

# Fanny Hill, Lord Fanny, and the Myth of Metonymy

by Patrick Spedding and James Lambert

IN her 1989 essay, "Fanny's Fanny: Epistolarity, Eroticism, and the Transsexual Text," Julia Epstein states that "[n]umerous commentators have pointed out" that the name Fanny Hill "literally means *mons veneris*" and that John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748–49) has "come to be known 'simply' as *Fanny Hill* in part as acknowledgement of this metonymy."<sup>1</sup> Epstein also observes that "Anal intercourse is the only sexual act [Fanny] refuses to perform. . . . The 'fanny,' in other words, is the one bodily site the memorialist protects."<sup>2</sup> Similar claims concerning the obscene meaning of *fanny* have also repeatedly appeared in discussions of Henry Fielding's satirical dedication of *An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews* (1741) to "Miss Fanny, &c."

Unfortunately for Epstein and a host of other commentators, there is no evidence whatsoever that, in the eighteenth century, *fanny* had the two meanings she suggests. In fact the evidence is to the contrary. Consequently, it is highly unlikely that any of the fictional eighteenth-century Fannys were named with the intention of suggesting the female sexual organs, however specified or identified (vagina, genitalia, *pu-denda*, vulva, *mons veneris*, or *mons pubis*) or the male or female buttocks

<sup>1</sup> Epstein, "Fanny's Fanny: Epistolarity, Eroticism, and the Transsexual Text," in *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Goldsmith (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 136–37.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 141 and 146. Lee Edelman carries Epstein's argument even further, claiming that when Fanny trips over and is lying unconscious, "face down, bottom up," she "embodies the instability of positioning that radiates out from the sodomitical scene" she has just observed and "demonstrates that it was not without reason that Cleland named her Fanny after all" ("Seeing Things: Representation, the Scene of Surveillance, and the Spectacle of Gay Sex," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss [New York: Routledge, 1981], 108).

(backside or arse). Moreover, the latter meaning of *fanny* is a twentieth-century usage, specific to the United States, making *fanny* “the most prominent example of a common word having quite different meanings in different speech communities.”<sup>3</sup>

To suggest that the usages referred to by Epstein and other literary critics are in fact evidence that these meanings were current in the eighteenth century is, of course, begging the question. Certainly, upon closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that current usage rather than eighteenth-century usage is the basis of the interpretation of *fanny* as a sexual term.

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The first dictionaries to define *fanny* were Albert Barrère and Charles G. Leland’s *A Dictionary of Slang, Jargon & Cant* in 1889 and J. S. Farmer and W. E. Henley’s *Slang and Its Analogues* in 1891. The entries contain no citations and no dates, just “the fe[male] pud[endum]” and “the female *pudendum*.”<sup>4</sup> Cross-references in Farmer and Henley from *naf* (backslang for *fan*, i.e. *fanny*),<sup>5</sup> similarly defined, direct the reader to *fanny* and *monosyllable*, where one finds *Fanny*, *Fanny-Artful* and *Fanny-Fair*, along with scores of other terms of “venery,” succinctly glossed as “cunt.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Hughes, *An Encyclopedia of Swearing* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2006), s.v. “fanny.” While a number of American dictionaries contain both definitions of *fanny*—suggesting a level of awareness of, or variation within, “different speech communities”—the latest edition of *Webster’s Dictionary* contains only the American usage (i.e. “buttocks”) (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Philip Babcock Gove [Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1993], s.v. “fanny”).

<sup>4</sup> Barrère and Leland, *A Dictionary of Slang, Jargon & Cant* (London, 1890) 1:354, s.v. “fanny”; Farmer and Henley, *Slang and Its Analogues*, 7 vols. (London, 1890–1904), vol. 2 (1891), 374, s.v. “fanny.”

<sup>5</sup> Farmer and Henley, *Slang and Its Analogues*, vol. 5 (1902), 6, s.v. “naf,” citing James Orchard Halliwell’s *A Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words* (1847); Halliwell does not identify the term as back-slang and there is no corresponding entry for *fanny* or *fan*, thus defined (*A Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words, Obsolete Phrases, Proverbs, and Ancient Customs, from the Fourteenth Century*, 2 vols. [London, 1846–47], 1:346, s.v. “fan,” and 2:569, s.v. “naf,” which is defined as “The pudendum muliebre [literally: *the shameful parts of a woman*]. North”).

<sup>6</sup> Farmer and Henley, *Slang and Its Analogues*, vol. 4 (1896), 336–40, s.v. “monosyllable.” “Fanny Fair” is the title of a song beginning “To Fanny Fair could I impart / The Cause of all my Woe,” which seems to have appeared for the first time in Allan Ramsay, *The Tea-Table Miscellany: Or, A Collection of Choice Songs, Scots and English*, 10th ed., 4 vols. (London, 1740), 1:388–89. This song was frequently reprinted in the eighteenth century and the phrase “Fanny Fair” (as well as “Fanny the fair”) was reused in a few other songs in the period, but never in an obscene context or as a synonym for vagina. For “Fanny the fair” see “Susan’s Complaint and Remedy”: “But now he has left me! and *Fanny* the fair / Employs all his wishes his thoughts and his care” (Ramsay, *Miscellany*, 355). No citations for “Fanny Artful” from the eighteenth century are known and neither term appears among