Colonial Academic Alliance Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 2 Article 7

2011

Secrets of Sex and Innocence in Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure: A Profile of Purity Using Three Common Philosophies

Rance D. Denton
Towson University, RDENTO1@students.towson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/caaurj

Recommended Citation

Denton, Rance D. (2011) "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.
Available at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/caaurj/vol2/iss1/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colonial Academic Alliance Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

Secrets of Sex and Innocence in Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure: A Profile of Purity Using Three Common Philosophies

Cover Page Note

Thank you to Dr. H. George Hahn for his guidance and encouragement.

This article is available in Colonial Academic Alliance Undergraduate Research Journal: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/caaurj/vol2/iss1/7

Well before the innovations of electronic mail and text messaging, people communicated over long distances using the power of paper and ink. To fulfill the natural urge for human interconnection, letter-writing empowered people with a personal mode of expression that gradually grew into an art-form. The epistolary mode gave people an outlet by which to express their views on the "religious…and social customs that formed the framework for individual lives."[1] Novels written in the epistolary format mimic private correspondence, allowing the reader to be audience to stories that do not often adhere to proper social expectations. Epistolary novels are "narrative[s] of transgression,"[2] containing more personal descriptions of human vice than novels of other narrative forms. The reader is not the intended audience; instead, they act as an interloper in a private world where sins are confided in secrecy to a fictional recipient.[3]

John Cleland's epistolary novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* functions under these same conventions, taking the form of two long letters addressed from a reformed prostitute named Fanny Hill to a nameless audience labeled only as "Madam."[4] At the time of its publication in 1749, *Memoirs* was condemned for its lewdness and its vivid illustrations of human sexuality.[5] The novel can be considered both literary and pornographic according to its sensational descriptions and risqué narration. While contemporary scholars often approach the novel for feminist, homosexual, or gender-specific ideals, as if seeking some *au courant* message-from-the-past, few of them analyze the unconscious motivations that allow the heart of the novel – Fanny Hill herself – to beat.

Fanny can be seen as a philosophical fulcrum, a character whose impulses are better understood when viewed through empirical, psychoanalytic, and utilitarian lenses. By applying the theories of John Locke, Sigmund Freud, and Jeremy Bentham to her upbringing and adventures, it can be assumed that even in the wake of Fanny Hill's vast

---

1 Karen O'Brien, "History and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68, no. 1/2 (2005): 401, http://www.jstor.org.

2 Bernard Duyfhuzien, "Epistolary Narratives of Transmission and Transgression," *Comparative Literature* 37, no. 1 (1985): 6, http://www.jstor.org.

3 This idea that letters contain dark secrets meant to be revealed only to a trusted confidante is visible in many well-known epistolary novels. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* Captain Walton conveys Victor Frankenstein's gruesome attempt to create a living being to his sister via letter; in Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly: Or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker,* the titular character – seeking to discover the purpose behind his friend Waldegrave's death – viciously murders a group of Native Americans and retells the story in a letter. The reader is ultimately tasked with judging whether or not the commission of such acts merits condemnation or absolution.

4 John Cleland, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, (New York: Oxford, 1999), 1. This salutation also appears on pages 89, 90, and 188, but no name is ever given. Further citations from this source will be parenthetically cited throughout the rest of this paper.

5 Peter Sabor. Introduction to *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, by John Cleland (New York: Oxford, 1999), ix. According to Sabor's introduction, "During a detention of over a year in Fleet Prison [for refusal to repay a debt, Cleland] completed both parts of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, the first being published in November 1748, the second in February 1749." It is Sabor's "Note on the Text" which states that both parts were dated in 1749 as the first official edition. In addition, Sabor also acknowledges the similarities between Henry Fielding's *Shamela* (1741) and *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, which is also written in letter format.

sexual escapades, she remains an icon of untarnished innocence. She is turned from a girl into a woman in an underground world where self-discovery is attained through sexuality. Fanny's scandalous activities can be easily attributed to her lack of the understanding of social propriety. Her letters are her confessions; her words, the convalescence of her identity, the purity of which is resurrected following her acceptance of womanly virtues and the ensuing ascent into adulthood.

It may be questioned what value exists in examining Fanny Hill's fictional memoir by measure of Lockean, Freudian, and Benthamian discourses. Cleland's novel is undoubtedly controversial, having challenged public ideals of composure and decency at the time of its publication. "[T]his Vile Book, which is an open insult upon Religion and good manners," wrote Bishop of London, Thomas Sherlock, about *Memoirs*, "[reproaches]…the Honour of Government, and the Law of the Country."[6] Similarly, the Enlightenment treatises of Locke, the psychoanalytic theories of Freud, and the ethics of Bentham thrived at the center of their own respective controversies, as they all expressed alternate reassessments of rationality and development. These schools of meta-ethics allow the reader to better understand the roots of Fanny's choices, thus helping eliminate the idea that she was wholly responsible for her own fall from decorum and grace.

By using the popular standards of John Locke's empirical philosophies, a reader can begin to approach the causes that may have led Fanny to a life of prostitution. During the Enlightenment, a time during which science and philosophy examined new explanations of the world around man, Locke sought to rediscover the keys to human nature by employing a theory vaguely Socratic in its principles.[7] Introducing a reprinting of Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Walter Ott writes, "Locke saw that instead of giving our imagination free reign, we need to step back and determine the limits of human knowledge."[8] By confining thoughts regarding development and knowledge within the realms of human understanding, mankind would be able to discover far more about itself than it could searching for answers through divine, "ultimate truths."[9] Locke's treaty proposes that humans are creatures educated solely through experience, and that there are no thoughts, beliefs, or concepts that are exhibited universally among people.[10] It is visible through Fanny Hill's development that she is provided no education by which she can avoid the sexual perversions she experiences – and even facilitates – in the future. Fanny describes her upbringing by writing that her "education, till past fourteen, was no better than very vulgar; reading, or rather spelling, and…my foundation in virtue was no other than a total ignorance of vice" (p. 2). This lack of knowledge sets the stage for Fanny's future escapades, for she is left untaught in the ways of sexual propriety, responsibility, or danger. Upon the death of her parents,

---

6 Robert P. Maccubbin, *'Tis Nature's Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality During the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 192.

7 Socrates is commonly quoted as having said, "I know that I know nothing." John Locke's theories expressed in *Human Understanding* echo a similar mindset.

8 Walter Ott, introduction to *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* by John Locke (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2004), xi.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., xii-xiv.

Fanny is without guidance. Having lived sheltered but unschooled, she is released upon England without the ability to judge, recognize, and follow acceptable customs.[11] Ignorance is as much an instrument in Fanny's social degradation as her innocence. "The ignorance," Locke declares, "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."[12] Being fifteen years-of-age when her parents die is of no consequence – Fanny Hill is a nebulous moral mass, required to seek out her own mental shape. Sexuality is the tool that chisels her, for without religious guidance or worldly knowledge she is left to rely upon her only remaining recourse: her body, "a constitution perfectly healthy" (p. 2).

Locke details a specific pattern that allows for the attainment of experience, and thus a bank of knowledge from which a person can make rational decisions. By understanding this Lockean chain, it becomes apparent where Fanny Hill's lack of wisdom led to her misguidance. He explains that humans are predisposed to only a single innate concept, *faculty*, or sense, which allows the body to "let in particular ideas…and furnish the empty cabinet";[13] through this conduit of discovery comes the ability to *reason*; the capacity for reason introduces *first principles*, such as the "love of pleasure and abhorrence of pain";[14] finally, through this unencumbered train of development, one is able to process *maxims*, which are more complex derivations of reason such as mathematics, scientific principles, and philosophical thought.[15] Sexuality – and Fanny's lack of tutelage in virtue and vice – subverts this inter-related method of personal development, causing an interruption to this chain. Fanny processes her experiences of the world through her body and not through the absorption of principles and maxims. Upon moving to London to forge a new life for herself, young Fanny is taken in by Mrs. Brown, who – unbeknownst to Fanny – is the mistress of a brothel. She is introduced to Phoebe, her "tuteress elect, to whose care and instructions [she] was so affectionately recommended" (p. 9). Phoebe replaces Fanny's deceased parents as her teacher and seduces her into a new method of thought, where indulgences of the body become rule and morality is directly proportionate to sexual gratification. Following a homosexual encounter forced upon her by Phoebe – involving "touches, squeezes, and pressures" as well as digital penetration – Fanny discovers the power of pleasing her bodily faculties (p. 10). "I was transported, confused, and out of myself," writes Fanny, "[and] Feelings

---

11 Deborah Simonton, *The Routledge History of Women in Europe Since 1700,* (Florence: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2006), 59-63. "Sexual attitudes of the eighteenth century are difficult to grasp," writes Simonton, "because sexual morality was so controversial and debated; no consensus could be reached." While the public opinion of promiscuity and liberated sexual activity may have been debatable, churches and legal authorities did not loosen their opinion of open sexuality and held strong to their conservative views that extra-marital sexuality was sinful and criminal.

12 Locke, *Human Understanding*, 18.

13 Ibid., 9.

14 Ibid., 16.

15 Ibid., 3-17. Locke does not outline this "Lockean chain" directly, save for the italicized terms – rather, this concept is an attempt to summarize, to the most basic degree, what is an increasingly complex philosophy of intellectual development without drawing too much away from this study's focus on Fanny Hill.

so new were too much for me; my heated and alarm'd senses were in a tumult that robb'd me of all liberty of thought; tears of pleasure gush'd from my eyes, and somewhat assuaged the fire that rag'd all over me" (p. 12). The experiences through which her life is molded come through an inverted form of the Lockean chain, where pleasure connotes discovery and the internal fire that Fanny describes must be quenched by increasingly demanding sexual regiments. Through sex, Fanny Hill becomes a citizen of a figurative empire, one inhabited by Phoebe, Mrs. Brown, and other prostitutes, where perversion, lust, and passion are the ethics, religion, and economy.[16] Fanny is naturalized, becoming "of the same mind, from [her] education, company, and customs of [her] country, which persuasion…will serve to set conscience."[17] That prostitution appears to be dishonorable employment – despite the propensity of gentlemen to patronize it – is no concern to Fanny, for the sexual experiences that shape her also modify her lens of vice and virtue.[18] "Hence naturally flows the great variety of opinions concerning moral rules," Locke writes, defending the freedom of one to make immoral choices based on personal opinions or even ignorance, "which are to be found…according to the different sorts of happiness [men] have a prospect of."[19]

Sex effectively relocates Fanny Hill to a realm in which the societal definitions of vice and virtue are challenged, primarily due to her growth through her sexual experiences. Locke suggests that no moral rules developed by the majority of the society – which are learned from preceding generations – are entirely innate, for if they were, there would be no need for teaching or condoning them. Yet, Locke does recognize that there are specific actions – like many of those expressed in *Memoirs*, including prostitution, homosexuality, and object-directed fetishism – that are liable to be disapproved by most members of society. It is by this seemingly universal scale that some maxims may appear to be inborn. In recognition of this phenomenon, Locke explains that

> God having, by an inseparable connection, joined virtue and public happiness together…made the practice [of virtue] necessary to the preservation of society, and visibly beneficial to all with whom the virtuous man has to do; it is no wonder

---

[16] John Benyon authored a paper that delves into the economic symbolism present in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. In his study, he points out the focuses made on prostitutes in the novel as "fresh goods," and describes their worth as being directly relative to the amount of pleasure they can provide their clients. It approaches the material from a less humanist and developmental point of view, instead choosing to view the novel as a statement of economy and value. For further reading, see: John C. Benyon, "'Traffic in More Precious Commodities': Sapphic Erotics and Economics in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure,*" in *Launching Fanny Hill*, ed. Patsy S. Fowler and Alan Jackson (New York: AMS Press, 2003), 3-26.

[17] Locke, *Human Understanding*, 22.

[18] Simonton, *History of Women,* 60. Since "[n]owhere could prostitution be suppressed successfully" in Europe, disapproval of prostitution did not inhibit women from finding employment through it and men finding pleasure in it.

[19] Ibid., 21.

> that everyone should not only allow, but recommend and magnify those rules to others.[20]

But Locke also recognizes that this mass application of virtuous concepts does not preclude the transposition of such values within individuals, which helps explain Fanny's own understanding of virtues and vices. Gary Gautier evokes Lockean thought in his study of feminine and maternal identity in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, for "Locke suggests that the relationship to self is primarily one of *ownership*."[21] Fanny is the sole possessor of herself, the reigning regent of her own physical and mental domain, thus setting her apart from the expectations of the society around her. To the unreformed Fanny, virtue is dependent upon her sexual experiences. Her world is molded by prostitution and fired in a kiln of promiscuity. The only rules besides those of her body are designated by the brothel-matrons by whom she is employed. Consequently, these rules all lead Fanny toward a single goal: instead of bettering herself or seeking a more socially-adherent lifestyle, she strives only for the base physical satisfaction of orgasm, and she constantly adventures with this direction in mind. "[T]he talent of pleasing…form'd to me the greatest of all merits;" reflects Fanny, "compared to which the vulgar prejudices in favor titles, dignities, and honours…held a very low rank indeed" (p. 80). To the young Fanny, what is virtuous directly pleases her body, while an aim for any other purpose is vicious and unproductive.[22] Her option to sophisticate herself through worldly wisdom is stunted by her sexuality. She is a composite of her carnal perceptions. The ability to absorb "principles of justice, piety, gratitude, equity, and chastity" is lost upon her.[23] Only when Fanny encounters Charles – the object of her love and her eventual spouse – is she enlightened enough to question the creeds by which she lives. Though her reformation is not immediate, Charles gradually delivers Fanny from her old ways.[24] Following her marriage to him, she is newly purified and renounces her lifestyle of eroticism and lust. The numerous "*joys, ardours, transports*, [and] *extasies* [sic]" (p. 91)[25] to which she was once beholden are shunned, and the Fanny Hill that

---

[20] Ibid.

[21] Gary Gautier, "Fanny Hill's Mapping of Sexuality, Female Identity, and Maternity," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 35, no. 3 (1995): 476, http://www.jstor.org.

[22] Fanny is all but blind to the world around her unless she is sexually active. She goes on to say that her "natural philosophy all resided in the favourite center of sense" (p. 80). This is explained further by Peter Sabor in his explanatory notes to *Memoirs*: "'natural philosophy' was the eighteenth-century term for the study of nature, which Fanny pursues through her vagina, rather than through the five senses."

[23] Locke, *Human Understanding*, 23. Without explanation, this quote from Locke's essay threatens to be taken out of context. These are not at all inborn principles, as many of Locke's contemporaries believed. Even though these above-listed standards were prevalently upheld by the public, they were not "inbred rules" and still required fabrication by conditioning. Fanny is direct evidence of Locke's belief, for she has no teaching in these methods of thought and cannot form herself by them.

[24] Charles communicates with Fanny through the only method she knows: sex. It may be supposed that, had Charles not first connected with her physically, he would have never made enough of an impact on her to later be the reason Fanny shuns her past as a prostitute.

[25] The italicization of this quote is drawn from the Oxford World's Classics printing. Fanny specifically lists these words and labels them as "pathetic terms" (p. 91).

authors her memoirs is a woman purging herself of her deviant past. Her existence is a broad testament to John Locke's theory of human understanding, for through a sheltered upbringing, she is given no knowledge by which to avoid the temptation of sexuality. Likewise, following her growth through sex, only through experiencing her happiness with Charles is she able to understand society's definitions of virtue and vice and reclaim the innocence she had squandered as a teenager.

Locke's theories are not the only ones exemplified by the heroine of Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure.* Her life as expressed in the novel can have many of its details more thoroughly explained by the psychoanalytic theories of childhood and sexuality expressed by Sigmund Freud.

Freud was an intensely prolific writer, and his studies led him to present a school of philosophy that directly correlated the activities of an adult to adolescent urges.[26] According to Freud, the two were invariably connected – the world of the nascent child directly manufactured the tendencies of the same person as an adult. Freud probed this theory through studies that took into consideration psychosexual tendencies and the thematic correspondence of dreams with the waking state of an individual. By scrutinizing *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* using Freudian philosophy, a second view can be attained of Fanny Hill, namely that of a woman framed involuntarily by the supremacy of her unconscious mind.

The roots of Fanny's sexual needs are anchored early in her life and can – like the Lockean theories previously mentioned – be traced to the short description of her childhood home-life. Fanny Hill's mother granted her little attention, having "spared very little [time] to my instruction, and having, from her own innocence from all ill, no hint, or thought of guarding me against any" (p. 2). Yet again, this inadvertent neglect and the demise of her parents disrupts Fanny's ability to prosper in an acceptable light. With no understanding of how to safely satiate or disregard her sexual urges, Fanny is more strongly subject to them. According to Freud,

> The fact of sexual need in man and animal is expressed in biology by the assumption of a "sexual impulse." This impulse is made analogous to the impulse of taking nourishment, and to hunger. The sexual expression corresponding to hunger not being found colloquilly [sic], science uses the expression "libido."[27]

---

[26] The use of the term *philosophy* in this sentence is purposeful. Of the three theories approached in this study, Freud's was perhaps the most controversial, and the significance of his psychoanalytic contributions are debated even presently. Anthony A. Derksen labels Sigmund Freud as a "sophisticated methodologist who has not been given fair treatment," for while his tests may offer "irrelevant examples and unreliable references," reducing his reputation as a man of science, these do not necessarily refute his status an effective thinker or philosopher. For this reason, none of Freud's "scientific" tests will be used to exemplify any points in this paper. Support will be drawn only from his hypotheses. For more reading on the controversies regarding Freud's scientific methods, see: Anthony A. Derksen, "The Seven Strategies of the Sophisticated Pseudo-Scientist: A Look into Freud's Rhetorical Toolbox," *Journal for General Philosophy of Science* 32, no 2. (2001): 329-350, http://www.jstor.org.

[27] Sigmund Freud, *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*, in *Works of Sigmund Freud* (Boston: MobileReference, 2010), 609.

Fanny has no tools by which to manage her libido, and thus her sexual needs become all-encompassing.

Though her first sexual encounters are profoundly problematic – the initial experience, during which she is masturbated by another woman (pp. 10-13), and the second, during which she is nearly raped by a patron of Mrs. Brown's brothel (pp.18-20) – they do not discourage Fanny from further discovering the bountiful pleasures of sexual gratification on her own. These experiences become two of the most important for her, for they are what awakens in Fanny the realization of her sexual hunger. Fanny's first lesson in the pleasures of sexuality are primarily self-taught. She secretly watches the matron of the prostitute-house perform intercourse with a client, and it is this "sight [that] gave the last dying blow to my native innocence" (p. 25). Fanny becomes aroused by the scene and mimics the genital manipulation on herself that Phoebe imposed during her first sexual escapade. From that moment on, Fanny Hill is the titular woman of pleasure, striving again and again to attain "critical extasy [sic]" (p. 25).

Other than her first misguided confrontations with sexuality, what is it that breeds in Fanny this starving libido? The understanding can be better traced through two of Freud's works: *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he outlines the general personality of most children; and *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*. Of children, Freud writes, "The child is absolutely egotistical; it feels its wants acutely and strives remorselessly to satisfy them."[28] Children's specific needs – the lack of definition in Freud's work suggesting that the needs can be varying – are appeased however the child deems, for a child is far removed from a world of grave consequence. "[The child] is not responsible for its evil deeds either in our judgment or in the eyes of the penal law…[and] altruistic impulses and morality will come to life in the little egotist."[29] The second portion of this quote carries the most importance, for with tutelage, the child is weaned away from its avaricious self, during which time "a secondary ego will restrain the primary one."[30] In the case of Fanny Hill, "impulses and morality" are never given the chance to flourish, for her parents not only obfuscate the teachings of propriety, they perish before they have the chance to reveal them to her.

Regardless of her age, Fanny is loosed upon the world still a child. Freud writes, "In cases where the development of this morality fails to appear, we…talk about 'degeneration'; they are obviously cases of arrested development."[31] This theory of

---

[28] Frued, Sigmund, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2005), 217.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid. *Ego* refers to the identity of the self, and in this instance, the "primary ego" represents the child oblivious to morality, while the "secondary ego" is that which is provided by punishment, praise, social engineering, and education.

[31] Ibid. According to Freud, designation between the infantile child and the adolescent – one who has received a fair share of learning in the ways of virtues and vices – is this moral line, and depending upon the influences (or lack thereof), "the duration of the unmoral period of childhood is of different length in different individuals." Fanny's fifteen years of life do not grant her a latent understanding of how the world around her functions. Because she has not fashioned the previously-named *secondary ego*, she is still a child.

arrested development carries over to another of Freud's works, namely his *Three Contributions*, in which he lays out a complicated structure of psychosexual development that presents itself over several years of the child's life and through various stages of sensual discovery.[32] Fanny is not given the option to follow this natural pathway to its termination – it is severed near the middle by the death of her parents and her lack of education, and her development is similarly arrested in the *phallic* phase as it was with her moral growth. "The sexual activities of this erogenous zone, which belongs to the real genitals, are the beginning of the later normal sexual life," writes Freud, who sees the phallic phase as a starting-point for the second half of a child's subsequent development.[33] Freud's outline evokes an image of Fanny, for many of her actions seem like direct results of this visible protraction of the phallic phase. Genital pleasure is her main objective, for she is always "ardently wishing, requiring any means to divert or allay the rekindl'd…tumult of my desires" (p. 27). Freud notes this ever-present desire for sexual gratification incumbent of the phallic stage, writing, "it happens that the pleasurable feeling which these parts of the body are capable of producing makes itself noticeable to the child…and thus awakens desire for repetition."[34]

At first glance, this proof may seem less like arrested development and more like the expression of a normal, uninterrupted libido. It must be remembered that, unlike someone who has been cultivated all the way through the psychosexual directives, Fanny is subject – as a bearer of the original, "unmoral" child-ego – to what Freud labels as the "degeneration" that accompanies arrested development.[35]

It is Fanny's degenerations – her insistence, whether voluntary or unconscious, to engage in alternative, even taboo sexual practices – that prove her stasis in the *phallic* phase rather than her completion of all the phases, which would have delivered her for the duration of life into the *genital* phase. Freud's definition of a degeneration reads: "It has…become customary to designate all morbid manifestations not of traumatic or infections origin as degenerative."[36] Fanny's degenerations are vast and adventurous, and she fits many of the profiles for degeneration that Freud specifically details.

Inversion, or homosexuality, is one of Freud's primary examples of degeneration. Notably, inversion is the first sexual practice with which Fanny comes in intimate contact, and it allows her to explore her body and its capabilities before applying it in heterosexual acts. With her fellow prostitute Phoebe, Fanny is schooled in the basics of

---

[32] These stages are commonly referred to as the five stages of psychosexual development. The stages are *oral, anal*, *phallic, latent*, and *genital*. Completion of these stages ensured normal sexual activity. While these are outlined in detail in *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex,* a well-constructed introductory outline can be viewed here: Dino Felluga, *Modules on Freud: On Psychosexual Development,* http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/freud.html.

[33] Freud, *Three Contributions*, 645.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 217.

[36] Freud, *Three Contributions,* 618. In his writing, Freud seems aware of the negative connotation of the term *degenerate*, and uses it purely to label these sexual deviations. "It would seem more appropriate not to speak of degenerations: Where there are not many marked deviations from the normal; where the capacity for working and living do not in general appear markedly impaired." Yet, *degeneration* is the only term Freud can apply to these manifestations of altered sexuality.

pleasure, and because a "union of the genitals" is impossible, they practice mutual masturbation, which Freud states is the "most common sexual aim" among inverts.[37] In addition, Phoebe and Fanny share numerous kisses – "kisses as fierce and as salacious as I ever received from the other sex" (p. 11), which is a trait of inversion found primarily among female inverts, for "contact with the mucous membrane of the mouth seems to be preferred."[38]

Inversion is not the only degenerative quality espoused by Fanny Hill. In another scene of the novel, Fanny has intercourse with a sailor she does not know, having merely passed him in the street. Had "[she] been less under the dominion of unappeas'd irritations and desires," Fanny proclaims that she would have never given the sailor a second thought. Yet, she accompanies him into private, where the novel's repetitive sexuality is augmented by a thinly veiled act of anal sex. Almost humorously, Fanny describes the unexpected penetration by writing

> [H]e leads me to a table, and…lays my head down on the edge of it, and…bares my naked posteriours to his blind, and furious guide: it forces his way between them, and I feeling…that it was going by the right door, and knocking desperately at the wrong one, I told him of it: "Pooh, says he my dear, any port in a storm" (p.141).[39]

Since "the mucous membrane of the anus is by no means limited to intercourse between men" and "its preference has nothing characteristic of the inverted feeling," Fanny does not hesitate to continue with her engagement.[40] She and the sailor complete their task and part ways. Fanny is chided by Mrs. Cole, both a friend and mother-figure, for her "open legg'd" (p. 142) activity, and while Fanny resolves never to misuse herself so promiscuously again, she carries no guilt or concern for having engaged in anal sex. It is simply another notch in the hilt of her sexuality or another route by which to gain her final pleasure.

These are not the only Freudian degenerations Fanny harbors, or to which she is exposed. Other instances include her involvement in an orgy (pp. 112-125) and the pleasure she finds from whipping a client (pp. 146-152). Altogether, this evidence displays what Freud's psychosexual theory proposes: Fanny Hill has never shed her

---

[37] Ibid., 618-19. During these homosexual encounters, Phoebe demonstrates another of Freud's theories, which he defines later in his *Three Contributions*, called "penis envy." Phoebe yearns to be able to complete this aforementioned "union of the genitals" and even verbally expresses it to Fanny: "Oh! what a charming creature thou art!—what a happy man will he be that first makes a woman of you!—Oh! that I were a man for your sake" (p. 11).

[38] Ibid., 616.

[39] The various errors made in this section – the longevity of the sentence, the inclusion of "says he my dear" between the dialogue quotations – are printed directly from the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*.

[40] Anal sex, while it may be considered either perversion or degeneration, does not necessarily carry with it the self-loathing that often accompanies acts of inversion or less-acceptable sexual practices, as it is not unique to homosexuality.

primary ego, her child-like ways of self-satisfaction, curiosity, and haphazard exploration. Until her reformation, she is frozen in an "age of childhood in which the sense of shame is lacking," where her actions are not wholly the choices of an adult, but the yearning choices of a child eager to interact with the world "free of [her] flesh" (p. 142).[41]

Finally, there is a third philosophy can be used to dictate the innocence that Fanny Hill retains throughout her narrative. While the theories of Locke and Freud bore the inertia of fundamental development, English-born scholar Jeremy Bentham approached the idea of innocence in a way that challenged not just the previous studies of human nature, but the lawful and civil expectations the government had of its people. In 1789, he published his treaty, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, which introduced the tenets of utilitarianism.[42] Joseph Carrig provides a cursory and accurate definition of the utilitarian code, which "provide[d] a moral foundation" in order to influence the reform of the English penal system.[43] "Bentham believed that earlier systems fail to lay…establishment of a legal code for one of two reasons," Carrig writes. "They misconceive human nature and, as a consequence, impose moral obligations that run counter to the motivations that are the true source of human action."[44] Bentham explained that "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*," by which the actions of a person – and consequently, a whole people – are dominated by the want to reduce the former and replicate the latter.[45] This concept of utility was pertinent to not just whole governments and groups of people, but to each individual, by whose desires the majority was composed. Fanny Hill is a prototype of the utilitarian theory: her endless search for pleasure is a panacea to any potential pain. According to Bentham, what produces pleasure should be perpetuated by both the individual and the whole.

Utilitarianism is an intrinsic nature in humanity based on sensation (or, as Locke denotes it, faculty). "By the natural constitution of the human frame, on most occasions of their lives men in general embrace this principle."[46] Fanny Hill is the definition of utilitarianism, for she lives only to satisfy her need for pleasure, which – according to

---

[41] Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 212. Further support for Fanny's sexuality as a product of innocence can be seen in a preceding passage. "It may be observed in the case of children who are a little older that being undressed has a kind of intoxicating effect upon them, instead of making them ashamed." Exhibition and sex are Fanny's way of taking off her proverbial gloves, sensing the world, and growing in it.

[42] Joseph Carrig, introduction to *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation,* by Jeremy Bentham (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2008), vii. Carrig begins his introduction by quoting from Bentham, who wrote, "I dreamt the other night that I was the founder of a sect….It was the sect of utilitarians." The book was published a decade later. Because Bentham never meant to write a work of "abstract philosophy," *Principles* was intended as an attempt at ethical reform. That it was not wholly adopted as one is what designates its use in this study as a philosophy, despite Bentham's original aim.

[43] Ibid., xii.

[44] Ibid., xi.

[45] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation,* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2008), 1.

[46] Ibid., 3.

both Locke and Freud – can be best accomplished sexually due to her lack of other knowledge. Throughout her memoirs, Fanny is not only the recipient of pleasure, but is the provider of it. By viewing her so charitably, the very title of the book comes into clearer perspective. Fanny is not simply a prostitute; she is a woman of pleasure, a matriarch of the urges that drive humanity. Prostitution and sex are the unique vehicles by which she becomes the catalyst of worldly pleasure. Were that she a painter, a singer, a dancer, the novel's title could remain the same if such actions were the prominent method of her satisfaction and of those around her. Prostitution, however, is the perfect occupation by which to define the novel's utilitarian mindset. During every encounter, Fanny is not the only subject of delight – her fictional partners are indulged in various forms of bliss, and the reader is also able to experience a certain sense of titillation. No other subject matter would have such universal appeal or utilitarian application.

Because pleasure is appropriated so commonly during Fanny's memoirs, Bentham's theories encourage analysis of the novel's moral purpose. Fanny, rather than be held accountable for her lasciviousness, is able to take on a new role as a liberal figurehead whose actions are more felicitous than offensive. Bentham redefines the concept of what is right and what is not, for

> If he is inclined to think that his own approbation or disapprobation, annexed to the idea of an act, without any regard to its consequences, is a sufficient foundation for him to judge and act upon, let him ask himself whether his sentiment is to be a standard of right and wrong, with respect to every other man, or whether every man's sentiment has the same privilege of being a standard to itself?[47]

This speculation – that one man does not necessarily have the right to rebuke another for their alternate courses of pleasure-seeking – is echoed quite similarly by Fanny, well after she discovers that sex is not just a necessity for her lifestyle, but a preference, an experience she endlessly enjoys. Repeating the beliefs of her benefactor Mrs. Cole, Fanny writes:

> She consider'd pleasure of one sort or other…and every wind that blew thither a good one, provided it blew nobody any 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…as infinitely diversify'd…and independent of all reasoning (p. 144).

Bentham's concepts of pleasure and pain are not simple and general ideas, however. Justification of Fanny's overactive sexual passion as beneficial is possible using the definitions modeled in Bentham's *Principles*. While systems of pleasures and pains may

[47] Ibid., 4. In this passage, "he" and "him" directly refer to one who seeks to judge another for their actions.

vary, there are specific constituents to what composes one or the other. Pleasures may be "*good,* (which is properly the cause or instrument of pleasure) or *profit* (which is distant pleasure, or the cause or instrument of distant pleasure), or *convenience*, or *advantage, benefit, emolument, happiness*, and so forth";[48] pain, on the other hand, can be complemented by "*evil* (which corresponds to *good*), or *mischief*, or *inconvenience*, or *disadvantage*, or *loss*, or *unhappiness*, and so forth."[49] In addition to those standards, it must also be taken into consideration the duration of the pleasure, the amount of people the pleasure effects, the propensity of the pleasure to occur, and the potential pains it could produce in others.[50] The duration of the acts in *Memoirs* continuously increase; the amount of participants and observers rises; the frequency of sexuality intensifies; and Fanny, for that she lives entirely surrounded by sexual subcultures, is audience to no one who becomes critical of her activities, thus ensuring constant communal happiness.

While the theories of Locke and Freud focused intensely on mental and sexual development, and thus allowed for easy access to various explanations of Fanny's purity, Bentham's principles were ones mainly of judicial and legislative reform. As stated in the introduction, "Bentham himself admits that the work is inadequate as an introduction to the principles of morals since…it fails to consider other important concepts, most notably those of virtue and vice."[51] Though sufficient reasoning can be found in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* to support Fanny's sexual activity as a majority's source of pleasure, other works and testimony must be invoked to approach the matter of her preserved innocence. Along with being a reformer, Bentham was considered a feminist, having had deep sympathy for the social strife women faced. Miriam Williford writes, "Bentham particularly deplored the position women held during his lifetime…[and he] detested vague, meaningless phrases such as those that men used to defend…their treatment of women as little better than slaves."[52] As both a defender of women's intellect and a man who sought reformation of the punishment and penal systems, it is likely that Bentham would not have seen Fanny's prostitution as an act of vice, crime, or sin. Alternatively, since "Bentham evidently believed that men associate women so much with their sexual role,"[53] her promiscuity might have been seen not only as a resource of existence, but as brilliance, for Fanny gradually became not just philanthropist of pleasure, but a controller of the men she bedded. Sex becomes her leverage, her ability to direct the world around her. After coming under the command of

---

48 Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 19.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 18-19. This is a broad simplification of Bentham's theories. The complexity of the systems by which to define pleasure or pain are intensely formulaic. The constituents of a pleasure must summarily be of greater value than the constituents of a pain to consider it one. Bentham does not expect this blueprint to be applied to every moral choice, however. "It is not to be expected," he writes, "that this process should be strictly pursued previously to every moral judgment, or to every legislative or judicial operation."

51 Carrig, introduction to *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, x.

52 Miriam Williford, "Bentham on the Rights of Women," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 36, no. 1 (1975): 168, http://www.jstor.org.

53 Ibid., 170.

Mr. H-----, a man who disposes of Fanny's debts in an attempt to objectify her, she uses her skills to obtain her freedom. "Mr. H-----'s loftier qualifications of birth, fortune, and sense, laid me under a sort of subjection and constraint, that were far from making harmony in the concert of love" (p. 80). Yet, for as much control as Mr. H----- declares over Fanny, he is blind to her power: by using sex, she draws in Mr. H-----'s servant – a young man – which becomes an action of disloyalty that leads Mr. H----- to relinquish his ownership over her.

Bentham's utilitarian theories differ from Locke's and Freud's in that, instead of excusing Fanny as a sexual vagabond, they explain why she chooses to be one. Her sexuality does not hinge on moral standards; instead, she is entirely morally separated from intercourse, for it becomes not just a tool of satisfaction, but of survival. Fanny, as a result, is still pure – sex as an expression of love is something she only shares with Charles, while the sex she uses to survive in the world around her is merely a natural reaction, a Darwinian response in a world where women have few options.

There are numerous philosophies and schools of ethics one could use to further explain Fanny Hill's innocence at the conclusion of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. There are also others that could deny her that purity. What cannot be debated, however, is the significance of Fanny's reform. The two epistles that construct the novel are written well after Fanny's self-removal from the world of prostitution, following her marriage to Charles. The reader is left not with the young *Fanny* Hill,[54] a simple woman of pleasure, but with a married and rehabilitated *Francis* Hill, an adult woman who belongs to a single man and who has had her morals solidified by the proper world around her.

It is her marriage to Charles that purifies Fanny Hill and returns her once again to her state of innocence and propriety, as if the only sexuality she ever experienced occurred when she surrendered her maidenhead, in full willingness, to her future husband (p. 41). John Locke's empirical philosophies, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories, and Jeremy Bentham's ethics of utilitarianism illuminate Fanny Hill's innocence. In the consummation of her marriage (and the consummation of her scurrilous past), Fanny Hill is cleansed – her experiences are trusted eternally to the whims of the confessionary letters that compose Cleland's infamous *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*.

Bibliography

Bentham, Jeremy. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. 1789. NewYork: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2008.

Cleland, John. *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. 1748-49. Edited by Peter Sabor. New York: Oxford, 1999.

[54] The choice of the name "Fanny" may have been intentional – this shortening of "Francis", according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is also a colloquial name in British English for the female genitals. Since this is not specifically identified in the novel, this is purely conjecture, as the earliest recorded use of this slang is in an 1879 edition of *The Pearl*, an erotic magazine issued monthly in London.

Carrig, Joseph. Introduction to *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation,* by Jeremy Bentham. vii-xvii. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc. 2008.

Duyfhuzien, Bernard. "Epistolary Narratives of Transmission and Transgression." *Comparative Literature* 37, no. 1 (1985): 1-26. http://www.jstor.org.

Freud, Sigmund. *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*. 1920. In *Works of Sigmund Freud*, 607-700. Boston: MobileReference, 2010. Nook edition.

---. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. 1899. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2001.

Gautier, Gary. "Fanny Hill's Mapping of Sexuality, Female Identity, and Maternity." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 35, no. 3 (1995): 473-491. http://www.jstor.org.

Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. 1690. Edited by Alexander Campbell Frasier. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2004.

Maccubbin, Robert P. *'Tis Nature's Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality During the Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

O'Brien, Karen. "History and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century Britain." *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68, no. 1/2 (2005): 397-413. http://www.jstor.org.

Ott, Walter. Introduction to *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, by John Locke. xi-xvi. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2004.

Simonton, Deborah. *The Routledge History of Women in Europe Since 1700*. Florence: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2006.

Williford, Miriam. "Bentham on the Rights of Women." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36, no. 1 (1975): 167-176. http://www.jstor.org.