

Marriage in Pamela and Fanny Hill



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Class and gender chiefly governed British society in the eighteenth century and the opportunities for a woman to achieve social and financial security were scarce. In this society men of the upper class governed the female identity. This patriarchal climate stipulated that “ a respectable woman was nothing but the potential mother of children” (Blease 7). In the context of eighteenth century British society, this prescribed duty implied marriage first and was shortly followed by procreation and duties relating to family life. Although marriage and maternity provided the only socially acceptable path for women during this time, some women turned to prostitution as an alternate means of subsistence. However, in eighteenth century society, where sexuality, especially female sexuality, was repressed, prostitution as a line of work was largely taboo. Thus, marriage during this time provided the only respectable means for a woman to achieve a comfortable and virtuous life. In addition, amidst a socially stratified society, marriage also served an alternate purpose as a potential means by which a woman could elevate her social situation. These social politics, combined with the sexual inequality that characterised eighteenth century British society, are manifested throughout the literature of the time. Samuel Richardson’s novel *Pamela; Or, Virtue Rewarded*, embraces the notion that marriage is the only acceptable path for his heroine. However in *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, John Cleland provides the antithesis of Richardson’s novel by depicting pleasure as his heroine’s ultimate source of freedom throughout the account of her life as a prostitute. Both Richardson and Cleland approach marriage within their respective works in radically different ways as each text provides its author with a vehicle to comment on the function of marriage amidst eighteenth century British society. Pamela and Fanny Hill reconcile the

differences in their fundamental structure through their portrayal of marriage not as the only available option, but the only acceptable option for their heroine. The disparate depictions between the lives of Cleland and Richardson's heroines throughout their respective texts serve to assert that marriage is not the only available option for their heroines. Throughout the first volume of Pamela, Richardson's heroine continually deflects the sexual advances of her master claiming that she "would rather lose [her] life than [her] honesty" (Richardson). Conversely, Cleland's heroine, Fanny Hill, devotes the bulk of her memoir to the graphic recollection of her sexual encounters as a prostitute. Although inherently different in plot, the heroines of these two texts share a common origin as poor, lower class country girls. The similar and somewhat ambiguous upbringings of Pamela and Fanny create an innate comparison between the two characters and their lifestyles. Cleland manipulates this parallel and portrays Fanny as the antithesis to Richardson's heroine. Throughout both texts, the authors interrogate the institution of marriage as a complex issue intricately connected with social class and sexual inequality. Many critics have labelled Samuel Richardson as "puritanical, meaning little more than that he had a rigid moral code" (Morton 242). Richardson's Puritan principles manifest themselves throughout the novel through Pamela's repeated denial of Mr B's designs on her. Pamela abides by a strict moral code throughout the text claiming "how easy a choice poverty and honesty is, rather than plenty and wickedness" (Richardson). This resolve to cling to her virtue is not only for her own spiritual protection, but also for the safeguarding of her person. Her refusal to become "mistress of [Mr B's] person and fortune, as much as if the foolish ceremony had passed" is governed as much by her moral compass as it is by

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her instinct for self-preservation as a woman of a low social class (Richardson). Although Mr B offers his entire estate to Pamela if she will agree to be kept as his mistress, without the legal contract of a marriage to secure this position, Pamela would be robbed of her precious virtue and risk complete social ruin were Mr B to turn her out. Pamela equates being kept mistress to slavery and confides in her parents claiming that she “ would rather be obliged to wear rags, and live upon rye-bread and water, as I used to do, than to be a harlot to the greatest man in the world” (Richardson). As a lower class servant-girl, becoming a mistress to a powerful aristocratic gentleman had the potential to “ invite [Pamela’s] ruin” (Richardson). Thus, the only options available to Pamela that would not guarantee her ruin were to cling to her virtue or solidify her position through marriage. While Pamela’s upstanding virtue provides the model behaviour for young ladies of the time, Cleland’s heroine sustains herself through the socially unacceptable act of prostitution. Although Fanny Hill is a pornographic novel intended to arouse its male readership, Cleland’s text is essentially anti-Pamelist in its account of Fanny’s life. Richardson offers his heroine multiple opportunities to flee the unwelcome advances of Mr B from Mr William’s proposal of marriage to Mr B’s offer to take Pamela as his mistress, both of which she refuses. Fanny, on the other hand, is forced out of poverty into the line of sex work. She relinquishes her hold on virtue, telling the reader that “ our virtues and our vices depend too much on our circumstances” (Cleland 46). Fanny acknowledges that her mode of survival will cost her virtue nonetheless she eagerly submits. Her unrepressed attitude toward her sexuality creates a stark contrast with Pamela who repeatedly exclaims that she would rather seek death than the loss of her honesty. As a pornographic

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piece of literature, Fanny's memoir " offers a picaresque of bodies and their parts traveling from one encounter to the next" (Haslanger 164). However at the same time, Fanny's account depicts a woman forced into prostitution who " did not care what became of my wretched body: and wanting life, spirits, or courage to oppose the least struggle, even that of the modesty of my sex, [and] suffered, tamely, whatever the gentleman pleased" (Cleland 46). Under the guise of an erotic novel, Cleland employs Fanny Hill to comment on the social and sexual stratification present in British society. Cleland takes a progressive approach toward sexuality throughout the text. Firstly, in that he acknowledges the sexual desire of his heroine during a time when female sexuality was strictly repressed. Secondly, Cleland suggests that sexual encounters span the void between the social classes. Fanny claims that " the talent of pleasing, with which nature has endowed a handsome person, formed to me the greatest of all merits; compared to which, the vulgar prejudices in favour of titles, dignities, honours, and the like, held a very low rank indeed" (Cleland 61). Thus Cleland asserts that the superfluous titles, etc. that distinguish the classes are neutralised in the context of a sexual encounter, and that identifying with a higher social rank cannot cultivate love, or at least sexual attraction. However, aside from romanticising Fanny's life as a prostitute, he also illuminates the inequalities between the sexes that exist even in the neutralising realm of sexual encounters. While Fanny and her fellow prostitutes were " branded with the names of guilt and shame," the men that visited them could do so without detection (Cleland 71). In a world where young women were expected to maintain their innocence until marriage, Pamela's tireless preservation of her virtue was seen as model behaviour. However, Cleland notes the irony in this

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requirement which men of status were hardly expected to follow. As Fanny attempts to feign her innocence with one of her lovers, she reflects upon the “innocence which the men so ardently require in us, for no other end than to feast themselves with the pleasure of destroying it” (Cleland 98). While both texts utilise their heroine’s situation to comment on social and sexual politics that plagued British society at the time, they employ the marriage of their respective heroines to communicate their differing opinions on the options available to the eighteenth century woman. In Richardson’s novel, Pamela’s persistent safeguarding of her virtue is eventually rewarded in the mutually beneficial marriage between herself and Mr B. Pamela’s virtue elevates her husband morally, while their marriage grants her stability as well as access to upper class society. Richardson presents marriage as Pamela’s only respectable option, yet he allows her to marry the man she loves, rather than the most suitable and convenient choice. Fanny Hill, on the other hand, boasts a basic comedic structure to its narrative. The novel ends with Fanny’s marriage to her first love, Charles, which Fanny herself recognises as being “out of character” (Cleland 139). Cleland incorporates Fanny’s marriage to maintain a contrast with Pamela so that ““ Fanny Hill’s anti-Pamelism...lies most importantly in its commentary on the very form of the marriage plot” (Haslanger 183). In Pamela, Richardson suggests that “marriage rewards virtue and repairs, or even erases, harm” (Haslanger 183). Pamela’s marriage is a central turning point in the novel as Pamela leaves behind her old life as a lower class servant and assumes her new position as the wife of an upper class man. However, Fanny’s marriage merely serves to provide the novel with a comedic ending. Although both plots include a marriage, the “marriage in Pamela does the same thing as pleasure in <https://assignbuster.com/marriage-in-pamela-and-fanny-hill/>

Fanny Hill: both perform conversions of discord into concord, injury into the impossibility thereof” (Haslanger 183). Richardson’s work, asserts that marriage is the only socially acceptable end for his heroine. While Cleland’s pornographic text acknowledges that prostitution is not deemed socially acceptable, he argues that the pleasure Fanny derives from her sexual encounters can provide her with the same social and sexual neutralisation that Pamela achieves through her marriage. Nevertheless, both novels acknowledge marriage as an integral part of eighteenth century society that can be achieved through a variety of means, but provides the only socially acceptable path to security for the female heroine. References Blease, W. L. (1971). *The emancipation of English women*. New York, B. Blom. Cleland, J. (2004). *Fanny Hill: memoirs of a woman of pleasure*. Ware, Wordsworth Editions. Haslanger, A. (2011) What Happens When Pornography Ends in Marriage: The Uniformity of Pleasure in Fanny Hill. *English Literary History*, 78 (1), p. 163-188. Morton, D. (1971) Theme and Structure in “ Pamela”. *Studies in the Novel*, 3 (3), p. 242-257. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29531465>. Richardson, S. (1958). *Pamela: or, Virtue rewarded*. New York, Norton.