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Accumulation and Control in Fanny Hill: Fanny's Role in The Emergent  
Middle-Class Society of Eighteenth Century England

In "Modern prostitution and gender in *Fanny Hill*: libertine and domesticated fantasy," Randolph Trumbach states that "prostitution was pretty much a business between persons of the same class," owing this observation to the working class occupations represented in a list of persons arrested for prostitution in early eighteenth century London (82). If prostitution was a *de facto* intra-class institution, it is interesting that John Cleland chose to make Fanny Hill's primary clientele rich gentlemen of high estate or wealthy middle-class merchants, and this class disparity brings up an interesting question: if Fanny and other prostitutes at Mrs. Cole's house service the gentry and merchant class and reap the financial rewards of such service, can they be considered on equal social standing with streetwalkers or working class prostitutes? Careful scrutiny of the financial transactions and representations in the novel in comparison with actual historical accounts reveals that they are far more wealthy and privileged than the average London street prostitute. Additionally, the power and influence they exert over their financial affairs and the agency with which they conduct the business of prostitution reveal a power dynamic that confers on them a sense of entrepreneurship which eludes common prostitutes. In particular, Fanny's wealth and physical assets allow her to advance herself economically and socially through the exertion of control over other persons in the novel. The impact of the emergent middle class in British society and the commodification of sexual pleasures are displayed in Fanny Hill through the economic undercurrent of capitalism and class mobility as Fanny endeavors her ascent to a respectable middle-class marriage.

In order to track the economic and social progress of Fanny throughout the novel, we must first consider the state in which she begins. Fanny's goal of self-elevation in both social and economic status is explicit from the outset of the novel. When Esther Davis arrives in Fanny's country village and explains "how several maids out of the country had made themselves and all their kin forever" by marrying their masters, some of whom "came to be duchesses" through their efforts, Fanny's inclinations toward this goal are revealed in her response: "Luck was all, and why not I as well as another" (Cleland 41). Class mobility did have historical precedent in eighteenth century England; the profession of "master mariner" or sea captain is particularly relevant in comparison to Fanny's aspirations. Sea captains "stood at the peak of a hierarchical pay structure in the merchant service, which provided an incentive for ambitious youths who hoped to make their fortune at sea," a fortune which, although limited in pay to £6 a month (extrapolated to £72 per year), included partial ownership in the ship and cargo as well as other speculative opportunities which culminated in a lucrative career as a merchant investor (Earle 76). The motivations for engaging in a career in both prostitution and seafaring in the eighteenth century are, on a basic level, similar: both professions offer work to entry level persons and can end with a wealthy retirement for those who are able to survive the rigors of the profession.

Fanny embarks for London with the hope of obtaining a domestic service position which would lead to an anti-Pamela style, middle-class marriage. One criterion that Peter Earle sets for a person to consider themselves in the middle class of society is the practice of "accumulation," which he defines as the ability to earn income which "not only fed and clothed them [the middle class family] but also enabled them to accumulate on a regular basis and so improve themselves," concluding that "it was...accumulation and improvement, as well as the

employment of capital and labour, which were the essential features of the middle sort of people” (4-5). At the time of her departure for London, Fanny possessed her small “treasure” of eight guineas 17 s. (a relatively small sum) and bore most of the travel expenses in getting to her destination with Esther (Cleland 41-2). Her true assets lay in her ability to use her body and the power dynamics associated with Cleland’s version of prostitution to advance herself.

The key for Fanny’s success in the world of prostitution is the maintenance of her primary asset in life, her physical body. In his article “The Management of Desire in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*,” Andrew Elfenbein asserts that “under the right circumstances, sex virtually substitutes for salvation: it guarantees health, endless profit, and the most rigorous ethical and bodily discipline” (28). He attributes Fanny’s success to good management by Mrs. Cole, which eventually allows Fanny to succeed by adhering to temperance throughout her career which helps her maintain her body (Elfenbein 43). After the dangerous encounter with the sailor which blurs Fanny’s status as middle-class, she is lectured by Mrs. Cole and taught to consider the future: “Tutored in the ethics of capitalist accumulation, Fanny learns that long-term gain is better than short-term satisfaction” (Elfenbein 40). She is in essence taught to consider the risk of catching a career ending venereal disease as a result of her desire for a few moments of pleasure. Although Elfenbein asserts that Fanny learned this lesson after Mrs. Cole’s reproach of her behavior, her aspirations of accumulation and class improvement begin before this moment in the novel, and, if she does not learn the lesson of long term financial planning, she certainly suffers the consequences of failing to learn that lesson.

The general disorderliness of Mrs. Brown’s brothel is not conducive for the young Fanny to succeed financially, although the merit of analyzing this aspect of her departure is questionable. Elfenbein attributes Fanny’s departure to inflamed sensibilities brought about by

her voyeuristic witnessing of sex acts, specifically between Polly and the Genoese merchant, and also cites Mrs. Brown's poor management though engaging in the business which she oversees, namely exchanging money for sexual gratification with the Horse Grenadier (35-36). Although Fanny eventually reaps the financial rewards of love by marrying Charles, her short term fiscal prospects are not drastically improved by fleeing the bordello with him, and it is also worthwhile to consider the unreliability of the narrator in accurately relating information about young Fanny's decisions.

Gary Gautier points out that "the text is framed at the beginning as well as the end by Fanny's happy marriage: "The World of the marketplace, the world of capitalist reification, in which people are identified in terms of marketable attributes...is circumscribed by the comic frame of Fanny's true love" (Gautier). Indeed, Fanny the narrator is in a position of comfort, wealth, and romantic happiness with Charles as she recalls her flight from Mrs. Brown's house, so it would be unlikely that she would recall that decision with anything other than fondness. In the short term, her virginity, a marked asset for an eighteenth century prostitute, is sacrificed for her temporary position as kept mistress with a gentleman who relies on "a grandmother who doted upon [him]" since he has no real income of his own to speak of (Cleland 85). Fanny makes a poor financial decision and while the mismanagement and inflamed desires that Elfenbein speaks of should be given due credit, they must be taken in the context of the potential for skewed reflections by Cleland's narrator. In particular, Gautier suggests that Fanny is not necessarily aware of her unreliability when narrating her story; an example he provides is the large time discrepancy in Charles' account of his trip to Mrs. Brown's establishment to negotiate for Fanny's separation, suggesting that Fanny perhaps misses the fact that Charles was probably taking advantage of the services of the house during that time (Gautier).

While Fanny's recollections of her motives for departure are debatable, of the outcome of her decision is contrary to her aspirations of social and economic mobility; Charles is eventually compelled to leave the country and Fanny's miscarriage of his child and subsequent illness launch her into debt with the unscrupulous Mrs. Jones. Some critics accurately recognize this debt as the catalyst in the narrative which engenders the actual beginning of her career in prostitution (Mudge 204; Gautier). When Charles is forced to abate their affair, Fanny is left with seven guineas, or approximately £7 7s., which is, notably, less than she began with before she left for London<sup>1</sup> (Cleland 94). She accrues a debt with Mrs. Jones of £21 17s. 6d., for which she is threatened with jail if she is unable to pay it off (Cleland 94). Fanny is presumably presented the bill for Mrs. Jones' attentions at the outset of her recovery, but her knowledge of Mrs. Jones' unscrupulous business practices extends to before the departure of Charles; she earlier states that she will not "enter into a detail of all the petty cut-throat ways and means with which [Mrs. Jones] used to fleece [Charles and herself]; all which Charles indolently chose to bear with, rather than take the trouble of removing..." concluding that neither Charles nor herself, "a raw country girl," at the time knew anything of moderation in spending or "economy" (Cleland 89). In this sense, she has played into the hands of the speculator, Mrs. Jones. The text tells us that Mrs. Jones was once a kept mistress, and that she receives an annuity of £40 per year from her deceased lover (Cleland 89). Mrs. Jones is also portrayed as miserly, despite the fact that she is worth between £3000 and £4000 in total. According to Earle, "An income of £50 was enough to live a comfortable lower-middle-class life...[and was] four or even five times the annual income of a labourer," and a personal accumulation of £1000-£2000 placed a person as "very well off by contemporary standards" (14). In essence, Mrs. Jones is already well provided

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the value of a guinea is assumed to be 21 schillings, or one shilling more than the standard twenty shilling pound.

for in the novel, especially when we consider that Earle's figures are calculated on the cost of living for an entire family; her obsession with accumulation and capitalistic gain however, make her, as Fanny states, "a kind of private procuress" to whom "there was nothing that appeared...under the shape of gain that she would not have undertaken" (Cleland 89). Mrs. Jones represents the worst kind of materialistic accumulator in the novel; she is a speculator and loan shark who takes advantage of a person's unfortunate circumstances by offering services and then producing a hopelessly insurmountable tab. In short, she uses her accumulated wealth as a creditor, profiteering on the calamity of her tenants. In order to uphold the respectability of Fanny's elevation to middle-class, Cleland must present Mrs. Jones as the antithesis to the correct method of accumulation of capital in the emergent commodity society.

Ironically, through the distasteful practice of selling Fanny into prostitution, Mrs. Jones vaults Fanny into the path to economic and social elevation. Immediately after she is sold into prostitution, Mr. H makes her a gift of 22 guineas and pays off her existing debt with Mrs. Jones (Cleland 102). She is transferred out of the hands of her debtor, and placed in a new, more lavish residence where she is given a maid under her control. The employment and disposal of servants is outlined by Earle as a condition of middle class life, and by the standards of his study, Fanny immediately profits by a year of subsistence middle-class income (£50) merely by entering into the arrangement with Mr. H (taking into account her initial allowance and the removal of her debt). After her removal, she is bestowed with "Silks, laces, earrings, pearl-necklace, gold watch, [and]...all the trinkets and articles of dress" (Cleland 103). Financially beneficial as these rewards are, she is to jeopardize them in short order as a result of the perceived class indignity she suffers at the sight of Mr. H's betrayal with her maid.

When she enters the relationship with Mr. H, she does not pretend to any kind of class elevation. Referring to herself in relation to Mr. H, Fanny states that, “he was so much my superior in every sense that I felt it too much to the disadvantage of the gratitude I owed him; thus he gained my esteem, though he could not raise my taste,” positioning herself as his economic and intellectual inferior (Cleland 103). Fanny does not extend this temperament of humility to her maid. Fanny’s describes her country maid Hannah’s infidelity with Mr. H by stating that “his stooping to such a coarse morsel was...no more strange than hunger, or even a whimsical appetite’s making a flying meal of neck-beef, for a change of diet” (Cleland 106). The maid, referred to now as the “wench,” occupies a career which Fanny not one year ago was endeavoring to obtain herself before being deceived into prostitution. After the maid counters Fanny’s interests, she becomes a “coarse morsel” in her eyes and too far below her master in status, even though before the infidelity, Fanny viewed herself as being of inadequate “taste” to even hold conversation with Mr. H.

Likewise, her elevation in status is apparent subsequent to her dismissal by Mr. H. The clique of fellow kept mistresses whom Fanny associates with “flocked to insult [her] with their malicious consolations” upon her dismissal, and they “had long envied [her] the affluence and splendour [*sic.*] [she] had been maintained in” under Mr. H’s possession (Cleland 124). Fanny laments their verbal abuse when, reflecting, she states, “Unaccountable malice of the human heart! And which is not confined to the class of life *they* were of” (Cleland 124, emphasis added). The “class” to which Fanny refers does not explicitly include herself, betraying her own distinction between the relatively affluent, and underprivileged, kept mistresses. The self-empowerment of her privately determined class distinctions allow her to empower herself in another way: the reversal of the male to female money for sexual favors transaction.

In an effort to revenge herself upon Mr. H for his infidelity with the maid, Fanny seduces her servant boy into a sexual encounter which crosses social class boundaries and is clearly controlled by Fanny as the seducer. Fanny comments on the rustic's social condition when she anticipates her reader's objection by stating that "this was a young fellow in too low a rank of life to deserve so great a display," countering with the question, "was my condition, strictly considered, one jot more exalted? Or had I really been much above him, did not his capacity of giving such exquisite pleasure sufficiently raise and ennoble him to me at least?" (117). In fact, when Fanny is plotting her vengeance, she refers to Mr. H's "condescension with [her] maid" as a "dangerous example" which causes her to consider her servant boy "a delicious instrument of [her] designed retaliation" (107). If the example Fanny is following is of a master seducing a servant, it is clear that she is placing herself in the role of the master and the boy in the role of the servant. The absence of exaltation she speaks of in relation to the servant boy is in reference to the boy's sexual mannerisms, through which he displays less "superiority" than Mr. H and is "more on that level which love delights in" (117). Thus, the equality which Fanny ascribes to the rustic is connected more closely with amorous gratitude than a class commentary. Even the fact that Fanny anticipates her reader questioning whether the boy is in her social class demonstrates her own uncertainty of the class relations.

Compensation is a tricky matter for Fanny, as she must decide what is appropriate to give the boy in return for the seduction. Will is rewarded for the first encounter with a paltry sum: Fanny "thrust a guinea into his hands: not more, lest, being too flush of money, a suspicion or discovery might arise from thence..." (114). The theme of careful discretion in rewards will figure prominently again in a later episode in the novel. As compensation for the next sexual encounter, Fanny forces the boy to "receive money enough to buy a silver watch, that great



article of subaltern finery” (120). The implications of this statement are not entirely clear from the surface structure of the sentence. The money exchange implies the typical prostitution transaction (sexual gratification for money), with Fanny as the client. As far as the money’s usage is concerned, there is no indication that Fanny knew what became of the money after the transaction other than the ambiguous statement that the money was “accepted as a remembrance he was carefully to preserve of [her] affections” (120). There is no definite mention of his purchasing the watch, and the money itself could have been used for anything. The fantasy that Fanny projects onto this money is that it would not merely be used for any vulgar transaction, but that it would be converted into a status symbol which would serve as a reminder to him of their affair. The prospective watch is a symbol which would identify him with the social equivalent of the military “subaltern”: not a member of the middle-class as such, but not a commoner either; this is a social rank which Fanny fancies herself a member of at this stage of the novel.

Upon her dismissal from Mr. H’s service, Fanny is given 50 guineas and alleges to have taken with her at least £200 of clothing and personal affects (125). According to Earle, an extravagant wardrobe of a woman of high fashion in eighteenth century England would have been valued at £17 10s., and the average price of a middle-class man’s entire wardrobe would have been about £10-20 (285). Compared to these actual figures, Fanny has a completely unbelievable amount of personal affects. In terms of money, she has earned in the past year through Mr. H more than a lower-middle class family combined and she has clearly shown that her earnings are far beyond what any average prostitute could ever hope to earn in a lifetime. According to Trumbach<sup>2</sup>, theft was the only avenue out of destitution for most prostitutes: “The most usual fee mentioned for a common street prostitute was one shilling, sometimes two or three. Sometimes it was less than a shilling” (Trumbach 163). Trumbach goes on to give some

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<sup>2</sup> All statistical references from Trumbach are from Sex and the Gender Revolution.

instances where common streetwalkers were paid six pence or less for their services (163). A basic illustration is necessary to put the complete fantasy of Cleland's monetary amounts into perspective: to earn £10, less than four percent of what Fanny makes in her departure settlement with Mr. H, an average streetwalker would have to prostitute herself *two hundred times*.

Nevertheless, despite their fantastic disproportions, specific monetary amounts still figure prominently in Cleland's narrative. Fanny's coworker in Mrs. Cole's brothel, Louisa, uses money in a very particular way when seducing the flower boy. When left alone with Fanny, she conspires to lure the boy into the brothel by "pulling out half a crown" and "giv[ing] it him to change, as if she had really expected he could have changed it" for the price of two nosegays (197). The overpayment is an attempt to draw the flower boy into the before mentioned standard act of prostitution represented in the novel, by which payment is exchanged for sexual gratification; in this transaction, the overpayment which cannot be repaid by means of making change is then converted into the service of prostitution. By the end of the encounter, however, Louisa settles on "taking all his flowers off his hands, and paying him at his rate for them," rather than "embarrass[ing] him [with] a present that he would have been puzzled to account for, and might have put others on tracing the motives of it" (202). Her motive for recovering the half crown is twofold: she does not want to implicate him in the act of prostitution, and she certainly does not want his parents or neighbors questioning where he obtained such a large sum of money. The net effect of this transaction is, however, a typical prostitution transaction in that she ends up purchasing all of his flowers in exchange for sexual gratification. The flower boy is given a monetary reward and no perceivable token of elevation in social status other than what the disposable income from the sale of his flowers will provide him (presumably very little).

This encounter differs in two key ways from Fanny's seduction of her servant: the impetus for Fanny's payment is an egalitarian attempt to provide the servant boy with some kind of status altering payment for his services, and Fanny's encounter with the servant has revenge as the primary motive (though pleasure plays a prominent role as well). In each case, however, discretion in payment is a major concern for the seducer. In contrast to the lavish rewards heaped on Fanny throughout the novel by her clients, Fanny and Louisa are very careful not to overcompensate the two seduced boys beyond their socioeconomic condition. Both fear discovery of the prostitution act through the boys' accumulation of funds, something that lower-class people should not be able to do according to Earle's definition. Thus the world of professional prostitution and amateur forays are clearly demarcated: no landlords or acquaintances of Fanny or Louisa would question a large surplus of funds since it is generally known how they come about their accumulated income.

The primary reason for Fanny's success in accumulating income is her ability to exert the natural endowments of her body by forcefully controlling the prostitution environment around her. Perhaps the greatest example of this is her deception of Mr. Norbert in the counterfeit maidenhead scheme. Tassie Gwilliam in her article on the subject states that "Counterfeit maidenheads can level the ground of the battle between the sexes or even reverse completely the apparent balance of power: instead of an encounter between rapist and victim, or purchaser and commodity seller, the deployment of false virginity can imply a contest between two equally knowing parties, or even the presence of a wicked female deceiver preying upon a male dupe" (519). It is Fanny who, though the counterfeit maidenhead scheme is suggested to her by Mrs. Cole, endeavors to be "[her] own caterer" in the ensnarement of Norbert at the fruit market (Cleland 164). She participates enthusiastically in the deception, though she recounts the ease of

her deception and his “cullibility” as making her scheme all the less difficult (Cleland 165, cf. 171). Gwilliam asserts that Fanny always holds ultimate control during the defloration encounter with Norbert, and she goes on to assert that the altered “power relation between the rapist and victim” fails to “[change] the structure of the sexual act or the structure of the economic exchange” (536). The ability for Fanny to engage in this act is due to her “use of art to persuade a customer of the presence of what has been lost and then to elicit pleasure”; she goes on to state that “For Fanny, art is almost redundant in any case; there are no traces written on her body that require erasing” (Gwilliam 537). This last element is crucial, because the assertiveness of Fanny’s control combined with the lack of typical physical evidence which would arouse suspicion from Norbert (ravaged physical features, venereal disease, etc.) allow Fanny to profit from this encounter and indeed, perhaps more so than good management, allow her to continue on for as long as she does in her profession.

The false maidenhead scheme earns Fanny the exorbitant amount of 300 guineas, as well as a short lived position as kept mistress with Mr. Norbert. Compared to the real life eighteenth century rate for the debauchment of a virgin (a half guinea to two pounds), this amount is totally unrealistic (Trumbach 163). The very fact that Mr. Norbert would have ever consented to such a high amount is completely unbelievable, not to mention his agreement to the £100 brokerage fee collected by Mrs. Cole. Rich payoffs such as these allow Fanny to accumulate £800 by the time Mrs. Cole dissolves her enterprise, at which point she is able to comfortably lease an estate and employ a maid, presumably out of her own pocket (Cleland 209). She has nearly reached what Earle would call the “very well off” sector of the middle class. Recalling Earle’s definition, point by point reflection of her progress yields a match with his criteria for the middle-class person: Fanny has accumulated capital in the form of her small fortune; she has improved herself

by establishing a secure lease and estate; she has employed capital and labor in the form of her house and servant: by meeting all of the monetary and capitalist criteria, she is a member of middle-class society. It is precisely as she reaches her goal, that the one shred of realism left in the novel—the use of finite monetary amounts—is abandoned by Cleland.

Fanny randomly meets her elderly gentleman lover who dies just shortly after making her the executrix of his will, and leaves Fanny “so large a fortune as it would have been even the height of impudence in [her] to have raised [her] wishes, much more [her] hopes to” (Cleland 212). The only other descriptors given to indicate the sum of the inheritance are her vague references to “vast possessions” and an “unexpected fortune” (Cleland 212). While there are certainly other transactions which are glossed over in the narrative such as the sum left by Mr. Barville for instance (Cleland 189), those transactions presumably involve no substantially larger amounts than have been left by any of her other clients. It is extremely curious that such a large inheritance should have no number attached to it by Cleland, particularly since it is the only technically legal and quasi-moral<sup>3</sup> gain that Fanny can claim in her short life up to that point.

While critics of the novel almost universally agree that many aspects of the text are fantasized (Trumbach laying out the most comprehensive list of fantasies in “Modern Prostitution”), the concrete amounts set in the transactions, though grossly inflated and inaccurate, provide an important grounding mechanism for the novel until its conclusion. The reversion, as it were, to a fairy tale sum, also marks Fanny’s reversion back to monogamous and amorous sexual relations, as well as her official social elevation to the middle class through her marriage to Charles. The text still presents some interesting problems with the conclusion of

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<sup>3</sup> I say quasi-moral since the moral implications of coasting into the life of a wealthy merchant and securing a full bequeathal of wealth just two months prior to his demise are (perhaps) barely justifiable by the random circumstances of their meeting. The moral ambiguity of the inheritance is only heightened by the fact that a lifelong prostitute should inherit the earnings of an orphan who made his fortune “by honesty and industry” (Cleland 210).

financial affairs. In at least two instances within the novel, capitalism is a failure. Fanny's elderly lover became an orphan at birth because "his parents, honest and failed mechanics" were presumably unable to care for him fiscally; having no relatives to provide an inheritance, he must pass his fortune to his consort, who is also an orphan and unable to make good on her initial promise at the outset of the novel to provide for her kin. Similarly, Charles' own father dies "not so well as even with the world," and his uncle, a ruined merchant, leaves him only a "small remainder" of his shipping fortune (Cleland 213). Fanny's enterprise, which according to Trumbach's history should be the most unprofitable and risky career imaginable, turns out to be ludicrously successful in comparison to the capitalist models presented in the narrative.

Whether this comparison offered by Cleland is an implicit social critique is debatable, since the monetary successes of Fanny's profession are grossly exaggerated and would have certainly been recognized as such by a contemporary audience; the comparison is likely a twist of humor added at the tail-end of the novel for the sake of levity. The underlying approbation of accumulation offered in the novel surfaces through Fanny's empowerment and financial success. Cleland's narrative choices offer valuable commentary on the emerging middle-class, capitalist spirit: accumulation is the key aspect which sets Fanny apart from the common streetwalker in the novel and it is the empowerment bestowed on her by her inexhaustible physical assets which allow her to become an entrepreneur and ascend to the middle class of society prior to inheritance and marriage.

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