinforced a mode of regulation that sought to sustain the material and social benefits of patriarchal system grounded in new ideals of romantic behavior and conjugal companionship. Further, this paradigmatic shift to an ideology of sexual difference marks an intersection of biology and politics—Roberto Esposito labels this as the “biologization of politics”—and the emergence of what Foucault identifies as biopolitics: a type of political power that discursively inscribes and artificially unifies a continuum of unrelated sexual functions and human bodies through a regulatory regime of power-knowledge.¹²

II. Locating Pleasurable Bodily Experiences and Conditions of Precarity

Despite the fact that Fanny Hill eventually enters into a domestic marriage and succumbs to eighteenth-century English bourgeois heteronormativity, she seems for much of the book to transgress or elude this “fate” as she functions as a thriving prostitute. Indeed, it is through the figure of the prostitute that Fanny surveys a field of sexual pleasure and steps to the edge of heteronormative limits, witnessing sexually perverse practices and participating in bodily acts of pleasure. As a prostitute, Fanny is

¹¹ Lynn Hunt, “Introduction: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800,” in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 45.

¹² See Roberto Esposito, *Third Person*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012). See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), 135-159. Interestingly, as Nancy Armstrong astutely remarks, Foucault fails to mention or virtually disregards “a mode of gender differentiation that enables one sex to dominate the other” (22). See Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

able to slip in and out of sexual experiences without committing to a fixed heterosexual identity. It is precisely through the archetype of the prostitute that Fanny is able to transgress eighteenth-century boundaries and occupy a liminal space between private and public spheres.

A moment that registers the liberation of Fanny's libidinal desire and obliterates the material conditions of a laboring body occurs early in the novel when Fanny seduces the servant boy, William, as an act of revenge in the wake of the discovery that her gentleman suitor, Mr. H—, has been cheating on her. In this particular foray with William, Fanny describes her experience as a "double achievement of pleasure and revenge."¹³ In graphic detail, Fanny narrates her bodily response to William's touch:

[H]e opens the folding lips, the softness of which yielding entry to any thing of hard body, close round it, and oppose the sight: and feeling further, meets with, and wonders at a soft fleshy excrescence, which, limber and relax'd after the late enjoyment, now grew, under the touch and examination of his fiery fingers, more and more stiff and considerable, still titillating ardours of that so sensible part, made me sigh, as if he had hurt me. On which he withdrew his curious probing fingers, asking me pardon, as it were, in a kiss that rather increased the flame *there*."(77, emphasis Cleland's)

In this moment, Fanny's body momentarily resists intelligibility. The corporeal ambiguity of Fanny's body disrupts the binary logic of Western subjectivity and in doing so escapes a structure that channels female desire in the service of phallogentric thought.

¹³ John Cleland, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, ed. Peter Sabor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 79. Subsequent references to Cleland's text will be parenthetical.

However, it is crucial to observe that Fanny experiences bursts of agency and pleasure because she occupies the role of a prostitute. In late eighteenth-century England, the body of a prostitute was deemed monstrous because of its hyper-sexualized practices and voracious libidinal excess. In fact, as Felicity Nussbaum purports, “prostitutes [were] conceptualized in eighteenth-century England as a species set apart from women. Prostitutes manage[d] to incorporate all imagined sexualities and to exceed their allotted geopolitical space.”¹⁴ Thus, in this particular scene with William, because her body grotesquely parodies the body of both a woman and an androgynous individual, Fanny momentarily exposes and opposes a regulatory mode of recognizability through which the eighteenth-century English bourgeoisie imagined and enforced its own national unity.

While Fanny’s occupation as a prostitute offers access to an array of pleasurable bodily experiences, it also epitomizes her state of exclusion: it may be true that Fanny establishes a modicum of financial independence but she also suffers from poverty, violence, and emotional instability. As a prostitute during the eighteenth-century, Fanny exists at the limits of established norms that govern recognition of personhood. Consistent with Butler’s conceptual overlap of her theories of gender performativity and precarity (the politically induced condition in which some populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and consequentially are more exposed to injury, violence and death), as a prostitute Fanny does not qualify as a subject of recognition and as such is not guaranteed protection from the law, medical benefits or access to financial

¹⁴ Nussbaum 100.

security.¹⁵ While Fanny's state of exclusion may not be immediately evident—because of the text's venereal landscape and ceaseless rehearsal of sexual pleasure—there are narrative bursts that capture the austerity of prostitution and as such work to shatter idealized portrayals of prostitution.¹⁶

After the departure of Charles (Fanny's first lover and eventual husband) and the miscarriage of their child, Fanny is forced into prostitution due to the financial extortion employed by her landlady, Mrs. Jones. In order to pressure Fanny into prostitution, Mrs. Jones presents Fanny with a bill “for arrears of rent, diet, apothecary's charges, nurse, &c.” (57) that Fanny cannot pay. Because Fanny does not have the financial resources to settle this incurred debt, Mrs. Jones arranges for Fanny to become the kept mistress of Mr. H—. Upon the discovery of this arrangement, Fanny describes her emotional comportment as “melancholic despair” and claims that she “was now lifeless, and indifferent to every thing”(58). Due to the violent shocks of her situation, Fanny has no option but to comply with the demands of Mrs. Jones and take up a sexual relationship with Mr. H—. Fanny's description of her first sexual interaction with Mr. H—further intimates her wretched condition and utter lack of agency:

I did not so much as know what he was about, till recovering from a trance of lifeless insensibility, I found him buried in me, whilst I lay passive and innocent of the least sensation of pleasure; a death cold corpse could scarce have had less life or sense in it. As soon as he had thus pacified a

¹⁵ Butler acknowledges that there is a critical distinction between precariousness (corporeal vulnerability experienced by all mortals) and precarity. For more on precarity, see Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (London: Verso, 2006).

¹⁶ David Weed particularly charges Cleland with “verbally airbrushing both the prostitutes' looks and the harsh realities of their working conditions in order to stimulate a male readership that has a libidinal investment in the novel's sexual fantasy”: see David Weed, “Fitting Fanny: Cleland's Memoirs and the Politics of Male Pleasure,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 31.1 (Autumn 1997): 7.

passion, which had too little respected the condition I was in, he got off, and after recomposing the disorder of my cloaths, employ'd himself with the utmost tenderness to calm the transports of remorse and madness at myself, with which I was seiz'd, too late I confess, for having suffer'd on that bed the embraces of a stranger: I tore my hair, wrung my hands, and beat my breast like a mad-woman: but when my new master, for in that light I then view'd him, applied himself to appease me, as my whole rage was levell'd at myself, no part of which I thought myself permitted to aim at him, I begg'd him with more submission than anger, to leave me alone.

(60)

The rhetoric of this passage invokes visions of alterity (death, madness, slavery), forms of otherness that have been historically relegated into the category of the abject. In this scene, Fanny identifies Mr. H— as her “master” and describes her body as “a death like corpse,” equating her status to a realm of nonexistence. Moreover, in this moment when Fanny struggles to speak, she can only “beat her breast” and “tear her hair.” Fanny’s condition silences her into a state of paralysis in which she does not have the “right” to speak. In this way, Fanny’s performativity becomes directly linked with her condition of precarity. And although Fanny attempts to reclaim control of this moment (her inward directed fit of rage signifies an effort to render herself culpable and as such a willing agent who is responsible for her plight), her situation, her way of living the body, is and never will be fully within her control.

III. Hierarchical Progressions from Domesticity to Prostitution

Interestingly, if we chart the trajectory of Fanny as prostitute through the course of the text, a pattern emerges: the various iterations of eighteenth-century prostitution that Fanny enacts incrementally move her closer to domesticity and away from the realization of the common trope of the Harlot's progress.¹⁷ Under the direction of three different female bawds (Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Cole), Fanny advances through three stages of prostitution, progressing up the prostitution hierarchy, which moves her closer to qualification for domestic benefits. In this way, the text depicts a schematics of prostitution that reveals a correlation between the imitation of domestic ideals and degrees of precarity. As Fanny traverses from country life to the bawdy-house of Mrs. Brown to the high-class brothel of Mrs. Cole and eventually enters into a domestic marriage with Charles, she experiences a series of dislocations that expose her to a chronic instability of precarity, but that also strategically channel her bodily performances toward heterosexual pleasure, and thus, toward established norms of embodiment that confer personhood. For the interest of this paper, a comparison between Fanny's occupancy in Mrs. Brown's brothel and Mrs. Cole's seraglio offers a fruitful way to consider how the text offers an interpretative protocol that links bodily performances of pleasure, middle-class politics of domesticity and degrees of precarity.

As the novel opens, Fanny has recently been orphaned and thus begs Esther Davis, her "fellow traveler," "protectress," only "dependence," and "friend" (4) to take "a motherly care" (4) of her. Immediately upon their arrival to London, Esther Davis abandons Fanny, leaving her "stupid and mute" (4). By virtue of events outside of her

¹⁷ In William Hogarth's engraving *A Harlot's Progress*, he depicts the fall and destruction of an innocent country girl who arrives in the city, alone and vulnerable and is conscripted into prostitution by a devious bawd, and eventually dies of venereal disease. For more on this, see William Hogarth, *Engravings by William Hogarth*, ed. Sean Shesgreen. (New York: Dover, 1973), 18-23.

control, Fanny is expelled from the safety of the rural domestic sphere and thrust into the streets of London, which ultimately places her in a “politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability.”¹⁸ Soon after, Fanny is conscripted into prostitution under the auspices of Mrs. Brown, whose covert machinations lure Fanny into an unforeseeable zone of conflict.¹⁹ In the brothel of Mrs. Brown, Fanny occupies a wretched condition of “unwilled adjacency” with a seasoned prostitute, Phoebe Ayers, “the hackney’d, thorough-bred...to whom all modes and devices of pleasure were known and familiar” (11). As Fanny’s sexual “tutress,” Phoebe is employed under the instructions of Mrs. Brown to initiate Fanny into sex and introduces Fanny to pleasure through a series of “strange assaults.” In her first lesbian sexual encounter with Phoebe (and in the novel), Fanny describes her experience retrospectively as a “fatal” descent into debauchery: “What pleasure she had found I will not say; but this I know, that the first sparks of kindling nature, the first ideas of pollution, were caught by me that night, and that the acquaintance and communication with the bad of our own sex, is often as fatal to innocence, as all the seductions of the other” (12-13). In this moment, Fanny compares her pleasure sparked by Phoebe’s bodily ministrations to “pollution” and equates her situation to common heterosexual schemes of “fatal” seduction. Fanny further intimates, however, that her fall was necessitated by her “invincible stupidity” and “portentous

¹⁸ Butler ii.

¹⁹ Encouraged by Esther’s instructions, Fanny goes to an “intelligence-office” where she meets Mrs. Brown and describes her experience of seduction as a matter of her own ignorance and state of desperation: “she[Mrs. Brown] said all to me that an old experienced practitioner in town could think of, and which much more than was necessary to take in an artless unexperienced country-maid, who was even afraid of becoming a wanderer about the streets, and therefore gladly jump’d at the first offer of a shelter, especially from so grave and matron-like a lady, for such my flattering fancy assur’d me this now mistress of mine was”(7). For a discussion about Cleland’s portrayal of prostitution and eighteenth-century models of prostitutional recruitment, see Lena Olsson, “Idealized and Realistic Portrayals of Prostitution in John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*,” in *Launching Fanny Hill: Essays on the Novel and Its Influences*, eds. Patsy S. Fowler and Alan Jackson (New York: AMS Press, 2003), 81-101.

innocence” (16). While it is certainly possible to construe this response as an ostensible rhetorical pardon that allows Fanny to jettison responsibility and indulge in aberrant acts of pleasure, Fanny’s mode of interdependency to Mrs. Brown and Phoebe renders her vulnerable to their exploitative treatment. In fact, once Fanny becomes an orphan she persistently attempts to procure the possibility of a livable life through establishing networks of female alliance and bonds of femininity that mirror the contours of familial ties; this is clearly evinced as Fanny initially looks to Esther for “motherly care” and identifies Mrs. Brown as “matron-like a lady” (7). Moreover, Fanny attributes her corruption to “the constant fears...of being turn’d out to starve” (23) and concedes that her self-willed deception to Mrs. Brown’s deplorable agenda was driven by the specter of despair and destitution:

Yet, plain as Mrs. Brown’s views were now come out, I had not the heart, or spirit to open my eyes on them: still I could not part with my dependence on that bedlam; so much did I think myself her’s, soul and body: or rather, I sought to deceive myself with the continuation of my good opinion of her, and chose to wait the worst at her hands, sooner than being turn’d out to starve in the streets, without a penny of money, or a friend to apply to: these fears were my folly. (19-20)

Fanny conducts a cost-benefit analysis and admittedly invests in the institution of prostitution as an attempt to allay her state of precarity and to avoid isolation.

Accordingly, Fanny’s mode of connectedness subjects her to ties that are antagonistic.

Although Fanny’s exposure to a pedagogy of erotics grants her access to “delicious delight” (38) that is often facilitated by the nonthreatening instruction of Phoebe, her

cohabitation in Mrs. Brown's brothel quickly escalates into a hostile environment that places Fanny's bodily integrity under duress. Left alone to drink tea with Mr. Crofts, Fanny experiences physical brutality in order to resist his attempt to rape her:

But now my extreme aversion, my fears, my indignation, all acting upon me, gave me a spirit not natural to me, so that breaking loose from him, I ran to the bell, and rang it, before he was aware, with such violence and effect, as brought up the maid to know what was the matter, or whether the gentleman wanted any thing? and, before he could proceed to greater extremities, she bounc'd into the room, and seeing me stretch'd on the floor, my hair all dishevell'd, my nose gushing out blood, (which did not a little tragedize the scene) and my odious persecutor still intent on pushing this brutal point, unmov'd by all my cries and distress, she was herself confounded, and did not know what to do. (20)

Similar to the scene that occurs later on with Mr. H—, Fanny is reduced to a condition of corporeality; Mr. Croft's infliction of physical violence strips Fanny of all claims to personhood.²⁰ Moreover, Mr. Croft's use of violence functions as a technology that desubjectifies and transforms Fanny into a "docile body," a body that labors in the sexual service of male pleasure and has no social existence; her condition will not allow her to be recognized as someone who is eligible to receive support from economic or political

²⁰ The dynamics of this scene are indeed congruent with and anticipate Fanny's encounter with Mr. H—. As Lena Olsson argues, there is a parallel "situation where Mrs. Brown...leaves Fanny alone with Mr. Crofts, who has, like Mr. H—, paid for the privilege of 'attempting' Fanny. This parallel gives the later situation a sinister dimension, and Mr. H—predictably proceeds to rape Fanny, managing to accomplish what Mr. Crofts failed to do on the earlier occasion" (91).

structures of relief.²¹ It is important to observe, though, that Fanny desperately rings the bell in hope that Mary, the servant will come to her rescue. This action signifies Fanny's yearning to establish a network of female support. Despite this cruel treatment, Fanny continues to suspend her belief in the hope of cultivating an alliance that gains her access to rights.

Although Fanny eventually escapes from the vulgar and dangerous confines of Mrs. Brown's brothel and is offered a brief interval of domestic idyllic respite with Charles, Phoebe provides a glance into what Fanny's prospective future would look like if she were to stay with Mrs. Brown.²² It is tempting, as many critics have done, to read Phoebe as a transgressive figure who subverts bourgeois sexual hegemony due to her enigmatic sexual identification.²³ Indeed, Fanny characterizes Phoebe as someone who has a gratification for "those arbitrary tastes, for there is no accounting" (12) and further intimates her sexual predilection for women: "not that she hated men, or did not even prefer them to her own sex; but when she met with such occasions as this was, a satiety of enjoyments in the common road, perhaps too a secret byass, inclined her to make the most of pleasure, where-ever she could find it, without distinction of sexes" (12). While Phoebe's sexual ambiguity certainly resists being mapped by heteronormative modes of sexual regulation, the material conditions of her sexual labor have been written on her body. Fanny describes Phoebe as physically jaded:

²¹ For more on "docile bodies", see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage books, 1977) 135-169. Felicity Nussbaum similarly claims "[the] erotic/pornographic body becomes silenced ground for a nationalist and colonist agenda" (98).

²² Mrs. Brown literally traps Fanny: Fanny narrates that Mrs. Brown immediately confiscates her small fortune "under the pretence of keeping my money safe"(Cleland 15) and "tricks her out" with new cloths as a strategy keep her from running away.

²³ See Sabor, "From Sexual Liberation to Gender Trouble: Reading 'Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure' from the 1960s to the 1990s," 568-569.

She was about five and twenty, by her own most suspicious account, in which, according to all appearances, she must have sunk at least ten good years, allowances too being made for the havoc which a long course of hackney-ship, and hot waters, must have made her constitution, and which had already brought on, upon the spur, that stale stage, in which those of her profession are reduced to think of *showing* company instead of *seeing* it. (10, emphasis Cleland's)

Not only does this description convey a fading physical stature, but as Peter Sabor suggests in his explanatory notes, it also entertains the possibility that Phoebe suffers from venereal disease.²⁴ As such, Phoebe may escape an eighteenth-century bourgeois signification of female sexuality, but in doing so she also fails to adhere to norms that make her life intelligible and consequently she suffers from venereal disease and other unintended atrocities that reveal her state of precarity.²⁵

Eventually Fanny arrives at Mrs. Cole's establishment and accordingly describes it as "the safest, politest, and at the same time the most thorough house of accommodation in town" (94). As a domestic sanctuary of sorts, Fanny nostalgically reflects upon her time spent under the tutelage of Mrs. Cole and labels her as a "patroness" and "faithful preceptress." Fanny locates Mrs. Cole, moreover, as a maternal figure that finally provides her with the opportunity to forge bonds of female solidarity: "For Mrs. Cole had, I do not know how, unless by one of those unaccountable invincible

²⁴ Sabor's explanatory notes state that "[t]he 'hot waters' are those of bagnios, bathing-houses frequented by prostitutes and their clients; hot water was also a common cure for venereal disease" (191).

²⁵ Olsson locates a moment in the text in which Phoebe ostensibly confesses that she has had a few illegitimate children: "When Fanny worries about her vagina being too small for the newly discovered penis, Phoebe explains her own and Mrs. Brown's large vaginas as 'owing to nature, child-bearing, frequent over-stretching with unmerciful machines'." For more on this see, Lena Olsson, "Idealized and Realistic Portrayals of Prostitution in John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*," 89.

sympathies, that nevertheless form the strongest links, especially of female friendship, won and got intire possession of me. On her side, she pretended that a strict resemblance, she fancied she saw in me to an only daughter, whom she had lost at my age” (92). In sharp contrast to Mrs. Brown, Fanny’s mode of cohabitation with Mrs. Cole and her “sisterhood” of prostitutes insistently mirror the structure of a family unit—Mrs. Cole’s comparison to Fanny as her daughter being the most obvious association. As a disenfranchised population who are regularly exploited, Mrs. Cole’s house of prostitutes functions as an enclave that fosters emotional support and mitigates the hardships of sexual labor. Despite the fact that Mrs. Cole is in fact a bawd (albeit a genteel one), she imbibes a domestic sensibility that minimizes the conditions of precarity. To be sure, Fanny’s description of Mrs. Cole’s ethical practice of prostitution aligns with the agenda of a rehabilitation program:

She was a severe enemy to the seduction of innocence, and confin’d her acquisitions solely to those unfortunate young women, who, having lost it, were but the juster objects of compassion: amongst these indeed, she pick’d out such as suited her views, and taking them under her protection, rescu’d them from the danger of the public sinks of ruin and misery, to place or form them, well, or ill, in the ease, and security. (172-173)

In this way, Mrs. Cole can be perceived as an activist that marshals an alliance of fallen women in order to combat actively the failures and inequalities of socio-economic and political institutions with the intent to abate the repercussions of seduction—“the public sink of ruin and misery.” As a public benefactor, Mrs. Cole judiciously selects and adopts “unfortunate young women” who share similar circumstances and stories of seduction.

These young ladies find “safe and agreeable refuge” (111) in Mrs. Cole’s home, becoming “her daughters...whom, by her means, and through her instructions, succeeded very well in the world” (88).

Immediately after Fanny becomes situated in her new residency and is indoctrinated into Mrs. Cole’s “little family of love” (93), all of the young ladies share “the critical period of her personal history, in which she first exchanged the maiden state for womanhood”(96). Adhering to conventions that typify eighteenth-century English seduction narratives, each lady recites a personal account that enacts a complex layering and overlap of consent, complicity, and resistance.²⁶ Each respective story replicates conditions of seduction that problematically juxtapose disturbing scenes of bodily violence and “inward revolutions” (102) of pleasure and in doing so destabilizes the distinction between consent and non-consent. In the retelling of her defloration scene, for example, one of the prostitutes, Harriet, describes how she passes out and is “sunk down in a deep swoon” (103), thinking that the young man she has been watching swim has drowned. As her narration continues, she awakens in medias res, proclaiming:

[F]or I did not come to myself, till I was rouz’d out of it by a sense of pain
that pierced me to the vitals, and awak’d me to the most suprising

²⁶ Interestingly, each of the ladies’ respective narratives provides an iteration of seduction that refuses to subscribe to a consent/ resistance binary, and as such strikingly mirrors the ideological positioning consistent with Tory seduction fiction. Accordingly, this may in fact enact what Toni Bowers labels as an ideological shift in eighteenth-century British seduction politics; these stories offer “a mediation on the complexities of desire and resistance” that shed light on gendered identity and nationalist agency. This further suggests that, perhaps, the seductive politics of amatory fiction may offer a useful way to conceptualize how resistance agency is situated in *Memoirs*. However, as Peter Sabor incisively notes in his introduction, *Memoirs* is “a Richardsonian creation, modified by the wit and good humour of Fielding”(xxv-xxvi), so it becomes difficult to straightforwardly discern the ideological import of Cleland’s deployment of seduction paradigms specifically in relation to agency. For more on Tory seduction and collusive practices of resistance, see Toni Bowers, “Representing Resistance: British Seduction Stories, 1660-1880,” in *A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel and Culture*, eds. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia (Oxford: Backwell Publishing 2005), 140-163.

circumstances...taken at such an advantage in my unresisting condition that he had actually completed his entrance into my body so far, that weakened as I was by all the preceding conflicts of my mind I had suffer'd, and struck dumb by the violence of my surprize, I had neither the power to cry out, nor the strength to disengage myself from his strenuous embraces...I still lay all discompos'd in bleeding ruin, palpitating, speechless, unable to get off, and frighten'd, and fluttering like a poor wounded partridge, and ready to faint away again at the sense of what had befallen me. (103)

Although many critics have claimed, as Antje Schaum Anderson does, that “rape does not exist in *Memoirs* because women are constructed as always willing,” the undertow of bodily violence and pain in this scene seriously challenges the consensual politics of this particular interaction.²⁷ Even though Harriet eventually forgives her assailant (and the eventual eroticization of this scene supersedes and obscures the impact of violence), the language of this moment deliberately blurs the distinction between consent and resistance; labeling Harriet’s state of unconsciousness as an “unresisting condition” calls into question Harriet’s volition: did she actually pass out? Or is her swoon really a “feint” (as her aggressor argues), thus making this act a tacit admission of consent? Is this consensual sex or sexual violence? The difficulty of discernment further reflects the emergence of debates in eighteenth-century England concerning gendered sexual agency

²⁷ Anderson focuses the majority of her analysis on Fanny, (and only briefly mentioning the three prostitutes communal narration of their respective defloration experiences) claiming that Fanny “welcomes her pain as the natural and necessary precondition to pleasure.” For more on this, see Antje Schaum Anderson, “Gendered Pleasure, Gendered Plot: Defloration as Climax in ‘Clarissa’ and ‘Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure’,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 25.2 (Spring 1995): 108-138.

in relation to courtship, seduction, and rape.²⁸ Indeed, as Tony Bowers posits, up until the eighteenth century, “rape, was in effect a property crime between men,” and thus the critical shift in emphasis towards the primacy of female response in adjudicating sexual acts as either rape or seduction has had a profound influence on the construction of female subjectivity and the accessibility and distribution of rights.²⁹ It is important to note, however, that the violence of this scene silences Harriet, prevents her from speaking, and subsequently displaces her from the comforts of a tranquil domestic life and situates her in a vulnerable state of precarity as a “disposable” prostitute.

Despite the indiscernibility of the text’s consensual politics of seduction, Emily, Harriet, and Louisa ceremoniously rehearse “little histories” (111), tales of seduction which collectively work to construct an “all-female space”: a space in which a community of fallen women can form an alliance that functions as a defense to their collective state of precarity.³⁰ The enunciation of a personal history of seduction, moreover, is a performative exercise that simultaneously vocalizes the phantom of both the fallen woman and the prostitute. Through Emily, Harriet, Louisa, and Fanny’s acts of storytelling, their histories collide, become entangled and generate a polyvocal narrative

²⁸ This specifically recalls the 1740s controversy over Richardson’s *Pamela*.

²⁹ Bowers explains “[f]rom the Middle Ages until the seventh century, ‘rape’ (raptus) denoted what we today understand as two separate actions, abduction and elopement. A man who carries a woman off from her father’s home could be accused of rape whether she went willingly or not, and his victim in any case was not the woman herself, but her father”(Bower 141). For more on this see Toni Bowers, “Representing Resistance: British Seduction Stories, 1600-1800,” 140-141.

³⁰ John C. Beynon argues that Mrs. Cole’s brothel operates through Sapphic dimensions that produce “an all-female cooperative of women who aid one another in achieving material success...and rely upon an affective relationship that ties the women together and lubricates the wheels of their economic machine”(Beynon 16). Beynon, moreover, insists “it is difficult to encounter in eighteenth-century literary England a group of women who seek to entertain and instruct one another without reading such a grouping as at least potentially Sapphic”(Beynon 21). Beynon, however, fails to observe that these women are “disposable” and occupy an unchosen cohabitation of prostitution. For more on Sapphic erotics and economics in *Memoirs* see, Beynon, “‘Traffic in More Precious Commodities’: Sapphic Erotics and Economics in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*,” in *Launching Fanny Hill: Essays on the Novel and Its Influences*, eds. Patsy S. Fowler and Alan Jackson (New York: AMS Press 2003), 3-26.

that suddenly makes visible and audible those who are supposed to remain invisible and inaudible.³¹ In this particular moment, the typically unvoiced narrative of these women exposes a mode of exclusion through which eighteenth-century English heteronormative vectors of power imagined and reified its own national unity.³²

While the rehearsal of these stories operates on a psychic level to form social bonds of solidarity, the text also depicts a communal politics of bodily pleasure. A quintessential scene that captures the emergence of a communal politics of pleasure is when Fanny is first inducted into the sisterhood through a “publick trial” of group sex. Just as in the preceding scene, each prostitute individually performs her part, takes “her share in the dance” (117) as the whole party is “dazzled, surpris’d, and delighted” (115). In this particular moment, the collective assembling of pleasuring bodies is a performative force in the public domain. It is important to observe, however, that the performance of bodily pleasure is contingent upon a male counterpart. Fanny ascribes these particular enactments of carnal indulgence as refined moments of hedonistic gentility. In these instances, sexual practices become ceremonial displays of heterosexual delectation:

And this [the respect between sexes] was a maxim perfectly well understood by these polite voluptuaries, these profound adepts in the great art and science of pleasure, who never shew’d these votaries of theirs a more tender respect than at the time of those exercises of their complaisance, when they unlock’d their treasures of conceal’d beauty, and

³¹ Butler v.

³² Butler vi

show'd out in the pride of their native charms, ever-more touching surely than when they parade it in the artificial ones of dress and ornament. (120)

Described as a ritual necessary for “practical instruction,” Fanny locates the experience as an optimal act of high culture, aligning heterosexual performance with aesthetic practices of fashion. Directed by an agreeable young gentleman who serves as her “master of the ceremonies” (121), Fanny’s exquisite recital of a heterosexual performance grants Fanny acceptance into the selective circle of the heterosexual elite. Immediately after her trial, the ladies kiss and compliment Fanny, congratulating her on her successful performance. Fanny, moreover, observes that “the transaction of these pleasures, good manners and politeness were inviolably observ’d: here was no gross ribaldry, no offensive or rude behavior, or ungenerous reproaches” (120). The language of this reflection signifies Fanny’s attempt to identify her actions (and those of her compatriots) as that of a selective prostitute rather than a common strumpet. In this way, Fanny rehearses a discourse of taste that not only renounces “other” sexual practices that are ribald and rude, but that also aestheticizes and recodes her desire and bodily performance as a province of the heterosexual elite. Fanny’s rite of initiation, then, is a disciplinary practice that annexes her body into the domain of normative bourgeois sexuality.

IV. Mrs. Cole’s Discourse of Taste

Upon further inspection, it becomes evident that once Fanny enters Mrs. Cole’s brothel, she subscribes to a discourse of taste that privileges a heteronormative ethics of pleasure. Further, as Fanny internalizes this logic of heterosexual taste, her condition of precarity begins to dissipate, moving her closer to the realization of a domestic fantasy.

While it is clear that, through the lessons of Mrs. Cole, Fanny progressively endorses an aesthetic philosophy that reinforces conjugal pleasure and bourgeois sexual hegemony, it is curious that during her time with Mrs. Cole, she also witnesses an explosive sequence of perverse sexual practices that were typically categorized in the eighteenth-century as incendiary, vile, and “gross ribaldry.” In order to work through the complexity of this issue, it is useful to turn to Foucault’s historicization of sexuality for interpretative illumination.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault theorizes that during the eighteenth-century, sexuality became naturalized and assimilated into the mental schema of society by “a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions.”³³ Rather than a single discourse on sex, Foucault argues, sexuality is deployed and produced at multiple sites of production. In this way, a proliferation of discourses contributed to a disciplinary power that was constitutive rather than repressive. In fact, the attempt to repress desire and codify it into a scientific “medico-sexual regime” through practices such as confession actually reinforced its power: “It seems in fact that what was involved was not an asceticism, in any case not a renunciation of pleasure or a disqualification of the flesh, but on the contrary an intensification of the body.”³⁴ It is precisely this “intensification of the body” and quantification of pleasure through which an eighteenth-century technology of power-knowledge sought to establish a “new distribution of pleasures, discourses, truths, and powers” in order to sustain the material and social benefits of eighteenth-century

³³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, 33.

³⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, 122-123.

bourgeois patriarchy.³⁵ In order to naturalize a heteronormative ethics of pleasure, to establish a standard practice of taste, all sexual experiences, including those that were typically categorized as abject, perverse or of “arbitrary taste” must be located and taxonomized.

Thus, according to this regulatory practice (particularly through the discourse of an aesthetic philosophy), Fanny must take stock of non-normative sexual practices so that she can ultimately disavow them, privileging sexual pleasures or “tastes” that cohere with heterosexual norms, which work to reaffirm a bourgeois sensibility that epitomizes the superiority of marriage.³⁶ Mrs. Cole, moreover, educates Fanny, deploying a pedagogy of erotics that provides her with a sensual curriculum through which Fanny masters a logic of taste that registers a heteronormative ethics of pleasure as axiomatic. Through Fanny’s subscription to an aesthetic philosophy, she enters into a marriage with Charles, conforming to established norms of embodiment that qualify her as a subject of recognition, which extinguishes her state of precarity and provides her with access to the benefits of patriarchy.³⁷ Indeed, as Fanny begins her narration, she states that “I shall recall to view those scandalous stages of my life, out of which I emerg’d at length, to the

³⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, 123.

³⁶ Jody Greene shrewdly observes that between 1700 and 1760 in Britain, writings on tastes contributed to the process of naturalizing bourgeois ideology: “In the writings of Hutcheson, Addison, Burke, and Hume, among others, English philosophy explored the concepts of pleasure and pain and debated the question of whether objective criteria like right and wrong could be applied to aesthetic experience”(Greene 230). For more on this, see Jody Greene, “Arbitrary Tastes and Commonsense Pleasures: Accounting for Taste In Cleland, Hume, and Burke” in *Launching Fanny Hill: Essays on the Novel and Its Influences*, eds. Patsy S. Fowler and Alan Jackson (New York: AMS Press, 2003), 221-265.

³⁷ Although Fanny’s marriage to Charles eradicates her state of precarity, it is important to recognize that she still exists in a social matrix of relationality, and thus can never fully escape the precarious dimensions of social life. According to Butler, all social bodies are menaced by suffering, injury, and death. Precariousness, then, is a vulnerability that we all share, but some simply refuse to acknowledge. For more on this, see Judith Butler “Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović.” *TDR: The Drama Review* 56.4 (2012): 163-177. *Project MUSE*. Web. 18 Apr. 2013. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>.

enjoyment of every blessing in the power of love, health, and fortune to bestow” (1). It is not until Fanny matriculates at the “academy” of Mrs. Cole, however, that we become privy to the means through which Fanny escapes from the infamy of prostitution and “emerges” as a wife.

Despite the fact that her mother kept “a little-day school for the girls in her neighbourhood” (2), Fanny claims that she received “very little of it to my instruction” (2). This small detail may seem trivial, but strategically works to emphasize the dual absences of both mother and proper education, roles that Mrs. Cole eventually fulfills. As Fanny’s “governess” (96), Mrs. Cole inculcates a “doctrine of passive obedience, and non-resistance to all those arbitrary tastes of pleasure, which are by some stil’d the refinements, and by others, the depravations of it” (96). While this seemingly suggests that Mrs. Cole extols “arbitrary tastes of pleasure,” she advances a philosophy that does not legitimize aberrant sexual practices. In fact, Mrs. Cole imparts an ideology that encourages Fanny to experience a diverse range of sexual practices so that she can engage in a “pleasurable analysis”: an analysis in which she appraises, calibrates and discovers a uniform truth, a truth that reifies bourgeois heterosexuality.³⁸

Due to Fanny’s “total ignorance of vice” (Cleland 2), Mrs. Cole exercises caution and sets up a series of sexual episodes that scaffolds instruction, gradually releasing responsibility to Fanny. Mrs. Cole, moreover, constructs a zone of proximal development, carefully selecting appropriate male partners for Fanny and providing

³⁸ Foucault theorizes that there is a “subtle interchange” between pleasure and knowledge: “a knowledge of pleasure, a pleasure that comes of knowing pleasure, a knowledge-pleasure.” In this way, Fanny’s learned discourse of taste functions as “scientia sexualis” and “ars erotica” See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, 40,77.

“admirable lessons” (125) and “rules of decency, and discretion” (173).³⁹ In this way, Mrs. Cole controls Fanny’s sexual episodes, managing Fanny’s degree of agency until she is “capable of being made a most agreeable, nay, a most virtuous wife” (172).

Whenever Fanny deviates from the heteronormative principles of Mrs. Cole’s curriculum, Mrs. Cole rebukes and identifies and corrects Fanny’s error. In a rare scene that takes place outside of Mrs. Cole’s brothel, Fanny meets a sailor and is contracted into his service. Immediately upon learning this, Mrs. Cole reprimands Fanny for her cavalier behavior:

But when I got home, and told Mrs. Cole my adventure, she represented so strongly to me the nature and dangerous consequences of my folly, the risques of my health, in being so open-legg’d, and free of my flesh, that I not only took resolutions never to venture so rashly again, which I inviolably preserv’d’ but pass’d a good many days in continual uneasiness lest I should have met with other reasons. (142)

In this moment, Mrs. Cole manages and harnesses Fanny’s rampant display of desire. Mrs. Cole translates the situation, warning Fanny that immediate bodily harm (particularly venereal disease) is a viable repercussion to this reckless encounter. Mrs. Cole’s rebuff reminds Fanny that she exists in a state of precarity, that—despite her access to pleasure and monetary benefits—she still remains in a corporeal condition of vulnerability.

³⁹ The zone of proximal development is a pedagogical term coined by sociologist Lev Vygotsky. It is defined as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.” For more on this, see Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, trans. Michael Cole (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

In preparation for each respective sexual experience, Mrs. Cole lectures Fanny, imparting lessons that adhere to the tenants of an heteronormative ethics of pleasure and an aesthetics of taste. Before Fanny participates in an experimental scene of flagellation, with the “unhappy young gentleman” (145), Mr. Barvile, Mrs. Cole attempts to account for this peculiar propensity:

[T]hat for her part [Mrs. Cole’s], she consider’d pleasure of one sort or other, as the universal port of destination, and every wind that blew thither a good one, provided it blew nobody an harm: that she rather compassionated, than blam’d those unhappy persons, who are under a subjection they cannot shake off, to those arbitrary tastes that rule their appetites of pleasure with an unaccountable controul: tastes too, as infinitely diversify’d, as superior to, and independent of all reasoning, as the different relishes or palates of mankind in their viands; some delicate stomachs nauseating plain meats, and finding no savour but in high season’d, luxurious dishes; whilst others again pique themselves upon detesting them. (144)

In this moment, Mrs. Cole rehearses a discourse of taste aligning Mr. Barvile’s aberrant sexual proclivities with practices of eating. Mrs. Cole also, however, equates “unaccountable...appetites of pleasure” to a physiological disposition or to “unhappy persons, who are under a subjection they cannot shake off.” In a “habitual state of conflict with, and dislike of himself” (145), Mr. Barvile’s abnormal sexual predilection is not a threat because his self-deprecation implicitly acknowledges that he adheres to a heteronormative standard that he is not able to access. Fanny explains that Mr. Barvile is

“incapable of receiving any pleasure, till he submitted to these extraordinary means” (146), as such his inability to conform to a standard practice of taste is a matter of circumstance rather than a direct rejection of heterosexual principles. Thus, while at first repulsed by the proposition of participating in Mr. Barvile’s “theatre of...bloody pleasure” (152), Fanny eventually consents as a result of Mrs. Cole’s persuasive rationale, shifting from disgust to pity.

At the age of nineteen, Fanny leaves Mrs. Cole with a “reserve of eight hundred pounds” and “bounded...nevertheless strictly within the rules of decency, and discretion” (173). While Fanny certainly departs as an affluent and independent woman, she does not achieve true happiness until she marries Charles. Once Fanny reunites with Charles, she “drops her pen,” but before doing so she rehearses a brief rationale:

Thus, at length, I got snug into port, where, in the bosom of virtue, I gather’d the only uncorrupt sweets: where, looking back on the course of vice, I had run, and comparing its infamous blandishments with the infinitely superior joys of innocence, I could not help pitying, even in point of taste, those, who immers’d in a gross sensuality, are insensible to the so delicate charms of Virtue, than which even Pleasure has not a greater friend, nor than Vice a greater enemy. (187)

As Fanny wraps up her “tail-piece of morality” (187), she rehearses a logic of taste that closely mirrors the contours of Mrs. Cole’s ideology. While Fanny irrefutably celebrates the pleasures of marriage and endorses a bourgeois patriarchal family (Fanny reveals that she and Charles eventually have a son), she emphasizes that vice is a necessary trial because it intensifies the realization of virtue. Fanny, moreover, pities those “immers’d

in a gross sensuality” deploying an aesthetic philosophy that perceives perverse sexual predilections as unfortunate instances of taste that possesses no formidable threat to a heteronormative ethics of pleasure, and thus do not pose a danger to the institution of bourgeois patriarchy. These non-normative acts of pleasure provide Fanny with the opportunity to showcase and legitimize her heteronormative sensibility.

As the wife of Charles, Fanny becomes a recognizable subject and as such springs from the clutches of precarity. In doing so, however, Fanny invariably conforms to norms of embodiment that map and territorialize her body within the disciplinary power of an eighteenth-century British imperial regime. As Fanny begins her journey as an innocent orphan launched into the streets of London, she shifts through various stages of prostitution, ascending up the prostitution hierarchy and moving her closer to the realization of a domestic fantasy. At the highest level of prostitution, Mrs. Cole’s safe and polite brothel affords Fanny the opportunity cultivate an alliance of fallen women that works to mitigate their collective state of precarity. Under the tutelage of Mrs. Cole, Fanny internalizes a discourse of taste, which allows her to take stock of all forms of pleasure through contact with bodies. Although Fanny reaffirms a heteronormative ethics of pleasure that serves to ensure the viability of the bourgeois patriarchal family, she interestingly does so as a recuperated fallen woman. While it is not accurate to label *Memoirs*’ sexual politics as transgressive or liberatory, Fanny’s position as a recuperated prostitute troubles a straightforward reading of oppression. Consistent with Butler, Fanny’s bodily performances of both physical suffering and pleasure register a “thereness” that cannot be denied: both instances of suffering and pleasure attempt to elicit a sensorial understanding of precarity, to spark recognition into the body politic. Is

it possible, then, that *Memoirs* attempts to recall a forgotten form of precarity—the recuperated fallen woman—a figure whose history has been simultaneously absorbed into and dislocated from the heteronormative ethics of pleasure?

Vita

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