Fanny Hill Now: A Half Century of Liberty

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The history of formal literary censorship in the United States begins and ends with John Cleland's 1749 *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure.* In Massachusetts, in 1821, the book was the subject of the country's first obscenity trial, and in 1966, after a case again in Massachusetts, the US Supreme court ruled—by a vote of six to three—that the novel could be freely published under the protection of the First Amendment.[1] The scholarly groundwork for this victory had been laid out by Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel* (1957), and while *Memoirs* gets no mention in this foundational work, the version of novelistic realism Watt outlined enabled those who would defend Cleland's novel to align it with the works of Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, both of whom are mentioned in the professorial testimony made before the court. The trial was noteworthy for, among other things, how little attention was paid to Cleland the author and how much was paid to the psychology of Fanny Hill, the novel's narrator. Fanny was defended as an "empiricist," one who proves "extremely curious about life," and who, in the satisfaction of that curiosity, can help us understand "things about the eighteenth century that [we] might not otherwise know," as one witness put it.[2] At the moment that it began to circulate freely, *Memoirs* finally took its place in the history of the "realistic" novel, where it would, despite Fanny's

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realism-enfeebling stylizations and omissions, continue to teach us about eighteenth-century life.

At the same time, the prominence brought to *Memoirs* by its legal struggles placed it at the vanguard of the sexual revolution, making its name—or at least the name of its narrator—a byword for progressive sexuality. A flood of editions followed in the 1960s, along with countless newspaper and magazine articles. Suddenly, this centuries-old account of a prostitute's progress into and out of the business of pleasure began to generate fresh sequels, parodies, comics, films, and even a cookbook. Fanny as a character broke loose from Cleland. She adapted to the times, migrating into a variety of modern situations and giving birth to dozens of other first-person narrators that were either direct relations (as with Molly, Nellie, Danny, Roderick, and Freddy Hill), or disciples (as with Fanny Mill, Fanny Hillman, and Fanny Hell)—none of whom helped the literary standing of their forerunner, especially when they mocked Fanny's academic merit in titles like *Fanny Hillman on Campus: Memoirs of a Jewish Madam* (1966) and *Phi Beta Fanny* (1969). But while *Memoirs* had triumphed in the popular imagination as well as in the courts on the grounds of *exceptio artis*, academics were relatively slow to accept the notion that the novel's artfulness provided an adequate basis for what the court termed "serious critical comment."[3] Not surprisingly, the earliest scholarly treatments sought to align the novel with canonical works such as *Moll Flanders* and *Clarissa*, and also to trace internal allusions to, say, *Paradise Lost*.[4] In 1970, Leo Braudy elaborated upon the winning strategies employed in the novel's legal defense and offered a full-scale analysis of the novel's relation to Julien Offray de La Mettrie and philosophic naturalism.[5] After evading the law, Fanny began to live above ground, it seems, by passing as a love machine.

Given the long history of attempts by the agents of law and good manners to suppress, confiscate, and condemn the novel, we should not be surprised that during the 1960s scholars focused on the clandestine publication history of *Memoirs*. The novel had always generated interest among what we would now call book historians. The work of David Foxon in particular clarified which extant early copies of *Memoirs* were the true first editions.[6] Other bibliographical labors, such as Patrick Kearney's extensive cataloging of the British Library's Private Case throughout the 1970s, drew attention to the vast restricted archive within which the first edition had been hidden.[7] It would not be until the mid-1980s that the novel became available in trustworthy unexpurgated editions derived from the Brit-

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ish Library copy known as P.C.27.a.44, which was edited and introduced by actual scholars of eighteenth-century literature. Peter Sabor's Oxford World's Classics edition and Peter Wagner's Penguin Classics edition, both published in 1985, brought Fanny out from under college dorm mattresses and into the lecture hall.

As much as Fanny's relentlessly stylized scenes gave us a self-consciously alternative account of what a Pamela or a Clarissa might have done had she been less virtuous, when *Memoirs* was made readily available to academic readers, it was consistently read against the grain to reveal the issues of language, power, gender, voyeurism, and narrative transvestitism that dominated the concerns of eighteenth-century studies throughout the 1980s. It became a central text in the nascent fields of sexuality studies and queer theory, and it came to be incorporated into new literary histories that challenged Watt's *grand récit*, including Ruth Bernard Yeazell's treatment of the novel in *Fictions of Modesty* (1991), which argued for its participation in the conventions of English courtship fiction as they developed from Richardson to Henry James. Similarly, Felicity Nussbaum's *Torrid Zones* (1995) followed up on historian Randolph Trumbach's approach to Cleland's depictions of prostitution and alerted scholars to the novel's obscurantism about the workaday life of the eighteenth-century prostitute, the realities of which become silenced in obedience to a nationalist and colonialist agenda. All attention again was on Fanny herself, who seems always coyly ready to reveal a symptom of her conditioning if not her condition.

By this point, in both the popular and scholarly imaginations, Fanny the character had eclipsed her creator. Apart from valuable but isolated scholarship by William H. Epstein and James Basker, little attention was given to Cleland or his other works.[8] Moving into the first decade of the twenty-first century, critics largely heeded Peter Sabor's call, in 2000, for increased historical attention to Cleland, "his milieu, and his oeuvre."[9] But Cleland's polymathic learning and wide array of interests—ranging from his short fiction, drama, and poetry, to his biographies, periodical reviews, translations, medical tracts, lexicographical studies, and several unclassifiable works blending various genres—called for a pioneering spirit and true interdisciplinarity. Carolyn D. Williams analyzed Cleland's considerable etymological tracts, Clorinda Donato elucidated the nature of his pseudo-medical work on the case of Catterina Vizzani, and Hal Gladfelder examined select legal cases that would lead to the identification—and subsequent publication in the present journal—of a lost document relating

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to Fanny's witnessing of a sodomitical scene, which itself frequently had been suppressed in editions of the work until Sabor's and Wagner's editions.[10] Instead of fitting *Memoirs* into existing histories born of presentism, Gladfelder's influential 2012 monograph, *Fanny Hill in Bombay: The Making and Unmaking of John Cleland*, drew various historicizing impulses together with much of what proved most durable from the 1990s theory boom into the richest study of Cleland and his idiosyncratic world that we are likely to have for some time. When we asked our contributors to address where Cleland scholarship is now, each one directed us to Gladfelder's book.

This special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Life* began as a way of marking the fiftieth anniversary of the exoneration of Cleland's novel in the US Supreme Court. We had two basic areas of concern. First, we wanted the novel's editors and translators to offer short discussions of the issues involved in bringing Cleland's text into our hands. Second, we wanted new full-length essays that would examine the historical situation of the novel in light of fifty years of scholarship. In our opening roundtable section, Peter Sabor and Peter Wagner revisit their labors editing the novel, Jaydeep Chipalkatti discusses the perils and joys of translating Cleland's prose into Marathi, the language of Bombay, and Richard Terry and Helen Williams discuss the new archival discoveries that enrich their 2018 Broadview edition.

Of our six full-length essays, the first three offer new approaches to old narratives about the novel. Hal Gladfelder seeks to clear the Cleland canon of opportunistic attributions made by pulp purveyors and in the process to see how eighteenth-century erotic fiction was marketed following the *Memoirs*'s twentieth-century revival, which turns out to reveal how little has changed since the eighteenth century. Norbert Schürer challenges those who argue for Cleland's tendency to obscure the economic dimensions and material conditions of Fanny's employment by emphasizing the quite visible alienating effects of her industry. And Laura J. Rosenthal brings affect studies into Cleland scholarship by considering the notion of "literary value" and suggesting that *Memoirs* is more interested in emotional response than moral judgment, thus separating it from standard sentimental narratives.

While important work has been done in the past fifteen years to enrich our knowledge of Cleland's other projects, what the second half of our essays seeks to do is relate this knowledge back to *Memoirs*. Carolyn D. Williams connects Cleland's etymological tracts with *Memoirs* through the

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figure of the Druidess, showing how Fanny unsettles masculinist notions of phallic power in a way that aligns with the history of Celtic womanhood stretching from Tacitus to the midcentury historical tragedies of William Mason. Clorinda Donato shifts our attention to the Continent and the largely ignored reception of *Memoirs* in Italy. She looks at the various moralizing frameworks that attended the novel's domestication into Italian literature as *La Meretrice*, and the reaction against such moralizing that, among other things, insisted on maintaining *Memoirs*'s alterity with a subsequent translation bearing the more specific title *La Meretrice Inglese*. And, finally, Simon Stern examines the obscenity cases in England from 1680 to 1765, a transformative era when obscenity, which had previously fallen under the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts, became an issue of common law. As this new criminal-law docket was absorbed, the courts were forced to develop and rationalize obscenity law in ways that ultimately enabled Cleland to escape prosecution.

What Fanny shared with fifty years of critics was an ability to fit into the concerns of the moment, to adopt the habit of the time. A half century on from the landmark decisions that freed Fanny from the law and estranged her from her creator, we are in a unique position to develop new perspectives on a work that has become one of the core texts in the history of the eighteenth-century novel, and one of the few eighteenth-century novels that, precisely because of its idiosyncrasies, still enjoys a place in the popular imagination. Even Ian Watt, in 1968, anticipated the need to preserve the novel's eccentricity in his discussion of the success of his *Rise of the Novel* on the occasion of its tenth anniversary. Watt concludes his entire argument by reasoning that *Memoirs* has proved to be "the most popular eighteenth-century novel" precisely because it is the "delicious exception" to the "Augustan values" of empiricism and realism that scholars had used—and would for decades continue to use—to justify its publication.[11]

Precisely because of its exceptionality, *Fanny Hill* has, by now, become ensconced in the eighteenth-century canon. But does canonicity entail visibility? Should Fanny's "stark naked truth" be concealed even if she legally can expose it? The novel has been freed from overt censorship—or at least from the kind that comes from above. However, the summer of 2017 revealed a new concern about censorship of the novel that might come from below. *The Times* and several other news sources ran articles expressing outrage that *Fanny Hill* was "dropped from a university course on eighteenth-century literature for fear of offending students."[12] The alarm-

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ist article received a rejoinder in *The Guardian* the following day by Judith Hawley, the professor at Royal Holloway London accused of bending to the will of offended—or even potentially "triggered"—students and dropping the novel from her syllabus. As it happened, the novel was never on Hawley's syllabus in the first place. If this was due to any kind of censorship, it may have been self-censorship. "The problem of teaching Fanny Hill," Hawley argued, "is not to do with sex, but power." When Fanny helps teach, those who invite her into the classroom "should attend to the power relations implicit in the pedagogical relationship."[13] Cleland, whose name never appears in Hawley's article, is erased in this relationship, as are his own pedagogical aims.

Freeing *Fanny Hill* has thus been a longer process than one might have expected, and the recent uproar over the novel revealed an expectation, at least among sensationalist newspaper writers, that the novel now has a tenuous place in the academy that once redeemed it. Questions of how truly free the novel might ever be must now negotiate with the power of freedom, not the power of suppression. Professors who teach the novel are more likely to appear as Fanny's pimps and procuresses than is Cleland; so long as this is the case, *Fanny Hill* will continue to be ours and not her own century's. While fate reunited Fanny in the novel's reality with her lost love, who quickly pulled her out of the pleasure business and into marital propriety, scholars must now reunite her with her lost creator, who can allow us see her "truth" free from the twentieth-century costumery she has needed to adopt in order to appear in public.

Notes

1. *Commonwealth v. Holmes*, 17 Mass. 336 (1821), and *A Book Named "John Cleland's Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure" v. Massachusetts*, 383 US 413 (1966).

2. 383 US 447.

3. 383 US 426.

4. To take just two examples, see Edward W. Copeland, "'Clarissa' and 'Fanny Hill': Sisters in Distress," *Studies in the Novel* 4 (1972): 343–52, and Michael Wilding, "*Paradise Lost* and *Fanny Hill*," *Milton Quarterly* 5 (1971): 14–15.

5. Leo Braudy, "*Fanny Hill* and Materialism," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 4 (1970): 21–40.

6. David Foxon, "John Cleland and the Publication of the *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*," *Book Collector* 12 (1963): 476–87.

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7. Patrick Kearney, *The Private Case: An Annotated Bibliography of the Private Case Erotica Collection in the British (Museum) Library* (London: Jay Landesman, 1981).

8. William H. Epstein, *John Cleland: Images of a Life* (New York: Columbia Univ., 1974), and James Basker, "'The Wages of Sin': The Later Career of John Cleland," *Etudes anglaises* 40 (1987): 178–94.

9. 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 (2000): 561–78; the quotation is from 573.

10. Carolyn D. Williams, "The Way to Things by Words: John Cleland, the Name of the Father, and Speculative Etymology," *Yearbook of English Studies* 28 (1998): 250–75; Clorinda Donato, "Public and Private Negotiations of Gender in Eighteenth-Century England and Italy: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Case of Catterina Vizzani," *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29 (2006): 169–89; and Hal Gladfelder, "In Search of Lost Texts: Thomas Cannon's Ancient and Modern Pederasty Investigated and Exemplify'd," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 31.1 (2007): 22–38.

11. Ian Watt, "Serious Reflections on *The Rise of the Novel*," *Novel* 1 (1968): 205–18; the quotation is from 218.

12. Lucy Bannerman, "*Fanny Hill* is too racy for the sensitive class of 2017," *The Times* (14 August 2017).

13. "I didn't 'ban' Fanny Hill because of trigger warning—I don't teach it at all," Judith Hawley, *The Guardian* (15 August 2018).

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