

Discuss the different effects of narrative interplay in John Cleland's *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*.

The Georgian era saw both a rise in prostitution and a persistence of traditional ideas (Catholic and Protestant notions of modesty and chastity) regarding female sexuality. It is unsurprising then, as Harol states, that eighteenth century England saw 'the emergence of a literary obsession with virginity'.¹ Such a preoccupation informed, and was informed by, literature of the time, which bolstered confining stereotypes of female sexual roles: roles such as 'The Virgin'; 'The Whore'. Richardson's *Pamela*² is a notable example of this. In *Pamela* and its literary companions, female virginity loss is a prevalent structural narrative element. I would like to draw attention to the fact that this narrative use of virginity provided limited sexual roles for women to conform too. By consequence, it carried the implication that the patriarchal mindset, in its ability to dictate these roles, had epistemological authority over female sexuality. In turn, this essay accepts the premise that literature both reflects and influences the society around it. Given the paramount position of Cleland's *Fanny Hill* within this particular literary realm, this essay will focus on the loss of female virginity in Cleland's infamous novel. In conjunction with the motif of virginity, I will discuss the novel's use of three narrative types: the pornographic; the marriage; and the quest, all of which I take as determined by the aforementioned patriarchal mindset. I believe that in interrogating the role of virginity in genres like these, it is possible to find the flaws in the narratives and thus in the

¹ Harol, C. *Enlightened Virginity in Eighteenth-century Literature*, 1st Ed. (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p.10

² Richardson, S. *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

misogynistic ideologies they push. Cleland's portrayal of female virginity alongside these three narrative types certainly does this.

This essay will first determine in what ways *Fanny Hill* fulfils the narrative templates of the marriage, quest, and pornographic plots respectively. I will then discuss the positioning of female virginity loss in each of these. Then I will assess where *Fanny Hill* stands in terms of meeting these criteria in order to ultimately open a discussion regarding the representation of female sexual identity in literary narratives, and how Cleland's novel responds to the issues raised. First and foremost, the importance of virginity as a social concept is evident throughout *Fanny Hill*. Such as when Fanny describes, prior to a sexual encounter with a man, her virginity as 'that trinket of mine, which bears so great an imaginary value.'³ Turning to the marriage plot, then, I would initially like to note the existence of patriarchal control over this plot type evident in the 18th century. As Shaffer recognises, 'For the most part, feminist critics have found the marriage-plot novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries disappointingly unsuccessful at challenging the patriarchal ideology of the period, an ideology best characterized as teaching women to view themselves as subordinate to, dependent upon, and at the service of the men in their lives.'⁴ In narrative terms, and as epitomised by *Pamela*, female virginity is lost at the end of this form, and coincides with the girl whose virginity is lost marrying the man she has intercourse with. Thus, it is important to note that female sexual identity is portrayed in this structure as a fixed, single entity. To be a sentimental heroine and fulfil narrative requirements, she must lose her virginity with marriage, accordingly remaining chaste up until this point. *Fanny Hill* is a marriage plot in

³ Cleland, J. *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (California: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017) p.32

⁴ Shaffer, J. "Not Subordinate: Empowering Women in the Marriage-Plot- The Novels of Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen" in *Criticism* Vol. 34, No. 1 (winter, 1992), pp. 51-73 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992) p. 51

the sense that it fulfils important elements of these criterion: the novel ends with marriage, and the heroine marries the man she first has intercourse with. The value of female virginity narratively seems maintained. Such an attitude is exemplified at parts by Fanny herself.

Toward the beginning of her memoir, she recalls 'how several maids out of the country had made themselves and all their kind for ever: that by preserving their virtue, some had taken so with their masters, that they had married them, and kept them coaches, and lived vastly grand and happy; and some, may-hap, came to be Duchesses; luck was all, and why not I, as well as another?'"⁵ The marriage plot and female virginity is typified in her statement, through the commendation of girls who remain chaste, then marry, and are consequently praised by way of a 'happy' life.

Nonetheless, reading *Fanny Hill* as a pornographic narrative problematizes the validity of the marriage plot. Once more, I would like to note that pornography as an aesthetic genre is a field dominated by the male perspective. *Fanny Hill* is undeniably pornographic in its explicit detail ('I no sooner felt the warm spray darted up in my innards from him..' ⁶) and frequency of the sexual encounters of its protagonist (throughout the text she has no less than ten sexual interactions, making up the majority of the storyline). The narrative of pornography requires there to be repeated sexual encounters. Accordingly, the place of female virginity loss in this structure must be at the beginning. A woman can only lose her virginity and *then* proceed to have repeated sexual encounters. *Fanny Hill* fulfils this structural criteria. The protagonist does lose her virginity near the beginning of the narrative (on pages 43 and 44 of 176), and this ignites desire for further sexual encounters. In the pornographic sense, then, virginity loss is a narrative fuel. This movement is portrayed notably in the text through the semantic

⁵ Cleland p.21

⁶ Cleland p.118

field of fire. The day following Fanny's virginity loss to Charles, he kisses her, 'which darted a flame to my heart, that from thence radiated to every part of me'⁷, and directly after intercourse she described the act had 'for that time put out the fire'.⁸ Michel Serres insightfully discusses the 'eighteenth centuries preoccupation with the machine, as a system for the transmission of forces outside itself', and, further, 'the self-contained motor [which] also corresponds to the emerging conception of human desire'.⁹ Given Serres' analysis, the imagery of fire (fire being the principle element of the 'motor' Serres speaks of) in association with Fanny's sexual desire implies the role of sex in the novel as an element of narrative progression, again implying the importance of virginity loss as being positioned at the *start*. Drawing back to my prior assertion that virginity in *Fanny Hill* fulfils elements of the typical marriage plot, the notion that the text can fulfil apparently contradictory functions regarding virginity is an important issue that I will address later in this essay.

An analysis of *Fanny Hill* as a quest narrative raises further questions and problematizes notions of the genre of the text and the function of female virginity within it. The quest narrative is a patriarchal one. As Marcus notes 'Because being human occurs in two genders, storytelling and reading are gendered activities. Men's stories .. tend toward 'blood narratives of adventure and quest,'¹⁰ There are multiple famous examples of these, such as the Arthurian Legends and Homer's *Odyssey*. *Fanny Hill*, known to be a bildungsroman, embraces many features of the quest narrative. Fanny at the start of the text exclaims: '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 adventurers of both sexes, from the

⁷ Cleland p.48

⁸ Cleland p.49

⁹ Serres, M. *Feux et signaux de brume: Zola* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1975) pp.209-10

¹⁰ Marcus, J. "Bluebeard's Daughters: Pretexts for Pre-Texts", in *Feminist Critical Negotiations (Critical Theory)* by Parker, A. & Meese, E. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1992) p.21

country, than ever it made or advanced.’¹¹ Of note are her mentions of her ‘launch into the wide world’, ‘seek[ing] [...] fortune’, and definition of her as ‘adventurer’, all commonplace in a quest narrative. Moreover, this narrative requires a protagonist’s attainment of some form of knowledge. In Fanny’s case, hers is a sexual one. She advances through interactions, each of which increase her experience in, and knowledge of, sex and pleasure. After losing her virginity to Charles and laying with him in bed, she describes she is ‘so enchanted with my fortune’.¹² She describes his genitalia not long after as ‘that wondrous treasure-bag of nature’s sweets’.¹³ ‘Fortune’ and ‘treasure’ are both recognisable motifs of the quest plot. The use of both in reference to sexual activity and sexual organs implies her quest as being of a sexual nature, a suggestion discussed more at length in Smith’s *How Fanny Comes to Know*.¹⁴ This raises an important question: what place does female virginity hold in a sexual quest narrative? Mudge states that in the eighteenth century, the hymen was the ‘Holy Grail of sexual fetishes’. This notion is exemplified by male characters within the text. Mr Norbert, a man Fanny has intercourse with, desires to take the virginites of young women: ‘he had fallen into a taste of maiden-hunting’. ‘Hunting’ implies his desire for virgin women as resembling a hero’s quest. Such a reference insinuates the novel is aware of this plot as commonplace in the patriarchal sexual imagination of the eighteenth century. As such, in portraying Fanny’s story as a *female* sexual quest narrative, Cleland is commenting upon its masculine counterpart. Within the typical masculine quest narrative, female virginity loss, like the Holy Grail, must manifest at the *end*. It is the goal towards which the protagonist strives. It drives the plot, and, once attained, ends the story. *Fanny Hill* has once more embodied conventions of a masculine quest plot but repositioned female virginity.

¹¹ Cleland p.7

¹² Cleland p.46

¹³ Cleland p.47

¹⁴ Smith, J. “How Fanny Comes to Know: Sensation, Sexuality, and the Epistemology of the Closet in Cleland's "Memoirs" in *The Eighteenth Century* Vol. 44, No. 2/3, (SUMMER-FALL 2003), pp. 183-202 (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003)

I have discussed where *Fanny Hill* engages with and mimics the conventions of three narrative types, all of which position virginity in a specific way. Subsequently, they exhibit patriarchal values through a depiction of female sexuality. It is created by man and diminished to a restricted role. I have demonstrated the ways in which *Fanny Hill* disrupts these narrative conventions. My essay will now determine in closer detail the impact of these disruptions. In agreement with critics writing in the late 1990s, Cleland's characters have no stable sexual identity.¹⁵ In terms of the quest narrative, in structurally displacing female virginity, *Fanny Hill* uses the genre to mock its own conventions in addition to those of the marriage plot. In the same narrative structure female virginity is *able* to take *contradicting* positions, showing each narrative and the ideology which drives it to be flawed. Moreover, given that each narrative type has a determined place for female virginity, ideologically and structurally, disrupting its position whilst maintaining other formal aspects challenges the idea that female sexuality only has *one* place and *one* role. This additionally challenges the notion that it even *can* be defined in this prohibitive way. A further challenge to patriarchal narrative and societal conventions is highlighted by Cleland's use of the marriage plot alongside the quest and pornographic forms. Whilst Fanny is rewarded with respect to the marriage plot as though she were a virgin, her extensive pornographic encounters in between her loss of virginity and marriage show her to be the opposite of this when she marries. Nevertheless, the function of female virginity in each narrative type is fulfilled. This indicates contradictions in the patriarchal imagination from which both these narratives originate. The literary forms and patriarchal values asserted have been tricked; their claims to knowledge over female sexuality shown to be false. It does *not* hold only one place and it is *not* existent

¹⁵ Sabor, P. "From Sexual Liberation to Gender Trouble: Reading "Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure" from the 1960s to the 1990s" in *Eighteenth Century Studies* Vol. 33, No.4 (Summer, 2000), pp. 561-578 (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000) p. 569

in only one form. By consequence, the novel challenges patriarchal notions of having narrative or epistemological control over women. In line with Harol, again, *Fanny Hill* can be taken as a ‘fantastically sharp satire on men and their desire for knowledge about women’.¹⁶

Having established the role of genre in *Fanny Hill* as a challenge to patriarchal values, this next part of the essay will debate the novel’s use of the epistolary form and of particular scenes within the content in order to assess in what other ways the text disputes similar ideas. The novel takes the form of two letters addressed to a ‘Madam’ from Fanny. From the opening sentence, ‘Madam - I sit down to give you undeniable proof of my considering your desires as indispensable orders’¹⁷, the reader is aware that the novel is a performance to a direct and known audience, and has the intention of bringing pleasure to this audience (‘you greatly justify me to myself for my compliance with a curiosity that is to be satisfied so extremely at my expense.’¹⁸) This immediately problematizes the validity of the story. It is impossible to tell how much of Fanny’s story is truth and how much is exaggerated or fabricated in order to bring excitement to ‘Madam’. Fanny professes a moralising speech at the novel’s close. When discussing her belief that a reader will think it out of character for her to endorse virtue given the excessively pornographic chronicle she has just provided, she likens it to ‘as if a writer should think to shield a treasonable libel by concluding it with a formal prayer for the king.’¹⁹ Whilst seeming to defend herself, providing a comparison such as this only draws attention to the easy possibilities for linguistic manipulation at the disposal of a speaker. In turn, given my prior analysis suggesting the novel’s use of the marriage plot served to mock its own conventions, the overly sentimental tone of Fanny’s moralising seems

¹⁶ Harol p.164

¹⁷ Cleland p.3

¹⁸ Cleland p.89

¹⁹ Cleland p.176

deliberately satirical: 'If I have painted vice all in its gayest colours, if I have decked it with flowers, it has been solely in order to make the ... sacrifice of it to virtue'.²⁰ The female heroine of a marriage plot would certainly be the vehicle through which this attitude would be expressed. Nonetheless, her speech again highlights manipulative representation ('painted vice'; 'decked it with flowers'), bolstering the implication that she is aware of the marriage plot as a representation of patriarchal ideologies, and parodies this.

Juengel appropriately asserted 'when Fanny frets over the efficacy of her figures, she worries not about their truth-value or referentiality but their signifying promise, their capacity to move the reader to pleasure.'²¹ Such a purpose on behalf of the narrator is evident at a linguistic level. Rampant in each scene of sexual interaction is self-conscious narration. Three instances of lexis used to describe the male sex organ read as such: 'that enormous machine of his';²² 'stiff staring truncheon';²³ 'thorn-hard gristle.'²⁴ Such language is exhaustive. It is trying to resist the repetition inherent in a pornographic narrative by way of an excessive use of synonyms; an indication that the narrator is concerned with making the narrative titillating rather than faithful to reality. Akin with the satirical moralising ending the novel, this linguistic play implies her voice is fictitious and reminds the reader Fanny is in control of the narrative. She is able to depict her story in any way she likes, ensuring epistemological control over her readership and narrative forms she mimics.

Moreover, a manipulation of representation is explicitly linked to virginity by Fanny when her and Mrs Cole go to significant lengths in order to convince Mr Norman that Fanny is a

²⁰ Cleland p.176

²¹ Juengel, S. "Doing Things with Fanny Hill" in *ELH*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer, 2009) (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2009) p.427

²² Cleland p.81

²³ Cleland p.64

²⁴ Cleland p.43

virgin, ensuring he pays handsomely to go to bed with her: ‘Mrs Cole had omitted no instructions, nor even neglected any preparation, that might enable me to come off with honour, in regard to the appearance of my virginity’, and, when Mr Norbert falls asleep after the act ‘‘I with much composure of body ... played off Mrs Cole’s device for perfecting the signs of my virginity’’.²⁵ Their successful venture proves and relies upon a flawed male perception of female virginity. Like patriarchal narratives of virginity, normative physical signs of virginity loss are faked, denoting again an utter undermining of male claims to having understanding or authority over the female sexual body.

I have defined my argument as grounded on the presumption that the literary genres of eighteenth century England bolster the patriarchal notions that female sexuality is constructed by male narratives, under the epistemological dominion of these, and can exist only in the specific forms these perpetuate. I have shown where *Fanny Hill* reproduces elements of these male narratives. In doing so, the text comments upon the notions these advance. Virginity in such narratives represents a restricted stereotype of female sexuality, through both its structural position in each plot type and the ideas it connotes. Through challenging the narrative certainty ascribed to virginity in each genre, *Fanny Hill* undermines the notion that virginity, (by consequence, any and all female sexual identities), can be accurately determined by men, or can be defined at all. I have then delineated how the novel expresses an awareness of the power of language as a representational form to manipulate truth, by implication showing awareness that the patriarchal narratives already mentioned do just this. Finally, by showing Fanny, the confessional voice, to be consciously manipulating language (and her own story), the novel is progressively feminist. Fanny undermines the patriarchal

²⁵ Cleland p.129

framework in which she exists. Accordingly, she places narrative power into the hands of her, a woman, creating the *potential* for a *space* in which women can write the narrative of female sexuality on their own terms.

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