



**Investigating the ambiguities and contradictions in the
representation of female same-sex desire in eighteenth-
century erotica, particularly
*Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure.***

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1. Introduction

In this bachelor paper, I will be dealing with the representation of female same-sex desire in eighteenth-century erotic fiction. First, I will take a look at the historical context of female sexuality in the eighteenth century. In this era, there was a strong anxiety about women and sexuality. To overcome this fear, it was argued that female pleasure simply did not exist. This line of reasoning resulted in the figure of “the passionless woman” (O’Driscoll 103). At the opposite side of the continuum, female desire was condemned by placing it within the context of prostitution. Any woman who did involve in sexual interaction was regarded as immoral and licentious, became associated with vice and promiscuous behaviour and was therefore condemned to the realm of whoredom.

Next, I will look at how lesbianism was treated in the prose fiction of the day. As Faderman has argued, lesbian desire was generally “treated more tolerantly than male homosexuality” (29). Still, lesbianism remained largely invisible. Above all, lesbian desire and sexuality were never described unambiguously. There are clear contradictory interpretations concerning the subject of lesbianism in the eighteenth century. On the one hand, the figure of the lesbian was the opposite of the acceptable passionless woman and incorporated all the dreadful characteristics in a woman. On the other hand, lesbian sex was dismissed as foolery and considered inadequate for losing one’s virginity, because a penis was considered an essential attribute in a sexual act. Attempting to reconcile these two visions proves to be problematic and it might not be possible to present a clear answer to this inconsistency. My intent is to investigate what the background is for this central discrepancy.

Finally, I will examine these aspects and apply my findings to one of the most important novels of the time *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (henceforth *MWP*) or *Fanny Hill*, as it is more commonly known, by John Cleland. This novel is often considered the first English prose pornography. Cleland’s novel, first published in 1748-1749, changed the literary landscape by acknowledging female sexual pleasure. Taking all this into account, I will investigate the contradictory finding that lesbian sexuality was at the same time very popular and yet treated with so much caution and anxiety.

2. Historical context

The eighteenth century was in many respects a transitional period, during which various significant changes took place. The ancient world view was being questioned due to mind-blowing findings in science and a number of life-changing inventions in the field of technology. This altered the world and changed the way people looked at it. With regard to sexuality, the eighteenth century was an age of extremes. Outward prudishness contrasted with the emergence and development of pornography in England during that period. In this regard, the influential insights of Michel Foucault are crucial and should not be overlooked. One of the key notions in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, the distinction between *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*¹ (67), is useful to interpret the differences between early modern and modern attitudes to sexuality. The main difference lies in the degree of secrecy and privacy. Foucault claims that sexuality in the early modern period was not a separate category, but rather part of a greater sphere of identity formation, embedded in a broader range of social domains. Sexuality in pre-Enlightenment England was thus not a private aspect of an individual's life as it is considered today. One indication of sexuality being embedded in the broader social context is the incorporation of political topics in erotic literature. Concerning homosexuality, Foucault claims that this category was

[C]haracterized less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practise of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul.
(43)

In addition, Foucault argues that a growing discourse around sexuality arose since the 17th century. Even though much of this discourse was repressive, the very "discursive fact" and the existence of more discussion in itself was a noteworthy transition (Foucault 11-12). What is more, towards the end of the eighteenth century a "new technology of sex" emerged (Foucault 116). The discourse on sexuality escaped the influence of spiritual and religious institutions and became a secular concern and a matter of the state through discourses like pedagogy, medicine and economics (Foucault 116).

2.1 Female sexuality in the eighteenth century

The eighteenth century witnessed the birth of an obsession with the penis, redefining sex as penetration (Hitchcock 79). Consequently, eighteenth-century erotic and pornographic literature was dominated by a penis-centrism. Fanny Hill's desire is strongly directed to the male genital organ and her preference reflects the prevailing opinion of the entire society, which had a strong phallogocentric orientation with regard to sexuality. Sex between women was not considered a genuine sexual act or,

as Fanny expresses it herself in the novel, it is “rather the shadow than the substance of any pleasure” (Cleland 71). The erotic fiction of the eighteenth century thus centred around the male genital organ, which is demonstrated by the enormous amount of extensive descriptions of the male genitalia. Donoghue has argued that representations of lesbian sexual desire were often “examples of male objectification of women” (184) and hence it is not unlikely that the focus on the male sexual organ is a way of increasing male self-esteem. This notable phallicism is a sign of the predominant “interest in male bodies, that is reflected in much erotica” (Harvey 65). Penises, erect, of an enormous size and ready for action were a commonplace in pornographic literature and feature numerous in Cleland’s novel. While watching the owner of the bawdy house having sex, Fanny remarks that: “her sturdy stallion had now unbuttoned, and produced naked, stiff and erect, that wonderful machine” (Cleland 62). After a while she takes a better look at the man and “his machine”:

I admired then, upon a fresh account, and with a nicer survey, the texture of that capital part of man: the flaming red head as it stood uncapped, the whiteness of the shaft and the shrub-growth of curling hair that embrowned the roots of it, the roundish bag that dangled down from it.
(Cleland 63)

It can be noticed that people (both writers and audience) were convinced of the need for a penis for any contact to be a genuine sexual act, or as Faderman has stated: “English writers seemed not to have been very aware of the possibility of sex without a penis” (27). Donoghue, however, extenuates this statement by elaborating on a number of texts “which are explicit about sexual possibilities between women” (183). Yet overall, English texts which engage in realistic, elaborate descriptions of sex between two women are low in number.

With regard to female sexuality in the eighteenth century, it is furthermore important to underline that the prevailing dichotomy between women as angels and women as whores should be nuanced or even altogether avoided for being too restricted (Jones 57). According to Jones these seemingly opposing descriptions are actually “ideologically inseparable” (57). However, this framework remains useful to talk about the conceptualization of femininity in eighteenth-century literature. Whereas Samuel Richardson, for example, makes ample use of this opposition and does his utmost to keep the extremes separate, Cleland mocks this duality by combining these supposedly irreconcilable positions in his protagonist Fanny Hill. In general, constructions of female eroticism from the sixteenth and seventeenth century onwards emphasized women’s weakness and the damage this generated. It can be argued that female sexuality was regarded as a threat toward the male dominance in the patriarchal society. As a result, the figure of the passionless woman was derived from the concept of sexual difference.

2.1.1 The passionless woman

The notion of the passionless woman² first occurred in medical discourse and very soon this construction had a significant effect on paramedical literature, later on influencing the literary field as well (O'Driscoll 103). This radical new interpretation of the sexual aspect of femininity originated in medical discourse and was based on a shift in the view of the female body. Central to the understanding of sexual difference is the work of Thomas Laqueur. He suggests that in the eighteenth century a transformation took place from a one-sex to a two-sex model of the body, under influence of the political discourse (Harvey 78). Up until the eighteenth century, the conceptualization of human anatomy perceived the female body as identical to the male body, albeit inferior (O'Driscoll 105). The following extract demonstrates how this notion should be understood, underlining that the equivalence between the male and female body was most apparent in the genitals:

Medical language showed that the male and female organs were perceived as the same, but positioned differently: thus ovaries were testicles placed internally, the vagina was an inverted penis, the labia were the foreskin, and the uterus the scrotum.
(O'Driscoll 105)

This idea changed radically in the early eighteenth century with the introduction of the two-sex body. In this view of the body, sex for the first time became “a radical differentiator between two distinct types of human beings” (O'Driscoll 106). Anatomical differences were first recognized and stressed. Thus, men and women were considered anatomically opposites. The perception that the male and female bodies were essentially different allowed to make a distinction in sexual preferences and characteristics as well (O'Driscoll 107). As O'Driscoll has stated, this “new model of womanhood” experienced “little or no erotic desire” (103). Moreover, it was argued that female beings were “by nature chaste and domestic” (Harvey 5). In addition, women's sexuality had always been connected to procreation. Before, it had always been thought that “both men and women needed to reach an orgasm in order to conceive” (Hitchcock 78). New theories of procreation, however, argued that women “did not ejaculate at orgasm, and that the active element was male sperm” (Hitchcock 78). The discovery that the female orgasm was not a necessary condition for conception resulted in the idea that the role of women was passive and less important to reproduction than men's involvement. Moreover, women's sexual pleasure was considered dispensable (Harvey 82). Furthermore, conduct literature concerned with femininity considered passive and asexual women virtuous (Jones 57). Very soon, however, insights of the scientific and medical field proved that the theory of the female natural passionlessness was incorrect, thus proving this widespread belief to be chiefly a social construct to justify the patriarchal political theory. The idea that women could not experience and certainly could not aspire to sexual pleasure was held on to despite the lack of anatomical proof, even though at first this theory was derived from the scientific discourse. As O'Driscoll points out, “this suggests that

female passionlessness was a concept that served an important social function in the new ordering of eighteenth-century gender roles” (107). Finally, the structural similarity of the genital organs was used to legitimize penetrative, vaginal sex and was thus employed to promote heterosexual desire (Harvey 91-99). In this respect, following Foucault’s train of thought that “homosexuality as a category of identity” only emerged after “the rise of a modern disciplinary apparatus”, Laqueur has argued that the two-sex model, “the creation of men and women as opposites”, was the sine qua non for the creation of the lesbian and homosexual identity (Traub *Renaissance of Lesbianism* 192).

Laqueur’s theory, if widespread, has nevertheless provoked some criticism. Much of the commentary focuses on the linear chronology Laqueur employs. Harvey has suggested that “applying older narratives of change to new areas” is problematic. The changes are not as clear-cut as Laqueur presents them. In fact, they are slow and long-term shifts, combined with changes in language. Harvey shows that the eighteenth-century conception of the body and sexual difference “combined the old and the new” and thus the displacement Laqueur presents did not occur suddenly or conclusively at a given moment in time (7). Secondly, applying a specific framework to an entirely different field is not a sound, faultless procedure. Whereas Laqueur defends the notion of female desexualisation, Donoghue and Harvey claim that women were not passionless, ignorant or naïve with regard to sexuality and that they did have access to erotica (Donoghue 14-15) (Harvey 76). Finally, O’Driscoll remarks that Laqueur’s work is “gender blind” (127), because his narrative views “the female body *only in relation to the male*” (Traub *Renaissance of Lesbianism* 192).

In any case, the sexual difference, which originated in medical discourse and was strongly propagated by the political discourse, heavily influenced the way the body was dealt with in erotic literature and conduct literature. As it is expressed in this extract, taken from Daniel Defoe’s pamphlet *Some Considerations upon Street-Walkers with A Proposal for lessening the present Number of them*, female sexuality was at one point only tolerated if it remained restricted to reproduction and motherhood:

The great Use of Women in a Community is to supply it with Members that are serviceable and keep up Succession. [...] It will readily be allowed, that a Street-walking Whore can never answer either of these Ends [...]. How very useless then is such a Subject?
(Jones 69)

Without a trace of the irony one would find in the work of for example Jonathan Swift, Defoe expresses here the idea that a woman’s value is entirely economic. For a woman to be useful both in marriage and to society, she has to “produce serviceable offspring” (Mudge *Whore’s Story* 53).

It is not unlikely that this entire argumentation resulted from men’s fear of sexually active women. Possibly, this anxiety grew even more when the increasing sexuality of women involved men’s roles

losing importance and women gaining more independence. This might also explain the enormous amount of anti-masturbation tracts. Arguably, one way of overcoming this paranoid fear might have been by ignoring and denying the mere existence of such a thing as female sexual desire, resulting in the invention of the passionless woman.

2.1.2 Women of pleasure: prostitution in the eighteenth century

Another way of condemning female sexuality, next to ignoring its existence, was to place it within the context of prostitution. *Fanny Hill* is an excellent example of a fictional account of a prostitute's experiences, as there were many at the time (Jones 60). Only by letting a prostitute recount her life story did it become possible to describe a female protagonist who revels in sexual pleasure. In erotica in general and in pornography specifically, prostitution was considered a necessary element (Peakman 8).

In the eighteenth century, the prostitute became the representative of everything attractive and dangerous. It can be argued that the figure of the prostitute incarnated the contradictory attitudes towards female sexuality in general, since both feelings of desire and fear were associated with this profession (Mudge *Whore's Story* xiii). Prostitutes were distrusted for many reasons. A first ground for the negative attitude was because prostitutes traded in deception. Instead of respecting true love and romance, they gained money out of deceit. In this perspective, men were considered the innocent victims of these cunning women. Secondly, their actions follow from greed, since their primary motivation is financial gain. Finally, as a rule, the relation between men and women was characterized by inequality, however, when engaging in a business transaction, a partial and temporary equality is established (Mudge *Whore's Story* 49-50). This way, the fear of women usurping authority and power displaced the fear for sexually active women. Prostitutes succeeded in gaining a certain degree of independency and were self-supporting. Being self-reliant, autonomous and having responsibility over one's own fortune were distinguishing features of the male role in eighteenth-century society. Daniel Defoe held strong views regarding prostitution and was not afraid to ventilate his opinion. As mentioned above, since a woman's value in society depended on her procreative ability and since prostitutes are "incapable of doing that Good", they are useless to society and "irrecoverably lost to their country" (Mudge *Whore's Story* 53). In literary fiction, however, prostitutes served various purposes and prostitution was a returning theme in various literary genres in the eighteenth century. Prostitutes featured in many satires and didactic pamphlets. In addition, there were treatises with warnings for the "ruses of whores", guides of London with "sections with advice on ladies of pleasure", reports about nightlife in the city, erotic catalogues of whores and pamphlets defending

prostitutes (Wagner *Eros Revived* 140-42). The whores populating Cleland's novel are far from depicted as the dregs of society and the stories they tell do not revolve around misery and poverty, but arguably serve only one purpose: provoking titillation, without explicitly moralizing (Mudge *Whore's Story* 225). The girls Fanny meets in the 'Academy', the establishment of Mrs Cole, all have a strong and varied sexual appetite and they each recount the story of their defloration with enthusiasm.

2.2 Lesbianism in the eighteenth century

The new conceptualization of the physical body, as described in section 2.1.1 above, had implications for the interpretation of sexual intercourse. In addition, the concept of the passionless woman, which resolved the anxiety about women's sexuality by denying that women had such a capacity, drove female sexual pleasure out of heterosexuality. It became a common argumentation that if women had any pleasure at all, it could be only self-pleasure and self-pleasure in its turn was associated with women finding pleasure with each other (O'Driscoll 104). This different conception of women's sexuality led in turn to a new "fear about lesbianism" (O'Driscoll 104). With a peculiar line of reasoning, it was argued that a lack of passion was related to masturbation and lesbianism. Since women were considered passionless, they were thought to be incapable of sexual pleasure. The incapability of sexual pleasure was then displaced by masturbation, because if women had any sexual pleasure, it was sure to be self-pleasure (O'Driscoll 104). Obviously, this argumentation is paradoxical, since women cannot at the same time be asexual and passionless *and* keen to masturbate (O'Driscoll 111). However, ignoring this fallacy, a third step elaborated this train of thought, arguing that masturbation could also be mutual masturbation among two women. This idea led to the assumption that women who pursued sexual pleasure would seek satisfaction with each other (O'Driscoll 104).

As will become clear, ever since the insights of Freud, masturbation was inextricably bound up with lesbian sexuality. Therefore, it is useful to briefly reflect on the widespread fear that surrounded the practise of masturbation. Around the beginning of the eighteenth century, masturbation became viewed as a physical problem instead of the moral problem it used to be before (O'Driscoll 108). In this respect, two very important publications cannot be overlooked. The first is *Onania*, an anonymous pamphlet that was published around 1708 with the telling subtitle: "The Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, and all its Frightful Consequences, in Both Sexes, Considered [...]". In 1758, a second, equally important work was published that dealt with this topic: Samuel Tissot's *An Essay on Onanism*. This work, as the subtitle makes clear, is a "[t]reatise upon the Disorders Produced by masturbation [...]". Both works argue that masturbation could be the cause of mental as well as physical illnesses (O'Driscoll 108). In addition, a discussion on mutual masturbation between two women is never far away in the discourse on masturbation of these two authors. Both works mention an enlarged clitoris

as one of the possible dangerous consequences of masturbation and this, in turn, can, according to Tissot, lead to attraction between women and, eventually, clitoral penetration (O'Driscoll 109-10). O'Driscoll points out that, for Tissot especially, the discussion on masturbation "leads inevitably to the problem of clitoral rubbing and penetration between women" (109). By the eighteenth century, Traub has argued, clitoral hypertrophy as a result of masturbation or even the mere mention of the clitoris prompts the figure of the lesbian ("Psychomorphology" 82-83). However, it should not be overlooked that this hypertrophy of the clitoris still invokes "a phallogocentric model of sexual relations" (Wahl 28).

In conclusion, it was argued that women had no passionate sexuality. If, however, they did seek pleasure it was through masturbation, which was in turn directly associated with lesbianism. This widely accepted tripartite argumentation resulted in a split with on the one hand the chaste passionless woman and on the other hand the lesbian to whom all terrifying characteristics with regard to female sexuality were ascribed. O'Driscoll summarizes it as follows: "any female passion must be explained as an attempt to become masculine, thus the figure of the 'lesbian' was created as the necessary opposite of the passionless woman" (111-12). The conception that lesbian sexual interaction incorporated all the promiscuous characteristics that should be avoided by respectable women is clearly incompatible with the prevailing notion of phallicism with regard to eighteenth-century sexuality (see 2.1). If lesbian sex was harmless because of the lack of a penis involved, one has to wonder where the need for the frantic anxiety toward female same-sex desire came from. This seemingly clear-cut distinction between the passionless woman and the licentious lesbian should, however, be nuanced. Homosexual women were not always rejected. Moreover, only if women adopted features of the opposite sex did they become a threat to the patriarchal society, as will become clear in the following section. Various scholars have pointed out that female same-sex desire was only reprehensible if it included usurping male prerogatives like independence, assertiveness and the ability to have penetrative sex (Traub *Renaissance of Lesbianism* 181) (Faderman 52).

2.2.1 Representations of lesbianism in eighteenth-century erotica

The purpose of this section is to briefly describe the different representations of female same-sex desire in literature. Even though lesbianism is often considered invisible, there have been several representations of lesbian desire in various discourses, among which poetic, medical, libertine and religious. I will focus on the treatment of this theme in erotica. As Peakman points out, depictions of sex between women became more and more popular in pornographic writing from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. More importantly, female homosexuality was usually not condemned, but rather presented positively and linked to women who also had sex with men (Peakman 8).

Earlier representations of female same-sex desire displaced this phenomenon to exotic and faraway locations, such as the Far East or Africa (Andreadis 6). It was not until the eighteenth century that lesbian sexuality was set in England. *MWP* brought female same-sex sexuality “home”, although still making sure it was not presented as unproblematic or acceptable. Lesbian sex in *MWP* is hedged through the setting, since the action takes place in a brothel, a far from respectable site.

The true “recognizable ‘Sapphic’ subject”, then, emerged in the eighteenth century. However, this figure was preceded by two other “modes of embodiment” in the sixteenth and seventeenth century: the tribade and the romantic friend (Traub *Renaissance of Lesbianism* 231). It is useful to briefly present these two figures, the precursors of the lesbian in English literature, as they are necessary for an understanding of the eighteenth-century lesbian. The figure of the tribade, then interpreted as a female hermaphrodite, emerged after the rediscovery of the clitoris in 1559 (O’Driscoll 112). As O’Driscoll puts it:

[W]hile there were accounts and evidence of women having erotic relations with other women throughout history, their sexual practices were not associated with anything particular about their bodies until the clitoris became a site of medical anxiety.
(112)

The eighteenth-century problem of clitoral rubbing and penetration between women (see 4.2) is not as revolutionary as one might think. In fact, this line of reasoning is a continuation and extension of the discourse about the seventeenth-century figure of the tribade. This marginalized figure was generally associated with anatomical monstrosity. It was believed that she had an enlarged clitoris and, thus, the frightening possibility of penetrative sex came into play.

As long as women acceded to male precedence and did not transgress by assuming male prerogatives [...], there seems not to have been much reason to explore or to name what women might do with one another’s bodies.
(Andreadis 15)

Exactly in this usurpation of male characteristics lies the threat for patriarchal society. Representations of this figure can be found in John Donne’s *Sapho to Philaenis* and Aphra Behn’s *To the Fair Clarinda* (Wahl 53).

In contrast to the feared tribade, the romantic friend was considered chaste and innocent (Traub *Renaissance of Lesbianism* 231). It is a “less transgressive form of female intimacy” (Wahl 8). According to Faderman, “romantic friends wanted to share their lives, to confide in and trust and depend upon each other” (142). Furthermore, she suggests that eighteenth-century intimate friends “disregarded the ‘sexual implications’ of their attachments” (Faderman 142). In contrast, other

scholars beg to differ. Moore, for example, argues that Faderman this way “unnecessarily limits” her analysis (Moore 9-10). This type of relationship is described in Sarah Scott’s *A Description of Millenium Hall*, and in Helen Williams’s novel *Anecdotes of a Convent* (Faderman 103).

By the end of the seventeenth century, the figure of the close friend began to absorb characteristics of the tribade. This is where Traub locates the beginning of “the historical perversion of lesbian desire” (*Renaissance of Lesbianism* 231). Moreover, the “more explicit articulation of feminine homoeroticism” was the starting point for the “demonization of a greater range of female bonds” (Traub *Renaissance of Lesbianism* 231). According to Traub, the fact that these two figures became more and more intertwined during the eighteenth century “can be understood as one measure of the growing threat of the *unnatural* within the seemingly natural” (*Renaissance of Lesbianism* 323).

In *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, lesbianism is described as a peculiar appetite. Fanny says about Phoebe that she has “one of those arbitrary tastes for which there is no accounting” (Cleland 49). Immediately afterwards, this statement is extenuated by adding that “she did not hate men”, because that would ascribe too much weight to this foolish and insignificant desire (Cleland 49). Although it is through lesbian sex that Fanny discovers erotic pleasure, she soon ascertains that this “foolery from woman to woman” (Cleland 71) is not satisfying and that it fails to provide real pleasure. Moreover, lesbian sex serves only as a precursor to heterosexual sex, generating a desire that can only be fulfilled by having penetrative sex with a man. After having sex with Phoebe she craves for that missing substance, thus underlining that lesbian sex could not satisfy her: “I now pined for more solid food, and promised tacitly to myself that I would not be put off much longer with this foolery from woman to woman” (Cleland 71). Phoebe seems to agree with Fanny on this, because during the intercourse, she exclaims: “What a happy man will be he that first makes a woman of you! – Oh! That I were a man for your sake-!” (Cleland 49). The phallocentric orientation implies that sex between two women could not result in the loss of their virginity, because of the absence of a penis. Despite just having had sex, Phoebe says she could not “make Fanny a woman”. As Faderman concludes, “[t]hus, Cleland suggests that what women can do neither satisfies them nor robs them of the precious sign of their virginity” (Faderman 28).

2.3 Eighteenth-century erotica

When discussing eighteenth-century erotica, the material has to be clearly defined. Since historians and literary scholars disagree on the definition of the different subdivisions of lewd literature, this proves not an unproblematic task. Especially the distinction between erotic and pornographic writing turns out to be rather difficult. It is important to bear in mind that the eighteenth-century producers and

consumers of literature did not utilize any of the categories we deal with today and consequently, applying present-day terminology to the corpus of that age is inevitably anachronistic. For clarity's sake, however, the most important terms used in this paper will be defined in the subsequent section. First of all, the term erotica, in accordance to Peakman and Wagner, will be used as a broad category of literature, an overarching term for all books on sexual matters (Peakman 7) (Wagner *Eros Revived* 5). Most scholars agree that the distinguishing criterion between the different subgenres is the level of explicitness. Therefore, when dealing with this material it is recommended to take into account both authorial intention and formal characteristics. Many scholars thus combine content and intent in their definition. Peakman considers erotic material as being "descriptive of amatory or sexual desire made through insinuation" and which serves to "amuse, rather than to sexually stimulate" (7). Pornography, in contrast, is the bulk of material "that contains graphic description of sexual organs and/or action written with the prime intention of sexually exciting the reader" (Peakman 6). Lynn Hunt claims that pornography is "the explicit depiction of sexual organs and sexual practises with the aim of arousing sexual feelings" (Harvey 20). According to Harvey, erotic literature is characterized by suggestion, allusive terminology and the use of extended metaphors, whereas pornography, in contrast, "abandoned the figurative for the literal" (Harvey 12-28). Wagner's definition of pornography is "the written or visual representation in a realistic form of any genital or sexual behaviour with a deliberate violation of existing and widely accepted moral and social taboos" (Wagner *Eros Revived* 7). Taking into account the different interpretations of these scholars, in this paper the term pornography will be used to denote literature that portrays sexual intercourse and the body realistically and explicitly, with the primary aim of arousing sexual excitement in the reader. This stands in clear contrast to erotic writing, which is characterized by tentative language, implication and innuendo and draws on extended metaphors of botany and geography (Harvey 22). Lastly, this definition avoids drawing in legal implications of this literature, because this aspect has fluctuated over time, according to the changing conditions and reception.

Using the term pornography to refer to eighteenth-century material is, as mentioned above, anachronistic, not only because this distinct classification did not exist at the time, but especially because the word is a nineteenth-century neologism, originally used to denote something different than what we use it for today. The meaning of the word has shifted because, self-evidently but often overlooked, "the definition changes as the cultural climate changes" (Mudge *Whore's Story* 25). Mudge points out that, before 1750, there was no such thing as "a generic category" of pornography (*Whore's Story* 28) and Peakman states that the development of pornographic work of English provenance only took off from the 1770s onwards (6). Both authors, however, underline the peculiar position of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, being the only exception, as it was already published in 1748/1749. Wagner, on the contrary, argues that, taking into account that the eighteenth-century reader would not have distinguished between French and English literature, the pornographic novel was

already a completely established genre before the publication of *MWP* (*Eros Revived* 231). Even though John Cleland uses elusive language sporadically (Harvey 24), he engages in explicit, graphic and extensive descriptions of sexual activities and sexual organs, therefore, it can be argued that *MWP* is a pornographic novel *avant la lettre*.

As many scholars following Michel Foucault, among which Harvey, Peakman and Jones, have argued, erotic literature cannot be seen separate from the contemporary context. The erotic and pornographic literary corpus is influenced by the historical context and, simultaneously, the surrounding culture is reflected in literature. A clear connection with various contemporary developments and attitudes in the political, social, scientific and cultural field can be established (Harvey 3) (Peakman 2-4) (Jones 57). The notion that eighteenth century erotica was marginalized is a prevailing conception, but proves to be a misapprehension. English erotic and pornographic fiction did not stand apart in the literary or the cultural field. On the contrary, because these genres were to a large extent intertwined with eighteenth-century culture, this literature can learn us a great deal about English society and culture between 1700 and 1800 (Harvey 4). The fact that erotica was not isolated in eighteenth-century society and culture is clearly demonstrated in Thomas Laqueur's discussion of sexual difference. In his book *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1990), Laqueur argues that the chief motive behind the changing interpretation of bodies was political. The view on the human body had to be redefined to legitimize the popular political discourse (Harvey 6). Men and women had to be defined as naturally distinct and unequal to endorse the discourse of "natural rights", which ascribed power to the male population and dismissed women as being inherently incapable of dealing with power and responsibility (Laqueur 194-207). In addition, Foucault has pointed out that the increase of libertine literature was provoked by socio-economical circumstances. He considers the "confessional technique", which is also employed in *Fanny Hill*, closely related to devotional literature, an outcome of the relation between sexual and religious expression (Wagner *Eros Revived* 47).

Finally, evidently, we can only speculate about the true author's intention of eighteenth-century writings, but it is still useful to briefly consider the reading audience of this literature. In the past, many historians have argued that women did not have access to or were not able to read erotica. Today, the assumption that women did not read bawdy material should be dismissed. Even though this explicit literature was primarily aimed at men, it is not unthinkable that it was read by women as well (Donoghue 14). Not unimportantly, the literary classics of this era, such as Richardson's *Pamela* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* included bawdy scenes, sometimes mentioning lesbian desire (Donoghue 14-15). As Donoghue points out, even though there are no clear figures on women's literacy during the eighteenth century, historians on the whole agree that the percentage must have been much lower than the rate for men's literacy (13). However, even though many women were unable to sign their names (the test upon which the percentage of literacy was based), a great part of them could still have

had reading skills, a phenomenon referred to as “passive readers” (Donoghue 13). Moreover, many women, even when completely illiterate, could still come into contact with various genres of literature as listeners (Donoghue 13). Other scholars have also paid attention to this common misapprehension that women were kept in the dark regarding libertine literature. Even though, as Harvey argues, erotica did not “cater to women’s sexual curiosity, desire, or pleasure”, it is possible that some women had “access to material that discussed sex” (76). In addition, Peakman affirms that it was mostly “élite gentlemen” who read imported, usually French, pornography, but she emphasizes the importance of taking into account “a more divergent readership for English-language erotic material” (27-28). Considering women did have access, albeit limited, to various genres of erotica, whether in print or through oral culture, the question could be raised whether the writers of this literature were aware of their partly female reading audience and to what extent they kept this in mind while writing. One could propose that the implicit moral message in many of these writings suggests a concealed echo of the popular conduct literature for women. This is by far not the case for all erotica, but it is worth considering with regard to *MWP*.

3. Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure or Fanny Hill

3.1 Introduction

Fairly little is known about the author and the writing history of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. The author, John Cleland, was born in England in 1710. After attending Westminster School, he joined the East India Company and worked his way up until he was secretary of the Bombay Council. His career ended abruptly when he returned to England in 1740 with little or no financial gain. In 1748, Cleland was arrested for a large debt and imprisoned for over a year. It has often been said that it was during his stay in Fleet Prison that he wrote and published his most important novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. The novel was published in two instalments, in November 1748 and February 1749. Wagner asserts that some evidence exists of a manuscript that was already in existence in the 1730s. In fact, Cleland probably already had a draft of the novel entitled *Fanny Hill*, which he only revised and had published while imprisoned (Wagner "Introduction" 11). Cleland later claimed, in a conversation with James Boswell, to have written most of the novel in his early twenties. He also stated that he intended to show a colleague at the East India Company “that it was possible to write about a prostitute without using vulgar language” (Sabor). As Sabor remarks, he was indeed successful in this, since *MWP* can be considered a “stylistic *tour de force*”, since Cleland makes use of a variety of metaphors “for parts of the body and for sexual acts” (Sabor). Thereafter, Cleland attempted writing other titillating publications and tried being a journalist and a researcher in medical science, all unsuccessful efforts (Wagner "Introduction" 11). The reception of the novel was far from welcoming and it did not take long before action was taken against the novel. The government issued a warrant

for the arrest of the author, printer and publisher of *MWP* on 8 November 1749 and Cleland was subsequently arrested on 10 November 1749. In 1750 a bowdlerized and abridged version of the novel appeared (Wagner "Introduction" 13). Officially, *Fanny Hill* remained suppressed in an unexpurgated form until 1970 in the United Kingdom. Today, however, the novel is considered to have contributed to "making legible the bourgeois remapping of certain categories constitutive of 'woman,' and then exposing that remapping as ludicrous" (Gautier x).

3.2 Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure, an eclectic-pornographic novel

Taking into account the insights of different scholars with regard to defining the different subdivisions or erotica, it can be concluded that Cleland's *Fanny Hill* belongs to the genre of pornography (see 2.3). However, as Wagner has pointed out, Cleland was able to draw on a long tradition of erotic fiction and even the eighteenth-century popular novel was quite openly preoccupied with sex (*Eros Revived* 210-11; 237). Cleland's novel was thus not pioneering with regard to the topic, but rather in the way it was dealt with. What makes this novel nevertheless innovative is the depiction of a natural and physical sexuality and Cleland's attempt to make this acceptable to the middle-class spirit. Wagner considers it "revolutionary" in its preaching the enjoyment of sex and sexuality ("Introduction" 17).

MWP belongs to different genres and this work incorporates characteristics of various literary genres. First and foremost this book belongs to the genre of the novel and might even be called a romance novel. Additionally, it can be considered a utopian picaresque novel, describing an eroticized rags-to-riches story of a young girl who is forced to live in a brothel, discovers the pleasures of sexuality, finds true love and ends up in a conventional bourgeois marriage. In that sense, it has been argued by Mudge that it shows similarities with the bildungsroman, focusing on the development (psychological, moral and sexual) of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. In *MWP* an evolution is described from innocence to experience, over perversion to finally a normal middle-class marriage (*Whore's Story* 200). In addition, various scholars have argued that *MWP* belongs to the genre of the whore biography. This specific subgenre of biographical literature can be used for different means. On the one hand, it can serve to present a clear-cut morality, condemning prostitution. On the other hand, it can be used to mock these finger-wagging moralizations and in that case it belongs to the genre of the anti-*Pamela* novel (similar to Fielding's *Shamela*). Since Fanny ends up virtuous and is rewarded, without regretting her licentious actions or genuinely repenting, it can be argued that *MWP* is an example of an anti-*Pamela* novel. As suggested by Mudge, whereas most moralizing and biographical novels depict an evolution from chaste innocence over sexual experience to repent and virtue, Cleland turns this tradition around. First he describes natural and human desires, focusing on the "material reality of the body" and then moves to more emotional and romantic facets, finishing on an almost moralistic and philosophical tone (Mudge *Whore's Story* 200). And, as pointed out by Wagner,

Cleland also combines the sensual and the sentimental in a pornographic whore biography (*Eros Revived* 220). A final characteristic that should not be overlooked is the “secularised confession[al]” aspect of this epistolary novel (Wagner *Eros Revived* 217). Fanny relates the account of her licentious life, describing numerous erotic episodes. This secularised confession, in which Fanny tells the “[t]ruth! stark naked truth” (Cleland 39), parodies the Christian tradition. In this respect, Wagner indicates the strong link “between sexual and religious expression” (*Eros Revived* 47). Pornographic fiction often appeared in the form of a confession and the whore biography is an excellent example of this practise. A final comment is concerned with the scenes of voyeurism that are numerous present in *MWP*. According to Paul Englisch, voyeurism is a commonplace in libertine literature and is especially characteristic of the pornographic novel (Englisch 631). This theme also features repeatedly in *Venus in the Cloister or The Nun in her Smock*. In *MWP* sexual arousal is derived from witnessing sexual interactions, by successively spying on Mrs Brown and her ‘sturdy stallion’ (Cleland 61-64), Polly and a young Genoese man (Cleland 66-71) and a homosexual couple (Cleland 193-96). The scenes where Fanny is a voyeur can be considered meta-narrative comments on the reader’s standpoint. The realistic narrative in its turn provokes titillation and sexual stimulation in the reader, who becomes a secondary voyeur. The reader is an intrusive voyeur during the entire novel, since we read Fanny’s confessional letters, directed to an unknown “madam” (Wagner *Eros Revived* 17).

3.3 Fanny Hill as a woman of *pleasure*

With regard to that part of the novel’s title that refers to pleasure, one could question whose pleasure is meant. Prostitution is usually thought of as women serving the needs of (male) customers. Weed, for example, argues that *MWP* concentrates almost exclusively on “men’s uses and misuses of pleasure, and on the ways that pleasure affects the male body” (11). I agree that Cleland’s novel features countless descriptions of male genitalia, men’s reactions to excitement and their behaviour in during sexual intercourse, I question, however, his conclusion that this novel only has attention for the male position. As mentioned above, Wagner considers the open enjoyment of sex and sexuality in the novel progressive (“Introduction” 17). Perhaps the true revolutionary character of the novel lies in the description of female sexual pleasure. At different moments in the novel female sexual pleasure is described as necessary and legitimate. The girls in the bawdy house all engage with great pleasure in different sexual encounters.

Fanny Hill undergoes a development of increasing delight in sex. In escalating episodes, a changing motivation for sex can be identified (Mudge *Anthology* xxiv). From her sexual initiation by Phoebe, Fanny evolves to sex for love, sex for money and finally sex for her own pleasure. There seem to be various reasons for Fanny to engage in sexual intercourse: financial reasons, revenge, boredom and finally, a hunger for physical pleasure and satisfaction. After discovering Mr H-’s affair with her maid,

Fanny decides to seduce the tenant's son, seeking revenge and sexual satisfaction. When one day the young man delivers a letter to her chamber, Fanny "immediately [...] drew him towards [her]" (Cleland 108). The young man "could not speak, but then his looks, his emotion, sufficiently satisfied [her]". Fanny is assured she "had no disappointment to fear" (Cleland 109). Various utterances in this scene make clear that Fanny desperately wants to be pleased by this youth. When he, due to his inexperience, cannot find the "tender opening", Fanny,

burning with impatience from its irritating touches [...] guided gently with [her] hand this furious fescue to where [her] young novice was now to be taught his first lesson of pleasure.
(Cleland 110)

Moreover, when she experiences a combination of pain and pleasure due to the size of his member, Fanny still claims she could not bear his withdrawing either (Cleland 110). Fanny is clearly determined to persevere until she is satisfied.

I was myself far from being pleased [...] and I soon replaced myself in a posture to receive, at all risks, the renewed invasion. Pained, however, as I was, with his efforts of gaining a complete admission [...] I took care not to complain.
(Cleland 111)

The undertaking described in this scene shows that Fanny not only has sex for money but because she wants to satisfy her own needs and desires.

3.4 Lesbian sexuality in MWP: Fanny and Phoebe

Fanny Hill engages in numerous sexual practises with various men and women, but the scene that is of interest in this section is the sexual encounter between Fanny and Phoebe Ayres. This passage is the only scene in which Fanny has a one-on-one sexual encounter with another woman. During her first night at the bawdy house of Mrs Brown, Fanny is initiated into the world of sexual pleasure by Phoebe, another girl who lives at the brothel. When the girls go to their room, Phoebe encourages Fanny to get undressed. Fanny hurries to bed and covers herself with the sheets, but Phoebe, who is less innocent and untaught, starts kissing and caressing her. From the very beginning, it is clear that no violence is involved and that Fanny is not entirely reluctant, since she claims that Phoebe's touches "warmed and surprised [her]" (Cleland 48), rather than shocking or frightening her. However, afterwards, Fanny will disregard sex between two women completely. I argue that Cleland's vague and inconsistent description of female same-sex sexuality reflects the ambiguous stance of the eighteenth-century society towards this phenomenon.

Even though Cleland depicts sexual intercourse between women, it can be derived from the development of the plot, the remarks and the attitudes that are expressed that *MWP* insists on the

predominance of heterosexual sexuality. As argued by Weed, sexual interaction in *MWP* is being restrained to vaginal intercourse between a man and a woman (11). However, I agree with Nussbaum that the novel is progressive and innovative by portraying this “sexual ambiguity” (105). The novel describes a number of conflicting utterances, actions and feelings with regard to the intercourse between the two women and the essence of Phoebe’s sexuality.

First of all, Fanny describes Phoebe as her “kind tutoress” (Cleland 86). From the beginning, Phoebe is described as a libertine woman, revelling in all kinds of licentious acts, as a girl who “was never out of her way when any occasion of lewdness presented itself” (Cleland 48). However, Fanny gladly engages in sexual interaction with her, portrays her very positively and seems to have only lovely recollections of her. Despite the positive evaluation of Phoebe and the sex they had, Fanny never refers to Phoebe as her lover and what has happened between them is never defined as the result of love or affection.

Secondly, Fanny is convinced that she has nothing to fear. Exactly because Phoebe is undoubtedly a woman, she cannot harm Fanny’s dignity: “[K]nowing no ill, I feared none especially from one who had prevented all doubt of her womanhood by conducting my hands to a pair of breasts [...] that full sufficiently distinguished her sex” (Cleland 48). However, shortly after the act, Fanny corrects her earlier judgement, and she now considers “the acquaintance and communication with the bad of our own sex as fatal to innocence as all the seductions of the other” (Cleland 50). It is possible that through the adjusted opinion of Fanny, Cleland wanted to point out the correct position, the opinion that the average eighteenth-century man and woman should adopt.

In addition, Fanny’s general uncertainty and confusion with regard to Phoebe reflects the reader’s doubt and ignorance. Fanny states that she is unsure about “[w]hat pleasure [Phoebe] had found” (Cleland 50) and for the reader as well, it remains obscure what Phoebe’s intentions are. On the one hand it appears to be her task to initiate young girls, who are new in the bawdy house, into the world of sexual pleasure. Even though Phoebe finds pleasure in “this art of breaking young girls” (Cleland 49), this initiation is merely an assignment, without any genuine affection involved. On the other hand, Phoebe’s ceaseless praising of Fanny seems sincere: “I must devour with my eyes this springing bosom [...] What firm, smooth, white flesh is here - How delicately shaped” (Cleland 50). It can be argued that Phoebe is genuinely interested in Fanny, because apart from sexually stimulating her, she wants to be able to look at her as well. “No! (says Phoebe) you must not, my sweet girl, think to hide all these treasures from me, my sight must be feasted as well as my touch [...] I have not seen enough” (Cleland 50). Of course, there are a number of possible reasons for her to praise the young Fanny. Undoubtedly, Phoebe’s primary aim is to put Fanny at ease in a sexual situation and help Fanny overcome her reluctance towards sexuality in general. Moreover, Phoebe wants to acquaint her with

the different aspects of sex, because Fanny soon will have to work in the brothel as well. Finally, it is not unthinkable that Phoebe wants to be sexually satisfied as well, after she has pleased Fanny.

Furthermore, lesbian sexuality is set within the context of prostitution and the underlying message might be that this is the only situation where this deviant sexuality is acceptable. Fanny and Phoebe meet at and have sex in a brothel, a location clearly placed outside the respectable domain and atmosphere of society and marriage.

Finally, Cleland incorporates many of the clichés and prejudices concerning lesbianism that were prevailing in the eighteenth century. Lesbian sex was more often than not associated with mutual masturbation among women. In *MWP* as well, Fanny and Phoebe masturbate together while spying on Polly having sex with an Italian client in the room next door. At a certain moment, Fanny exclaims: “For me, I could bear to see no more: I was so overcome, so inflamed at this [...] that, mad with intolerable desire, I hugged, I clasped Phoebe” (Cleland 71). Thus, Cleland combines two clichéd themes with regard female sexuality, prostitution and lesbianism: voyeurism and masturbation.

In conclusion, the discussion of lesbian sex in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* is not straightforward or unambiguous. It seems that for every description or action that affirmed and accepted female same-sex sexuality, there had to be at least one to deny and condemn sex between two women. Cleland’s protagonist Fanny Hill seems unsure and confused about the intimacies she engages in. Weed has suggested that Phoebe is the novel’s “lone female sexual dissident” (11). Furthermore, Phoebe’s enjoyment of lesbian sexuality clearly confuses Fanny. The conflicting attitudes expressed in the novel deceive the reader as to what is the true intention behind Phoebe’s actions or the correct appreciation of female same-sex sexuality. Like nearly all eighteenth-century libertine literature, *MWP* strongly focuses on the male genitalia and penetrative sex. However, the significance of the fact that Fanny’s first sexual experience was with a woman should not be overlooked, because Phoebe introduces her to a world of sexual pleasure, a world that Fanny from then on will explore and take to the limit throughout the novel. It can be argued that the ambiguity between fascination and caution towards the sexual activities between Fanny and Phoebe reflects the general uncertainty and the ambiguous and conflicting attitude of eighteenth-century society towards female same-sex sexuality in general.

3.5 A tail-piece of morality: morality or irony?

Much debate exists about whether *MWP* should be specified as a moral or an ironic novel. In fact, there are arguments for both interpretations. A first argument to support the thesis that there is a moral undertone present in *MWP* is the repeated statement that the only satisfying sex exists between lovers.

From their first encounter, Fanny claims she has fallen in love with Charles. Even though she engages in various sexual activities with numerous men throughout the novel, at the core she remains faithful because she has always loved him and sincere love is not shown through sexual intercourse. Fanny's sexual exploits never compromise her morality and the chance of redemption is maintained, regardless of her libertine behaviour. Thus, prostitution seems to be normalized. Only her reunion with Charles proves to be truly satisfying, because only sex between lovers can result in profound sexual pleasure. The novel is a celebration of the reality of sexual passion and Fanny never explicitly repents. However, from her fallen state, she becomes a virtuous, married, middle-class woman. Virtue is reinterpreted as "a state of the heart", regardless of licentious conduct (Mudge *Whore's Story* 203-29).

Secondly, Fanny claims that her only true defloration was while having sex with Charles. As Wagner states, Fanny's defloration is painful but nevertheless bearable, because of the feelings of true love she has for Charles (*Eros Revived* 239).

Then! then! for the first time did I feel that stiff horn-hard gristle battering against the tender part [...]. I complained, but tenderly complained I could not bear it... indeed! He hurt me. [...] [M]y extreme love made me bear extreme pain without a groan.
(Cleland 77)

Finally, Fanny's sexual actions escalate throughout the novel. As mentioned by Wagner, by the end she is unable to find the right words to describe her emotions and feelings (*Eros Revived* 244). The experiences gradually become more overwhelming and finally, language fails its purpose. This phenomenon is called *aposiopesis* and it describes the impression of a speaker, so overwhelmed by emotions that he or she is unable to continue speaking. This clearly indicates an overwhelming experience and it can be argued that in the case of Fanny this does not solely concern a physical experience, but rather an emotional and psychological state. Fanny especially experiences this circumstance during her (sexual) (re)union with Charles:

I see! I feel! the delicious velvet tip! – he enters might and main with – oh! – my pen drops from me here in the ecstasy now present to my faithful memory! Description, too, deserts me and delivers over a task, above its strength of wing, to the imagination; but it must be an imagination exalted by such a flame as mine, that can do justice to that sweetest, noblest of all sensations [...], sending up, through my eyes, the sparks of the love-fire that ran all over me, and blazed in every vein and every pore of me: a system incarnate of joy all over.
(Cleland 220)

This way, Cleland walks the thin line between love and lust, occasionally crossing that boundary. In the end, love overpowers lust, but only on the indispensable condition of a satisfying, healthy sexuality.

On the contrary, since female pleasure is inseparable from female identity, as pointed out by Mudge, Fanny should normally be identified as a criminal because of her perverse and licentious actions (*Whore's Story* 206). Fanny, on the contrary, finds happiness in marriage and is not cast out of society or condemned for her promiscuous course of life. As Graham has argued, Fanny's marriage is one of the novel's central absurdities, because Cleland rewards his protagonist for her licentiousness. Whereas in eighteenth-century social reality, a woman like Fanny would have never been accepted or even tolerated, Cleland lets "an aggressively sexual woman, a former prostitute, join the ranks of society" (Graham 582). Possibly, by letting Fanny's course of life end on an absurdly positive note, Cleland parodies the moral messages in texts of authors like Daniel Defoe in which prostitutes ended either dead or in complete poverty and misery (Wagner *Eros Revived* 237). In addition, by letting Fanny incorporate both the role of the whore and the virgin at the same time at different moments in the novel, Cleland mocks other moralizing authors. When Fanny sells her "fictitious maidenhead" (Cleland 130), she is both an encouraging whore and a pure virgin at the same time (Mudge *Whore's Story* 208). When staging the masquerade she and Mrs Cole set up to forge her virginity, Fanny plays her role of innocent virgin shrewdly:

[A] circumstance too that I did not fail to accompany with proper gestures, sighs, and cries of complaint, of which, that he had hurt me – he killed me – I should die – were the most frequent interjections.
(Cleland 171)

However, before applying the evidence of her counterfeit defloration, she states she "well satisfied herself", underlining she is not inexperienced and knows very well what pleasure she is after herself (Cleland 172).

Even in the conclusion of the novel, the "tail-piece of morality", Fanny is once more presented as simultaneously virtuous and peccant. Even though she attempts to convince her addressee of her virtuous state, it can't be overlooked that this entire passage has a ironic, mocking tone to it.

You laugh perhaps at this tail-piece of morality [...]. [Y]ou my look on it as the paltry finesse of one who seeks to mask a devotee to vice under a rag of veil, impudently smuggled from the shrine of virtue; just as if one was to fancy oneself completely disguised at a masquerade.
(Cleland 223)

What Fanny describes here is exactly the impression the discerning reader gets, despite her attempt to convince her addressee of the opposite.

It can be argued that Cleland applies different methods and strategies to legitimize the more than two hundred pages of describing sex scenes. It is not unlikely that by placing his story within the context

of prostitution and by letting his protagonist find true love and happiness in a bourgeois marriage, Cleland attempted to make his story acceptable by including features that would appeal to his bourgeois, middle-class reading audience. Cleland's novel is characterised by a dyad marginalization. On the one hand, the story belongs to the social margin, since the setting is a brothel, and on the other hand, it is an outcast in the literary field as well, since the novel belongs to the genre of pornography.

3.6 A tail-piece of sexuality: heterosexual, lesbian or homo-erotic?

A final comment is concerned with the various sexual preferences that are expressed in the novel. Considering the lesbian sex scenes in the first volume, *MWP* cannot be labelled as exclusively heterosexual. However, it cannot be called a lesbian novel either, since the encounters between Phoebe and Fanny are isolated cases, never associated with true love or a satisfying sexual experience. Some critics have suggested that *MWP* is in fact homo-erotic. Even though the sex scene between two men that Fanny witnesses is explicitly condemned, one cannot overlook the clear fascination with the phallus. The numerous and extensive figurative and passionate descriptions of the male genitalia at least point to a certain inclination. Other evidence for this interpretation includes biographical information about the author. First, in a letter to a Newcastle law clerk, Cleland compared his lawsuit to that of a man who wrote a defence of sodomy, clearly referring to Thomas Cannon (Gladfelder 23). Various critics, for example Foxon, Epstein and Sabor, have explored the possibility of Cleland's homosexual relationship with Cannon. Even though little or no evidence exists, Gladfelder points out that there is "bitterness of onetime intimates who have fallen out" to be remarked in both Cleland's and Cannon's correspondence after Cleland's imprisonment (25). In addition, in his introduction, Wagner refers to Cleland's "sudden departure" from the Westminster School in 1723 ("Introduction" 7). It has been speculated that the unnamed offence might be connected to Cleland's presumed homosexuality. Finally, it could be argued that Cleland's solitude is an indicator of deviant behaviour. Cleland remained unmarried and he did not have any close friends either. These vague but interesting circumstances and events of the life of Cleland shed some light upon his intriguing character, although most of it still remains obscure. Next, Moore, following Nancy Miller, argues that the female narrator is actually "a man in drag" [...], "ventriloquized by the male author" (56-57). Since Cleland primarily wrote pornography "for the pleasure of other men" and intended to arouse sexual desire, one could wonder where the phallogocentric orientation comes from and why he refrained from describing female genitalia. To conclude, I propose a final argument for a homoerotic interpretation of this novel. Andreadis has pointed out the poetic grudge that Ovid harbours against Sappho (29). This situation resembles Cleland's attitude towards his protagonist Fanny. He expresses a clear misogynist and patriarchal attitude towards female sexuality. Possibly, this is the expression of his frustration due to a suppressed sexuality and, arguably, he considers Fanny as a sexual rival, similar to Ovid's poetic envy.

4. Conclusion

The inconsistent description of female same-sex sexuality in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* can be considered a reflection of the ambiguous stance of eighteenth-century society in general. The view on female same-sex desire was very equivocal. Female sexuality was dreaded by the eighteenth-century patriarchal stance that dominated the society. The mere existence of female sexual passion was ignored and even denied. Consequently, the ideal of the passionless woman arose. The opposite of this figure was the licentious prostitute who was allowed to revel in sexual pleasure, since this was already a marginalized phenomenon which did not take place within the respectable community. Desire between two women brought about chiefly confusion, rather than straightforward rejection. On the one hand, women seeking pleasure with each other were regarded as innocent. Sex between two women was not considered serious, since non-penetrative sex was harmless. On the other hand, the rumours about the figure of the lesbian, which evolved from the seventeenth-century tribade, increased doubt. This figure incarnated all avoidable characteristics for the ideal passionless woman. *MWP* can be considered the reflection of this ambiguity and the double moral standard of the eighteenth century, since it accepts female same-sex desire when it was used for male pleasure (for example when depicted in pornography), but not in everyday life or in popular novels that were not set in the margins of society.

The central discrepancy of lesbian sexuality being harmless and abhorrent at the same time ties in with the contradiction that lesbian sexuality was both very popular and yet treated with caution and anxiety in literature. It is difficult to discover the reason for this contradiction. Arguably, there was, to some extent, fascination and titillation involved in the assessment of this deviant sexual behaviour. However, the enthusiasm should not be overestimated and clearly fear was the prevailing sentiment concerning this phenomenon, especially when it involved women usurping male prerogatives. With regard to the reason for Cleland's depiction of female same-sex desire, one can only guess. Arguably, he uses this scene to provoke sexual arousal and uses lesbian sexuality for male heterosexual pleasure. As Traub has stated, "[t]his ambivalence [was] exploited for titillating effect by writers of obscenity" (*Renaissance of Lesbianism* 125). Finally, it can be argued that what Traub claims with regard to the visual representation of female same-sex desire can also be expanded to the libertine literature of the eighteenth century: "[t]he effect is simultaneously one of chaste insignificance and erotic titillation" (*Renaissance of Lesbianism* 275). Possibly, the core of interest lies exactly within the ambivalence and obscureness that surrounded the phenomenon and perhaps it was fascinating because of the contradiction and mystery.

Regarding the possible moral message of the novel, clearly, Cleland appreciated love and sexuality equally. He considers sexual compatibility as an essential supplement to true love. This is a

revolutionary view on the importance of sexuality. Cleland should, however, not be praised too much for his dealing with female sexuality, since he definitely remains misogynist and sexist in his depiction. His only merit is that he at least describes it, in contrast to many contemporary writers.

5. Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, volume 1: The Will to knowledge*. Part III: Scientia Sexualis. Foucault elaborates on how the discourse on sex (sexual truth, because sex is considered a problem of truth) is produced in two ways. *Scientia sexualis* is the way the truth of sex is produced today, through confession:

Let us consider things in broad historical perspective: breaking with the traditions of *ars erotica*, our society has equipped itself with a *scientia sexualis*. To be more precise, it has pursued the task of producing true discourses concerning sex, and this by adapting –not without difficulty– the ancient procedure of confession to the rules of the scientific discourse. (Foucault, 67-68).

In the erotic art, or *ars erotica*, on the contrary, “truth is drawn from pleasure itself” (Foucault 57). In this case, truth is “understood as a practice and accumulated as experience” (Foucault 57).

2. I borrow the term “passionless woman” and “passionlessness” from Sally O’Driscoll, who in her turn gets it from Nancy Cott (O’Driscoll 125). Cott uses these terms

to convey the view that women lacked sexual aggressiveness, that their sexual appetites contributed a very minor part (if any at all) to their motivations, that lustfulness was simply uncharacteristic. The concept of passionlessness represented a cluster of ideas about the comparative weight of a woman’s carnal nature and her moral nature; it indicated more about drives and temperaments than about actions and is to be understood more metaphorically than literally. (Cott 220)

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