

Fanny Hill: The 18th Century Bisexual Woman

Sub-genres of the classic romance have become more popular with tropes such as enemies to lovers, anti-villain, “one bed” and many more, with a twist of sexual relationships and tension between characters allowing sex to be the driving force of the plot. If you went on Kindle Unlimited today, books such as *Ice Planet Barbarians*, a love story between an abducted human and a giant blue alien who saves her, would be among the thousands of erotic romance novels that you could find. In addition to these books, conversations in different mediums of social media and book clubs have brought attention to how sex is classified. For example, a recent viral Tik Tok of a Mormon teen sex trend called “soaking,” which is the insertion of a penis into a vagina without thrusting, calls attention to this very question. Conversations and the language surrounding sex have evolved to more explicit speech causing some people to think the current generations are more sexualized. Many eighteenth-century novels handle sex discretely by hiding the act or other sexual acts behind symbolism or metaphors. Some novels around this time, however, did not simply hide away sex, but they showcased it at the forefront of the plot, which became a blueprint for the “spicy” erotic romance novel. John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill: Memoir of a Woman of Pleasure*, the first English prose pornography, works to answer questions including what constitutes sex, and how consent can be portrayed. Cleland works to promote a heterosexual agenda through the main character Fanny, a retired prostitute, as she looks back on her past. Throughout the novel, the promotion of the heterosexual agenda forces readers to consider what constitutes sex and consent. My argument in this paper is that Cleland's heterosexual narrative is unsuccessful since the characters in this novel push boundaries on what constitutes sex and virginity.

John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill: Memoir of a Woman of Pleasure*, (1748), takes readers on a journey through the recollection of Fanny’s life and the various people she meets.

When readers first meet Fanny, she has just turned 14, after her parents have both unexpectedly passed away from smallpox, on her way to London in search of work. However, she gets tricked into working at a brothel under Ms. Brown. During the first few hours of being at the brothel, Fanny has her first homoerotic experience with Pheobe, another prostitute of the house. However, Cleland defines this instance as a series of caresses and embraces, instead of sex. During her first few days at the brothel, her virginity was sold by Ms. Brown to the highest bidder Mr. Croftis, who attempts to rape her, to conquer this precious jewel of virginity. Fortunately for Fanny, after this unsuccessful encounter, she meets her beloved Charles at the brothel, and he was able to steal her away from prostitution after paying Ms. Brown for her. Fanny lives a happy life for a few months as Charles' mistress until Charles unexpectedly goes overseas; then she faces depression and poverty. However, those are soon remedied by Mr. H, a man who had a mutual acquaintance with Fanny, looking for a mistress. The remainder of the novel becomes Fanny transitioning from a kept woman by different men to a working woman at brothels until she is finally reunited with her true love, Charles, many years later. During her life, Fanny finds success and money through taking control of her sex life and gaining autonomy. Throughout these encounters, readers follow Fanny's journey questioning and redefining the patriarchal view of sex and virginity.

As noted, the novel's portrayal of virginity as a priceless artifact that is meant to be protected not only by the woman herself but by the patriarchal structure because of men's inextinguishable need to conquer it. Cleland begins to define virginity and sex, but for readers, the lines begin to blur causing more questions around the topic. Fanny first experiences the war on her virginity when Ms. Brown sells her virginity to a 'cousin' Mr. Croftis, and he was promised she would give away this prize. Fanny begs the man to not harm her or have sex with

her but is seemingly unsuccessful. Fanny states, "... for whether my tears, my attitude, or the disorder of my dress approach fresh incentives, or whether he was not under the dominion of desires he could not brittle, but snorting and foaming with the lust and rage, he renews his attack... though he attempted with his knee to force them apart, effect it to stand fair for being master of the main avenue..." (Cleland 17). The scene which Fanny describes leaves readers with an impression of a savage man who will only be calmed with prized virginity. His mission has failed because he ejaculates on her thighs due to premature excitement from the thought of conquering her 'maidenhead', as he refers to it in the text, the loss of this treasure immediately causes him to lash out insisting that she is "spoiled- goods". Crofits states, "When it was over he bid me, with a tone of displeasure, get up... the old bitch might look out for another cully... that he would not be fool'd so by e'er country mock modesty in England..." (Cleland 17). Since the man could not perform under pressure and lost his treasure of a virgin, he lashes out at Fanny, blaming her and insisting she is "spoiled goods" simply because she does not want to have sex with him. However, Fanny is relieved that she did not have to submit to this brutish man and does not consider this attack to be rape, but instead an unsettling event. In addition, Fanny's supine position makes her more submissive to the man in this scene, and he can dominate Fanny while having access to male pleasure. In Thomas Holme's piece "Sexual Positions and Sexual Politics: John Cleland's Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure," he addresses the concept around the positioning of women during intercourse. Holmes states, "The reason for this preference becomes clear when one recognizes that in the context of the Memoirs the male-over-female sexual position physically embodies the idea of the patriarchal culture..." (Holmes 125). The concept of the patriarchal culture shows particularly in this scene when Fanny becomes dominated by a man, and even though she was begging him not to assault her, his need to have

sex with her becomes the goal. Crofts' anger after she fends off the attack shows an attempt to focus the power he had back. Had Fanny given up her virginity without a fight, the patriarchal power would have remained unbalanced in his favor. However, Fanny is able to take some power back from him. To return the power to his favor, he blames his victims for his shortcomings.

This scene is almost immediately paralleled when Fanny meets Charles who embodies the perfect suitor, the opposite of this brutish "cousin" by being young, handsome, and charming. Fanny immediately wants him to save her and take her virginity after she sees him for the first time. Fanny states, "...the prodigious love I was struck with for him... there was no resisting, and blinded me to every objection; I could, at the instance, have died for him: think if I could resist an invitation to live with him! That's my heart, beating strong to the proposal, dictating my answer, after scarce a minute pause..." (Cleland 31). Fanny becomes overjoyed at the idea of this charming youth taking her away from her life at the brothel and becoming a mistress for him, and potentially a submissive wife. She does not seem concerned that he could harm her, even though Crofts attacked her less than twenty- four hours ago. When Charles takes Fanny away and they have sex for the first time, this is when Fanny considers herself to be deflowered. Even though she had partaken in sex with Pheobe since her arrival at the brothel. Fanny writes, "When I recovered my senses, I found myself and dressed, and a bed, in the arms of the sweet relenting murder of my virginity...his complete triumph over my maidenhead...in tenderness to the pain which he had put me too, in the curing himself the height of pleasure, smothered his exultation..." (Cleland 35). The scene which Fanny describes, while she still lay submissive to him, paints a picture of the perfect conquest, in which her lover was tender, and the battle did not rage with a fight but was given willingly to the perfect suitor. The language that Fanny uses such

as “murder of my virginity” and “triumph over my maidenhead” mirrors war language. Cleland intentionally uses diction related to war to emphasize the need men possess to conquer women. However, Fanny willingly gave her virginity to Charles, therefore it leaves the question as to whether she was conquered.

Both of the scenes of Fanny’s first sexual encounters with men range drastically, however, they seemingly show a man's desire to conquer virginity. While one man is painted as a savage, brute who attacks forcefully upon his prey, but is ultimately unsuccessful. The other was a perfect gentleman who ultimately won his battle. In the scene with Charles, through Fanny’s description, readers picture a charming youth who shows affection becoming her choice to bestow the gift of virginity. I argue that because her virginity was given to Charles, he did not conquer her as Cleland would lead readers to believe in giving Fanny power over her sexuality. My idea of her gaining sexual autonomy brings new light to the reading since Cleland’s attempt to push the heteronormative idea that men have power falls apart.

The first sexual experience Fanny has takes place with Pheobe, another prostitute under the care of Ms. Brown. The first night with Pheobe at the brothel, Fanny engages in an erotic experience that would now be labeled lesbian sex but instead becomes classified by Cleland as caresses. Fanny states, “Encouraged by this, her hands became extremely free, and wandered over my whole body, with touches, squeezes, pressures, that rather warm’d and surpriz’d me with their novelty, then they either shock’d or alarm’d me”(Cleland 10). Fanny begins to describe the exploration of her body by Pheobe but tells readers before she did not want to seem rude, and things in London must work this way when justifying her pleasure at this moment. Cleland uses Fanny’s inexperience of sex in this situation to negate the fact Fanny enjoys sex with Pheobe. Later in this same scene, Fanny describes to readers the female orgasm when

Pheobe pleasures her stating, "...her lascivious touches had lined up a new fire that wanted through all my veins but fixed with violence in the center appointed them by nature where the first strange hands were now busy than feeling, squeezing, compressing the lips, and opening them again with a finger between., til an 'Oh!'..." (Cleland 11). In this scene, Fanny explicitly describes the homoerotic experience of having sexual relations between two women but does not name this as such. Cleland again attempts to undercut the sexual relationship, instead insisting Pheobe's job is a figure for grooming. Pheobe states, " 'Oh! What A Charming creature that art!... What a happy man will he be that first makes a woman of You!... Oh! That I were a man for your sake!...' With the like broken expressions interrupted by kisses as fierce and fervent as ever I've received from the other sex"(Cleland 11). Pheobe insists that this encounter did not result in the loss of virginity. Cleland uses this scene to set a boundary that "sex" requires penetration from a man. However, upon further analysis of this section, readers see that perhaps Fanny and Pheobe label this as sex without the loss of virginity. Pheobe stating " Oh! That I were a man for your sake!", shows hints that perhaps Pheobe does view this as sex. However, she is not a man, therefore does not have the power to conquer virginity. Fanny then states that this interaction includes kissing and caressing with more passion than that of a man. This marks the sexual chemistry that the women had together with both Pheobe and Fanny finding pleasure in these sexual encounters. However, this leads to a problem for Cleland's narrative. Had Fanny and Pheobe decided this encounter resulted in the conquering of Fanny's virginity, Pheobe would have been a conqueror of the prize, but because of the patriarchal standards, this could not happen.

Cleveland's attempt to balance the power back into the heteronormative way, by Pheobe and Fanny watching a heterosexual couple have sex. However, Pheobe and Fanny participate in

sexual activities during this time using the scene as a form of foreplay for the women. As Fanny and Pheobe hide in the closet watching Polly, another prostitute, and her suiter have sex, Fanny states, “For my part, I will not pretend to describe what I felt all over me during this scene; but from that instant, adieu all fears of what man could do unto me, they were now changed into such adieu desires...” (Cleland 27). When first seeing a penis she is immediately filled with lust and desire for sex with a man. After this encounter, Pheobe takes Fanny back to their room to have sex with her again where they use the memory and imagination that a penis is present as foreplay to sex. Fanny states,

Phoebe lay down by me, and ask'd me archly of, now that I had seen the enemy, and fully considered him, I was still afraid of him? Or did I think I could venture to come to a close engagement with him? To all which, not a word on my side; I sign'd, and could scarce breathe. She takes hold of my hand, having roll'd up her own petticoats, forced it half striving towards those parts, were now grown more knowing. I miss'd the main object of my wishes; and finding not even the shadow of what I wanted... (Cleland 29)

The scene displayed lesbian sex by today's standards, but Pheobe is using the imagery of a penis to arouse Fanny during the time. Cleland pushes the heterosexual narrative further when Fanny describes the missing penis from between Pheobe's legs when she discovers the flat area of the vagina. While both of these women experience pleasure during this scene, since the readers have been introduced to heterosexual sex through Fanny, Cleland attempts to show homosexual relations will no longer be fulfilling for Fanny. Thus attempting to reinforce that homoerotic sex is less satisfying.

Cleland seemingly enforces the concept that sex with women would be less satisfying, however, Fanny only has orgasms when she has sex with Pheobe. Therefore it leaves the question of how she is less satisfied. I argue that Fanny shows an exploration of her sexuality by enjoying sex with both women and men throughout her lifetime expressing autonomy over herself. To be quite blunt, Fanny enjoys having sex with both genders therefore Cleland's attempt to suppress her sexuality has failed. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* investigates the suppression of sexuality in western culture from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century. The attempted suppression of this sexuality can be seen in this novel because Cleland attempts to discount the homoerotic experiences as acts of masturbation or mutual masturbation instead of sex. . Foucault writes,

Calling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult and more costly. As if to gain mystery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguished the words that rendered it too visibly present. Without even having to pronounce the word... by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship. (Foucault 17)

This censorship and suppression Cleland ventures to impose on female sexuality and homosexual relationships fail because Fanny enjoys sex with both women and men. However, if Cleland were to admit that homosexual experiences were valid sex, meaning women could "conquer" other women more questions of the patriarchal system would arise; including questions around how the loss of virginity should be defined or if it truly existed. Both of these questions undercut the patriarchal system that men dominate women. Instead of addressing these issues, Cleland

strives to reinforce the patriarchal and heterosexual agenda by not counting homosexual sex as sex.

Continuations of conversations surrounding the portrayal of sex and consent adapt to an ever-changing society, it is important to look back on previous works, as they may shed light on a hot topic today. By readers tracking the seemingly heteronormative narrator, Fanny, witnessing the pushing of boundaries on what defines sex and virginity. The surface attempt Cleland makes to discount homosexual relationships in this book inevitably falls flat due to Fanny's treatment of these relationships. Watching Fanny question sexuality, virginity, and the patriarchal structure around her makes this novel an important part of existing conversations. This novel, when viewed in a new light, gives agency to Fanny over her body and life, which can be seen as a groundbreaking experience for a woman of her time. Thus this novel inadvertently becomes a blueprint for ideas portrayed in thousands of popular novels today.