

INNERVATE

Leading Undergraduate Work in English Studies

'There are no 'underclothing excitements' in Fanny Burney's novels, which is one reason why the burgeoning novel-reading class took to them so warmly. The novel, she proved, could be decent and amusing...' [Claire Harman, *Fanny Burney: a Biography* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), p.96.] Using this comment as a starting point, explore the treatment of 'vice' in *Evelina* and *Fanny Hill*.

Vanessa Robson

Although there are no 'underclothing excitements' in Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778), the threat of such "vice", in addition to further immoral acts, permeates the novel throughout. In a somewhat ironic paradox, *Evelina* treats "vice" as common conduct amongst the supposedly virtuous aristocracy, and so, as Waldo S. Glock summarises, '*Evelina*, then, is a novel of discovery: [...] a social discovery whereby she is taught by experience that the stereotypes of social behaviour are by no means unalterably determined by class distinctions.'¹ The threat of 'underclothing excitements' is strikingly evident with Sir Clement Willoughby's rather forceful pursuance of Evelina, and also with the predatory crowds of men that she encounters at Vauxhall. To characterise *Evelina* as 'decent and amusing' appears significantly absurd when the cruel and degrading nature of gentlemanly 'sport' is actually considered; the violent torment of Madame Duval by Captain Mirvan along with his vengeful humiliation of Mr. Lovel, and the race between two old women that acts as a perverse form of gambling, are undoubtedly beyond the realms of human decency.² In direct opposition, the "vice" of 'underclothing excitements' explicitly found in John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1749), is treated as a counterpart to, and reflection of, civilised behaviour. This is apparent when the presentation of the sexually impotent Mr. Norbert is compared to that of the masculine virility epitomised by both Will and Charles. Furthermore, the "vice" of prostitution is unusually played out within a refined, domestic setting; it is depicted as a pleasurable profession that in turn can lead to future happiness and a secure position in conventional society.

With regards to the "vice" that Evelina encounters, William Hazlitt believes 'the difficulties in which [Burney] involves her heroines are too much "Female Difficulties"; they are difficulties created out of nothing.'³ On the contrary, it could be argued that the threat of 'underclothing excitements' posed by Sir Clement Willoughby in particular is, whilst certainly reflecting the feminine issue of sexual violation, ultimately treated as far from trivial and indeed, as Susan Staves notes, 'Evelina's predominant emotion seems [...] to be an acute anxiety which is painful, real, and powerful.'⁴ This is demonstrated by the terror provoked by Sir Clement's attempt to hold Evelina captive during the coach journey back to Queen-

¹ Waldo S. Glock, 'Evelina: The Paradox of the "Open Path"', *The South Central Bulletin*, 39 (1979), 129-134, (p.132).

² Frances Burney, *Evelina*, ed. by Edward A. Bloom, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.152. (All further references in parenthesis).

³ William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, (London: J.M. Dent, 1931), p.124.

⁴ Susan Staves, 'Evelina: or "Female Difficulties"', *Modern Philology*, 73 (1976), 368-381, (p.368).

Using this comment as a starting point, explore the treatment of “vice” in *Evelina* and *Fanny Hill*.

Ann-street; a scene that markedly foreshadows Alec d’Urberville’s deceitful carriage ride preceding the rape episode in Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891). Initially, Sir Clement highly embarrasses Evelina as ‘he began by making many complaints of [her] unwillingness to trust [herself] with him, and begged to know what could be the reason’ (p.98). Such forthright and persistent questioning certainly contrasts to the selfless restrain of Lord Orville, who was willing to sacrifice his coach in ‘so considerate’ (p.98) a manner; a polite disposition that is surprisingly rare within the elite circles of the novel. Mrs. Selwyn associates his conduct with the previous period of politeness that sought to eradicate the corruption of Restoration courtly life. She states, ‘there must have been some mistake in the birth of that young man; he was, undoubtedly, designed for the last age’ (p.283). As Patricia L. Hamilton comments, ‘the ironic barb in Mrs. Selwyn’s equation of real politeness with the “last age” suggests Burney was consciously valorizing the mores of a bygone era.’⁵ Indeed, the ‘zeal’ that is condemned by Addison and Steele in the *Spectator*, their instructive periodical from the past era Mrs. Selwyn refers to, is absent from Lord Orville’s social decorum yet patently present in Sir Clement’s forceful imprisonment of Evelina.⁶ For example, he physically restrains her hand ‘for he actually grasped it between both his, without any regard to [her] resistance (p.98). Such aggression, teemed with how Sir Clement ‘passionately kissed [her] hand’ (p.100) without consent, poses the threat of rape; an act strongly depicted as a form of “vice” by Evelina’s exclamation that ‘never, in my whole life, have I been so terrified’ (p.100) and her desperation ‘to open the chariot-door [...] with a view of jumping into the street’ (pp.99-100). The ‘underclothing excitements’ of sexual violation are additionally alluded to during Evelina’s visit to Vauxhall. It appears to be a lack of refinement that dominates the gardens, exemplified by the predatory males of the ‘dark walks’ (p.197) who kept Evelina and the Branghton sisters ‘prisoners’ (p.197), sinistly describing Evelina as a ‘pretty little creature’ (p.197). Furthermore, Sir Clement once again cannot contain his passions and disconcertingly leads Evelina to a place where they ‘shall be least observed’ (p.198). So, whilst *Evelina* does not explicitly describe ‘underclothing excitements’, such “vice” is unquestionably alluded to in the text and is conveyed as a menacing threat that unceasingly haunts the innocent heroine.

However, other acts of “vice” are explicitly portrayed and appear shocking, indecent, and far from amusing, particularly when judged by the mannered ideals of Evelina and Lord Orville. Despite the severity of Madame Duval’s verbal attacks on Captain Mirvan, and as Hamilton clarifies ‘rudeness, it turns out, knows no gender in *Evelina*’, the physical violation she experiences by him is considerably more extreme.⁷ Madame Duval is violently dragged from her coach by the alleged “robber” and hurled into a ditch. The force of this attack leaves her publically exposed and humiliated, as ‘her head-dress had fallen off; her linen was torn; her negligee had not a pin left in it’ (p.150). The reaction that Madame Duval’s state receives is perhaps even crueler, given that ‘the servants were ready to die with laughter’ (p.150) and ‘the Captain’s raptures, during supper, at the success of his plan were boundless’ (p.153). Ultimately, the Captain has no shame for the distress he has caused and continues to viscously persecute those he does not favour. Staves appears to sympathise with the Captain, however, stating that he is a ‘brave and essentially good-hearted man; he exposes sham and administers his corporal punishments only to those who deserve them.’⁸ The episode where

⁵ Patricia L. Hamilton, ‘Monkey Business: Lord Orville and the Limits of Politeness in Frances Burney’s *Evelina*’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 19 (2007), 415-440, (p. 425).

⁶ Joseph Addison, ‘Spectator’ no.57 (5 May 1711), in *The Spectator: Volume one*, ed. by Gregory Smith, (London: Aldine Press, 1970), p.174.

⁷ Patricia L. Hamilton, ‘Monkey Business: Lord Orville and the Limits of Politeness in Frances Burney’s *Evelina*’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 19 (2007), 415-440, (p. 435).

⁸ Susan Staves, ‘*Evelina*: or “Female Difficulties”, *Modern Philology*, 73 (1976), 368-381, (P.378).

the Captain introduces a monkey ‘fully dressed, and extravagantly *à la mode*’ (p.399) to ridicule Mr. Lovel, appears to oppose this somewhat lenient opinion of his character. Even Evelina states that she ‘was really sorry for that poor man, who, though an egregious fop, had committed no offence that merited such chastisement’ (p.401). The monkey not only causes damage to Lovel’s pride and his injured ear, but also unjustifiably provokes Mr. Coverley and Lord Merton, in addition to frightening Lady Louisa ‘out of [her] senses’ (p.401). Typically, Lord Orville’s gentlemanly virtue resolves the situation as he removes the animal from the room and, as Hamilton surmises, ‘the expulsion of the monkey becomes a symbolic repudiation of the brutality by which Captain Mirvan [...] ruthlessly exploits others.’⁹ Another instance of indecent behaviour is resultant to the “vice” of gambling. As a means of entertainment, Lord Merton and Mr. Coverley orchestrate and bet on an absurd foot race between two elderly ladies; rejecting the more humane proposition to ‘draw straws’ (p.292) suggested by Lord Orville. The cruelty of these men is unfaltering as they eagerly watch as the women ‘stumbled and tottered’ (p.311) and ironically deem Evelina’s assistance to their injuries as ‘foul play’ (p.313). This low form of amusement contradicts the cultured diversions normally associated with those of good breeding, and consequently suggests that civility is not a customary product of aristocratic rank. It is apparent, therefore, that Claire Harman’s summation of Burney’s work as ‘decent *and* amusing’ can be argued against since the threat of ‘underclothing excitements’ looms large throughout the novel and other forms of “vice” are treated as both licentious and alarming.

In contrast, the “vice” of ‘underclothing excitements’ explicitly described in *Fanny Hill* is paradoxically treated as a counterpart to, and marker of, domestic civility. Mr. Norbert’s immoral overindulgence in rakish behaviour is reflected by his weak sexual performance where pathetically, once he ‘had gained a short lived erection, he would perhaps melt it away in a washy sweat, or a premature abortive effusion, that provokingly mock’d [Fanny’s] eager desires.’¹⁰ Although Fanny somewhat restored a sense of domesticity to Mr. Norbert’s habits, since he lost ‘his taste for inconstancy and new faces’ (p.135) and had ‘grown more delicate, more temperate, and in course more healthy’ (pp.135-136), he could not resist falling into ‘the debauch of drinking’ (P.136) and consequently was ‘lost’ (p.136). On the other hand, the innocent and virginal Will is depicted as sexually dominant given that his penis resembled ‘not the plaything of a boy, not the weapon of a man, but a maypole of so enormous a standard’ (p.72). His physical prowess is coupled with gentlemanly consideration; at Fanny’s pain, ‘the respectful boy even in his mid career [...] immediately drew out the sweet cause of [her] complaint’ (p.74) and so, as David Weed remarks, he ‘combines sexual virility with gentleness, which the novel represents as the most worthwhile combination of traits for the bourgeois man.’¹¹ Similarly the object of Fanny’s domestic affections, Charles, is portrayed as an able and satisfying lover whose ‘underclothing excitements’ are tenderly described as ‘the whitest ivory, beautifully streaked with blue veins, and carrying, fully uncap, a head of the liveliest vermillion’ (P.48). Indeed, it is this embodiment of sexual success that provides Fanny with a polite married life. The “vice” of sexual competence is thus treated as a counterpart to the virtuous ideal of mannered domesticity, which acts as a clear juxtaposition to *Evelina*’s treatment of such “vice” as a failure of gentlemanly behaviour and as a threat to female safety.

Furthermore, the ‘underclothing excitements’ present in *Fanny Hill*, particularly in terms of the “vice” of prostitution and of rape, are treated ultimately as positive experiences

⁹ Patricia L. Hamilton, ‘Monkey Business: Lord Orville and the Limits of Politeness in Frances Burney’s *Evelina*’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 19 (2007), 415-440, (p. 440).

¹⁰ John Cleland, *Fanny Hill*, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000), p. 133. (All further references in parenthesis).

¹¹ David Weed, ‘Fitting Fanny: Cleland’s “Memoirs” and the Politics of Male Pleasure’, *A Forum on Fiction*, 31 (1997), 7-20, (p.16).

Using this comment as a starting point, explore the treatment of “vice” in *Evelina* and *Fanny Hill*.

that lead to positive ends. Despite Mr. H taking advantage of Fanny during the traumatic aftermath of Charles’ disappearance, she comes to enjoy fulfilling the role of mistress. The issue of rape, which is perceived as a dangerous threat in *Evelina*, is therefore conversely cast in a somewhat inconsequential light; surprisingly, it is not this form of violation that provokes revenge in Fanny, but the more trivial act of Mr. H’s infidelity with her maid Hannah. Indeed, before her discovery of this betrayal, ‘no object had yet appeared that could overcome the habitual liking [she] had contracted for him’ (p.68). It appears then that sexual “vice”, if endured, can lead to the ‘constant generosity, politeness, and tender attention’ (p.68) that Fanny comes to receive from her keeper and as Rosemary Graham notes, ‘Cleland depicts a number of scenes where what ends as consensual intercourse begins as rape: reluctant and fearful at first, the women in these scenes cease to struggle once they realize what pleasure there is for them in the act.’¹² A similar instance of this pattern is exemplified by Harriet and her loss of virginity; quickly following her rape, her ‘anger ebbed so fast, and the tide of love return’d so strong upon [her], that [she] felt it a point of [her] own happiness to forgive him’ (p.100-101). This relationship that began with rape not only resulted in love, but if circumstances which Harriet neglects to describe had been different, could have resulted in marriage. Likewise, the career of prostitution that Fanny endures remarkably ends with marriage, children and acceptance into conventional society.

The “vice” of prostitution is additionally treated as a ‘decent’ profession that simulates the polite, domestic world in its creation of maternal bonds and welcoming rituals. For example, the brothel of Fanny’s first employment is ironically depicted as a lavish and ‘magnificently furnished’ (p.13) abode that ‘dazzled, and altogether persuaded [her] that [she] must be got into a very reputable family’ (p.13). After losing her parents, as Gary Gautier suggests, ‘her entrance into Mrs. Brown’s household can be seen as the fulfilment of a desire to re-enter maternal space.’¹³ This maternal space is simulated by ‘Mother Brown’ (p.21) and her instructive role; Fanny had ‘no sense of regretting [her] condition, but waited very quietly for whatever Mrs Brown should order’ (p.27). Furthermore, when Fanny is more experienced and introduced into the household of Mrs. Cole, a welcoming ritual is organised that at first bears resemblance to any ‘elegant supper’ (p.108) that might have been attended by the aristocracy. However, it soon leads to ‘open public enjoyment’ (p.109) but nevertheless an inclusive, familial atmosphere is evoked. Maternal approval is also given to Fanny by Mrs. Cole after she partook in violent sexual activity with a customer; Fanny notes that ‘Mrs. Cole, to whom this adventurous exploit had more and more endear’d me, looked on me now as a girl after her own heart, afraid of nothing, and, on a good account hardy enough to fight all weapons of pleasure through’ (p. 145). However, as Gautier deduces, ‘through the “mothers and daughters” pattern, the maternal bond becomes represented as an economic bond masking as a sentimental one.’¹⁴ Mrs. Cole’s approval is primarily due to the fact that Fanny has now become an extremely commercial and valuable product in her perseverance to please the consumer. Although a form of economic exploitation, Fanny still receives maternal encouragement and appreciation that depicts the “vice” of prostitution as rewarding and ‘decent’.

To conclude, an ironic and somewhat unexpected treatment of “vice” appears to be at work in both *Evelina* and *Fanny Hill*. Harman’s view that Burney’s novels feature no ‘underclothing excitements’ should perhaps be altered to accommodate for the threat of such

¹² Rosemary Graham, ‘The Prostitute in the Garden: Walt Whitman, *Fanny Hill*, and the fantasy of female pleasure’, *ELH*, 64 (1997), 569-597, (p.577-578).

¹³ Gary Gautier, ‘Fanny Hill’s mapping of sexuality, female identity, and maternity’, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 35 (1995), 473-491, (p.475).

¹⁴ Ibid, p.473.

“vice” that is alluded to throughout the text, namely in the form of male predation upon Evelina. Furthermore, to characterise her work as ‘decent *and* amusing’ is rather misleading given the sinister forms of “vice” exemplified by Captain Marvin, Lord Merton and Mr. Coverley. Ultimately, these instances of “vice” are treated as shocking and despicable, particularly highlighted by the honourable decorum of both Evelina and Lord Orville, and due to the fact that such immorality exists within the supposedly polite and cultured circles of the aristocracy. In contrast, Cleland treats “vice” more favourably in *Fanny Hill* in its portrayal of prostitution as a pleasurable profession that offers the protection of maternal bonds and the replication of a ‘decent’ society. Furthermore, the novel treats rape as an almost inevitable and therefore minor violation that if endured can lead to a fulfilled lifestyle that will in no way hinder the prospect of future happiness. Sexual prowess also appears to compliment and to reflect male civility; a notion revoked strongly in *Evelina* with the expression of sexual desire symbolising an acute failure of manners. This utopian image of prostitution and sexual “vice” can perhaps be accounted for by the genre of the text; as the first erotic novel in English it undoubtedly aims to please, and so a detailed description of the deprave working conditions of a prostitute’s reality would obviously not be conducive to sexual pleasure. To some extent though, the treatment of “vice” in *Evelina* and *Fanny Hill* ultimately subverts expectation.

376 ‘There are no ‘underclothing excitements’ in Fanny Burney’s novels, which is one reason why the burgeoning novel-reading class took to them so warmly. The novel, she proved, could be decent and amusing...’ [Claire Harman, *Fanny Burney: a Biography* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), p.96.] Using this comment as a starting point, explore the treatment of “vice” in *Evelina* and *Fanny Hill*.

Bibliography

Addison Joseph, *The Spectator: Volume one*, ed. by Gregory Smith, (London: Aldine Press, 1970).

Burney, Frances, *Evelina*, ed. by Edward A. Bloom, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Cleland, John, *Fanny Hill*, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000).

Gautier, Gary, ‘Fanny Hill’s mapping of sexuality, female identity, and maternity’, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 35 (1995).

Glock, Waldo S., ‘*Evelina*: The Paradox of the “Open Path”’, *The South Central Bulletin*, 39 (1979).

Graham, Rosemary, ‘The Prostitute in the Garden: Walt Whitman, *Fanny Hill*, and the fantasy of female pleasure, *ELH*, 64 (1997).

Hamilton, Patricia L., ‘Monkey Business: Lord Orville and the Limits of Politeness in Frances Burney’s *Evelina*’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 19 (2007).

Hazlitt, William, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P.P Howe, (London: J.M. Dent, 1931).

Staves, Susan, ‘*Evelina*: or “Female Difficulties”’, *Modern Philology*, 73 (1976).

Weed, David, ‘Fitting Fanny: Cleland’s “Memoirs” and the Politics of Male Pleasure’, *A Forum on Fiction*, 31 (1997).