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SEX AND THE MARRIAGE PLOT:
STORIES OF DEFLORATION IN THE BRITISH NOVEL

by

ANTJE SCHAUM ANDERSON

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

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ABSTRACT

Sex and the Marriage Plot:
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This dissertation traces the changing story of female sexuality—a distinctly heterosexual story—through three pairs of British novels written between the 1740s and the 1860s. The central trope of the dissertation is defloration, since the story of female sexuality as told in the novels invariably revolves around literal or figurative representations of a woman’s first heterosexual intercourse. Chapter 1 first explores the theoretical and historical implications of the concept of defloration against the backdrop of the social history of sexuality and of marriage, and then situates the story of defloration within a double context of narrative theory and the history of the novel. The moment of defloration, seemingly the most triumphant moment of the heterosexual narrative, crucially disrupts this narrative’s hegemony by working against narrative linearity either by way of repeating this moment excessively or by omitting it altogether from the narrative.

As two strategies of narrative disruption that increasingly interact with each other, the excessive repetition and narrative omission of the moment of defloration are central to the three pairs of novels read in the subsequent chapters. In Chapter 2, I show how
John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1747) and Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) feature literal moments of defloration that disrupt narrative linearity respectively through narrative excess and narrative absence. In Chapter 3, I discuss the transition from the literally sexual narratives of the mid-eighteenth century to a domesticated marriage plot by contrasting Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Jane Austen's *Emma* (1814). This reading is based on the argument that both novels' assault and proposal scenes are transformed and desexualized versions of the moment of defloration. In Chapter 4, I argue that Mrs. Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) and Anthony Trollope's *Phineas Finn* (1869) are re-sexualized variants of the defloration narrative. In both novels, excessive repetitions of disrupted and unsuccessful marriage proposals, together with a figurative reduplication of the heterosexual plot in a political narrative, signal the radical destabilization of the marriage plot's conventions, in particular of its prescribed gender constellations, in the mid-Victorian era.
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I owe the discovery that one needs to theorize literature to my first mentor and Masters’ Thesis director, Professor Dr. Peter Hühn at the University of Hamburg, and also to his colleague (and second reader of my thesis), Prof. Dr. Dietrich Schwanitz. In the first literature course I ever took at University of Hamburg, Professor Hühn introduced me to Roman Jakobson and Jonathan Culler, and thus to ways of thinking about literature that profoundly influenced my work, even though it has gone far beyond structuralism.

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My daughter Katharina Anderson is not old enough to read this, but she deserves thanks as well—for forcing me to see the bigger picture when the dissertation bogged me down. Her cheerful and energetic personality was always mood-enhancing, and I cannot describe how good it felt to hear her—even since she learned to speak her first phrases—praise me effusively for being “such a good worker” and getting our clothes clean (not to mention making use of the bathroom facilities).
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Chapter 1:

Stories of Defloration: An Introduction

1. About Deflowering Books

_deflower_, ... v. ...

1. _trans._ to deprive (a woman) of her virginity: to violate, ravish....

2. _fig._ to violate, ravage, desecrate; to rob of its bloom, chief beauty, or excellence; to spoil....

3. To cull or excerpt from (a book, etc.) its choice or most valuable parts. _obs._

_Compact OED, 672_

This study revolves around the first, and to a certain degree, the second definition that the OED provides for “deflower”—around the act by which a woman is literally or metaphorically “deprived of her virginity,” and also about its vexed connection to rape and (“fig.”) to the destruction of property. But it is the obsolete third meaning of “deflowering” books that seems to me an appropriate starting point for a prefatory reflection on what I ‘do’ with the central texts of this study—the novels and documents, the literary theory and the social history. Am I the deflowerer in my selection of texts and from texts?

At the center of this study are readings of specific scenes of defloration, literal and figurative, in the stories told in three pairs of novels written about heterosexual relationships between the 1740s and the 1860s: Samuel Richardson’s _Clarissa_ (1747-8) and John Cleland’s _Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure_, more widely known as _Fanny Hill_ (1748-9); Frances Burney’s _Evelina_ (1778) and Jane Austen’s _Emma_ (1814); and, finally, Mrs. Oliphant’s _Miss Marjoribanks_ (1865-6) and Anthony Trollope’s _Phineas Finn_
(1867-69). By ‘culling’ six novels from the vast body of novels during this time span. I am obviously making an idiosyncratic selection. I have selected novels that are “most valuable” to me because of their role in the history of the novel, in particular of the marriage-plot novel, but also because I see them as particularly striking and transparent manifestations of the transmutations that the story of defloration undergoes between the 1740s and the 1860s.

The restriction to a small number of novels across more than a century is, however, not simply a return to the grandiose arguments in the early historiography of the novel by scholars who tried to forge a coherent, universalized narrative about the novel’s development from selected and usually highly canonical examples. On the contrary, in picking a choice few novels, with highly visibly gaps and discontinuities between them, I am trying to resist the narrative impulse to tell a coherent and seamless story of the rise and fall of the marriage plot and of the repression of literal defloration with the nineteenth century. Likewise, I resist both embracing and bashing the canon, by mixing and matching firmly texts by established novelists like Richardson, Austen and Trollope with texts from the sub-cultural counter-canon of pornography, with recent ‘rediscoveries’ of once-canonical works like Burney’s *Evelina*, and with an out-of-print novel by a marginal Victorian writer, Mrs. Oliphant. My story of the historical indebtedness of the marriage plot to more aggressively and literally sexual plots is thus intentionally fragmentary and uneven. But of course, my resistance is never as firm as I would like it to be, and it is no use denying that I am, in fact, telling a *story*, however fragmentary and limited in scope. The three pairs of novels I will discuss can easily be read as the beginning, middle and end of a narrative of the feminocentric initiation novel, even without the gapless continuity that I strive to avoid. I am, of course, also sorely tempted to fill in the gaps that I have left, and ‘explain’ other transmutations of the heterosexual initiation story, especially beyond the 1860s, when novels about the breakdown of marriage and about
pre- and extramarital texts become prominent—a point to which I will return briefly in my conclusion.

When it comes to the moments within these texts that I have thus ‘culled’ from the history of the novel, I am once more a deflowerer of books. By emphasizing, even exclusively focusing on, scenes that are climactic moments in the narrative because they are sexually charged, orgasmic scenes, I am taking what to me (and to many readers before me) are the “best bits.” I am interested in these scenes because they are highly charged, erotically tense and often titillating “sex scenes”—be they literal descriptions of heterosexual intercourse or metaphorically transformed proposal scenes. As a deflowerer of novels, then, am I doing violence to the narratives by focusing so exclusively on their narrative and sexual peaks? Given the OED chain of definitions, even the defloration of books is a process that cannot be clearly separated from the dynamics of rape that are so firmly inscribed into the story of defloration: I am the active reader and interpreter of the text, a masculinized figure acting on an objectified, feminized body—a corpus of texts of my own choosing, from which I take the flowers, the “choice... parts.”

Whether readers are inevitably forced into a masculinized position vis-à-vis the text has, of course, been questioned at least since Judith Fetterley’s observations on the Resisting Reader, and resistance is a crucial and vexed term within my argument. I will argue that the moment of defloration itself creates subversive, resistant, or recalcitrant elements that undercut the possibility of this moment becoming an uncontested, unchallenged climax. These elements of resistance are, in a way, analogous to my resistance to certain canonical readings and authoritative dicta on the history of female sexuality, the marriage plot and the ways in which gender interacts with plot. But just as I see a vacillation between resistance and recuperation, subversion and co-optation, in the moments of defloration that I am discussing, I have to look at my own focus on culturally agreed-upon “best bits”—climactic scenes in ‘mainstream’ stories of heterosexuality.
greatest hits of literary and social history—as a strategy that entangles co-optation with subversion, hegemony with rebellion.

Given the organization of my argument, I cannot but admit that I ‘buy into’ reading for such ‘best bits,’ the exciting climactic moments within what is constructed as—I will argue—the male orgasmic structure of the heterosexual narrative. By doing so, I inevitably validate them as “the most valuable part” of a narrative. What I can do, however, and what this study is concerned with, is to emphasize how this ‘male’ narrative structure is achieved, and how it is counteracted by alternative narrative and sexual dynamics. Thus, I am not trying to ‘take sides’ with either of the available two extremes of labeling any of the authors and works as conventional or as challenging the conventions of heterosexual relationships, as affirming the status quo of gender ideology at a historical juncture or as subverting it. It seems to me that it is sufficiently established that authors like Richardson and Cleland, Burney and Austen, or Trollope and Oliphant always incorporate both the conventional and the resistance to it in their fiction. As many critics have pointed out for a number of different discursive contexts, this is hardly a matter of intentionality; the ideological framework within which novelists produce their novels, and to which they in turn contribute, is in itself contradictory and incorporates the very back-and-forth between contradictory cultural prescriptions about gender and sexuality. Obviously, the proportions of resistance and affirmation in different writers can vary greatly; but with the possible exception of Cleland, the writers I discuss resemble each other in that they have long been perceived as conventional, and not—say, like the modernists, or even Hardy—as iconoclastic. Richardson, Burney, Austen, Oliphant and Trollope have all long been on the list of “conservative” authors and have been actively, but not always very convincingly been rehabilitated by critics as radical, as subversive, as resistant to cultural hegemony. Novels by these authors can be expected to be to a great extent ‘affirmative’ of the historically changing ideologies, while resistance
to the ideological status quo is local rather than global, and often striking in its sudden surges.

Taking the dual presence of affirmation and subversion for granted, then, what I am interested in is how precisely this double presence manifests itself in the narrative dynamics of novels. I agree with D. A. Miller here, who had pointed out in The Novel and the Police that

It has become easy to show how the various decorums that determine a work of literature... are exceeded by the disseminial operations of language, narrative, or desire—so easy that the demonstration now proceeds as predictably as any other ritual.... Yet the point of remarking... the ‘subversion hypothesis’ of recent literature studies cannot be to dispute the evidence of such subversion.... It is rather a matter of seeing how this effect tends to function within the overbearing cultural ‘mythologies’ that will have already appropriated it. (Police xi, my emphasis)

What is crucial, then, is to consider the different ways in which these ‘mainstream’ novels register the resistance against and the gendered and gendering conventions of marriage and the marriage plot. To make transparent my own position as a deflowering reader, always both affirming but also actively engaged in subverting a posited master narrative of the development of heterosexual novel plots transparent is the metareflective extension of this emphasis on the “hows” of the interplay between affirmation and subversion.

Because the argumentative and sheer spatial weight of this study rests on the three pairs of novels that I will discuss in the following three chapters, I occupy the position of a deflowerer primarily when it comes to these six ‘primary’ texts. But in a way I am equally selective when it comes to the ‘secondary’ sources that frame my argument about the story of defloration as it is told in the novel. I would therefore like to spell out what has prompted my focus on certain limited areas of literary theory and literary history on
the one hand, and of the rapidly expanding theory and history of sexuality on the other. In the overarching logic of this tripartite introductory chapter, this twofold explanation corresponds to the two following sections—i.e. literary theory and history to the last section on "stories," and the theory and history of sexuality to immediately following section on "defloration." The reason for reversing the order here, in this brief sketch of my indebtedness, is that my specific emphasis within literary theory and history requires much less of an explanatory apparatus.

Since this study focuses on novels, it may not be surprising that I draw on narrative theory and on the history of the novel. Narrative theory, in particular when it is cross-bred with feminist literary theory to result in the feminist narratology to which I contribute here, enables me to theorize about the gendered narrative dynamics in novels in which defloration (or its figurative transformation) is staged as the climactic moment of the plot. Historical accounts of the novel (again, specifically as it has begun to explore the role of gender in the production, consumption and the ‘contents’ of novels) are equally important in that it enables me to situate my theory of gendered narrative dynamics in a historical context. Even this rather obvious choice of focus on narrative theory and the history of the novel, however, indicates a shortcut through a vast territory of literary studies: my argument includes neither genre studies nor the discourse on ‘realism’ and on the precise relationship between text and ‘reality’. I simply posit the primary importance of the novel \textit{qua} genre for the narrativization of female sexual identity via defloration, and I presume, rather than establish, that these novels participate in a discourse on defloration by \textit{both} reflecting pre-existing constructions of female sexuality and actively contributing to these constructions.

My selectivity is, perhaps, somewhat more apparent when it comes to the vast area of ‘sexuality studies,’ which again provides me with a backdrop for developing a theory and a history of defloration. My limited survey of the enormous and expanding
territory of sexuality studies is partly the result on my focus on novels that are preoccupied with heterosexual love stories, and specifically with the position of women in stories of rape, seduction, courtship and marriage. Two main limitations of my selection should be pointed out: First of all, I focus specifically on heterosexuality, especially on its perhaps most normative, institutionalized and hegemonic form, marriage. I thus do not draw on the historical and theoretical work that has been done on male and female homosexuality, on autoeroticism and masturbation, and other discourses of alternative sexualities. This focus does not, however, imply that I intend to privilege or reify the hegemonic discourse of heterosexuality as ‘normal.’ On the contrary, I consider it a social construct and will investigate its internal destabilization as it appear in novels—in other words, in a genre which, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century alike, tended to be prominently and even obsessively about heterosexuality.

Secondly, I use the seminal historical studies of sexuality and of marriage rather selectively because what interests me primarily with view to the novels are the idealized constructions of heterosexual behavior and gendered sexual identity. When one distinguishes, with Michael Mason, between sexual ‘practice’ and ‘belief’ in a society, novels tend to represent and argue with the ‘beliefs’ about sexuality rather than with the actual sexual behavior. The relationship between the two is, of course, tangled and messy, and it would be absurd to argue that ‘beliefs’ have no significant impact on ‘practice;’ however, what emerges from the demographic and documentary evidence amassed and discussed by authors as different from each other as Lawrence Stone, Alan MacFarlane, John Gillis, Michael Mason and even to a certain extent Michel Foucault, is that ‘practice’ is much more diverse across class and geographical boundaries than the ‘beliefs’—for example, beliefs as they are implicit in novels that feature heterosexual plots. Since I am specifically interested in what is implicit in these novels, the various historians’ arguments about a history of ideas—or of ‘mentalities’ in the French
historiographical tradition—concerning heterosexuality and female sexual identity have thus had a greater influence than the empirical findings about sexual behavior that these scholars might also discuss.

Ideas and ‘beliefs’ about sexuality are, of course, much more easily summarized and polarized than sexual behavior as it is evident from demographic records and documentary evidence. I have thus been able to draw on some rather simplistic models and polarizations of models precisely because it is this sexual ideology—to use a loaded term—that interests me. The most prominent example is the traditional virgin-whore dichotomy and the associated construction of female sexual desire as either nonexistent or excessive on which I will draw when I discuss the gendered narrative dynamics of the heterosexual stories. Another example is Laqueur’s juxtaposition of the “one-sex” with the “two-sexes” hypothesis and the impact of both models on varying theories of the female orgasm. Ironically, then, analyses that can justifiably accused of unduly emphasizing a particular highly theoretical construction, like Thomas Laqueur’s (cf. Mason’s critique of Laqueur, *Sexuality* 180) also ‘fit’ my project better than the studies that present a more complex and diverse picture of particular facet of the discourse on sexuality.

I wish, however, to be very clear about the limits of such an approach—I make no claims, about the direct ‘real-life’ impact of such simplistic beliefs about female sexuality. What is evident and most pertinent in the context of my study is that these simplified and idealized models are at work in the changing constructions of female sexuality and heterosexual relationships in the novels that I am discussing. It seems plausible to me that these constructions would, in turn, influence the actual sexual behavior. I have, however, no intention of proving this complicated connection. I see myself as a literary critic, not a historian. I am grateful for the historiographical work that has been done in this area, and for the ‘new’ historicism that is once more questioning the
problematic, artificial divide between "literature" and "history" cannot be separated. But my work remains focused on literary—specifically, narrative—texts and on the literary strategies employed in these texts that make for their very specific—and in many ways exceptional—participation in a discourse on sexuality.

What I have said so far about the relationship of my work vis-à-vis a history of sexuality probably makes it obvious that Foucault looms large behind my argument—perhaps not least because he is much more invested in a theory than in a history of sexuality and, especially in the first volume of the _History of Sexuality_, in the history of ideas rather than of 'practices'. Even in contributing to a narrowly _literary_ history of sexuality, I thus need to acknowledge both Foucault's influence on my project and the limits of that influence. Like many literary scholars, I find Foucault's ideas about the 'deployment' of the discourses on sexuality, on the relationship of power and knowledge, and on mechanisms of surveillance intriguing and inspiring, perhaps precisely because they are so sweeping and (again especially in the first volume of the _History of Sexuality_) so little occupied with providing historical evidence. In particular, Foucault's argument about the proliferation, rather than the disappearance, of discourses about sexuality in the nineteenth century was eye-opening when I first encountered it, and has provided me with ways to link the history of the novel to the history of sexuality.

Thus, I see the obsessive retellings of "love stories" as stories of seduction, of rape, and of courtship culminating in marriage in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century novel as part of this proliferation of discourses about sexuality. But that view is not altogether as incompatible with what Foucault calls the "repressive hypothesis" (_History of Sexuality_ I, 11, passim) as is his own narrative of a discursive explosion around sexuality in the nineteenth century. I thus agree with the main thesis of the _History of Sexuality_ only in its most cautious form—when, in the first part of Volume I of the _History of Sexuality_, Foucault declares that he wants to _situate_ the repressive hypothesis
“in the general economy of discourses on sex in the modern societies since the
seventeenth century” (11; cf. Mason’s point about this cautious version. *Sexuality* 172).

His sweeping rejection of the notion of the discursive repression of sexuality towards the
end of Volume I of the *History* is, by contrast, deeply problematic because it increasingly
implies that there was no such repression. This absolute refutation of the master narrative
of repression seems, of course, mostly polemic since it is so substantially mitigated by
Foucault’s own arguments about surveillance and discursive control, especially in
*Discipline and Punish*, but also in the second and third volumes of the *History of
Sexuality*.

The reason for my problem with Foucault’s radical rejection of the repression
hypothesis is a straightforward one: Foucault ignores genre and he ignores gender—in
other words, the two central tenets of my own study. It is because my argument centers
on gender and genre that my overarching argument fits into the Freudian master narrative,
despite my perception of the novel as part of the burgeoning discourses of sexuality in the
eighteenth and nineteenth century: I argue, after all, that the seduction and rape narratives
of the eighteenth century are transformed into more domesticated, desexualized marriage
plots, and that literal defloration is doubly replaced by the proposal scene and displaced
beyond the wedding-bells end of the marriage plot. The details of my argument will, I
think, make clear that I am not, indeed, retelling the narrative of repression that Foucault
rejects. In fact, I focus on the surprising prominence of a discourse on sexuality in this
ostensibly desexualized marriage plot. I would further argue that the marriage plot is a
way out of the discursive dead end—especially in Richardson, but in the discourse of
sentimentality in general—that results from troping women as asexual and sexual
encounters as unnarratable. The fact remains, however, that the novelistic representation
of heterosexuality in the nineteenth-century novel produces a discourse that is much less
openly sexual than either the discourse of the eighteenth-century novel or, say, the
medical discourse on masturbation or on female reproductive organs in the nineteenth century.

The ‘repressed’ language of the nineteenth-century novel and its emphatic desexualization of the heterosexual narrative especially in the early decades of the century is, I would argue, a direct result of the shift in the construction of femininity in the late eighteenth century. To simplify enormously here, with the nineteenth century came the more strictly and widely enacted separation of the spheres, the increasing emphasis on women’s ‘natural’ difference from men (even, as Thomas Laqueur has argued, in terms of the shift in anatomical representations of male and female bodies), and the more radical exclusion of women from the public sphere. All of these shifts—gradual rather than radical, and not without precedents in the eighteenth century—have a profound effect on the ways in which sexuality can be constructed in a genre in and for which women figured so prominently as authors, readers and characters. Although it is, perhaps, problematic to speak of the nineteenth-century novel, or even just the marriage-plot novel, as an unambiguously domesticated, “feminized genre” (pace Katherine Sobba Greene, who refers to the courtship novel only), it is certain that the novel was, indeed, perceived as one of the most prominent discursive venues for women.

This tightly interwoven impact of gender and genre, is of course a facet of the proliferation of the discourses on sexuality that Foucault notoriously neglects. Feminists have always pointed to the problematic omission of gender in Foucault’s argument; as Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby point out in the introduction to their early collection on *Feminism and Foucault*, Foucault’s “discussions gloss over the gender configurations of power;” he “fails to take into account the relations between masculinist authority and language, discourse, and reason” (xiv, xv). I would add that genre is an equally crucial omission precisely because genre is so deeply entangled with such “gender configurations of power.” By focusing on a medical and scientific treatises on hysteria and other
specifically 'female complaints' that were primarily perceived as part of a discursive genre produced and read by men, Foucault avoids discussing women as participants rather than objects within the discourse on sexuality. Only by excluding 'feminized' genres addressed to and also produced by women—such as novels as well as conduct books or journal articles designed to popularize scientific and medical arguments—can he argue so aggressively against the "repressive hypothesis."

The ever-increasing number of document collections and of feminist-historicist studies documenting women's participation in the discourse on female sexuality in the nineteenth (and to a lesser degree, in the eighteenth) century make clear two things clear: On the one hand, women did indeed participate in the discourses on female sexuality, but on the other hand, their participation was often a difficult achievement against enormously powerful prescriptions of feminine silence and ignorance about sexuality. It is thus not surprising that women tended to participate in (and even initiate) debates about the legal and institutional facets of female sexual identity rather than to contribute to the medical discourse that would have required an improper familiarity with sexual organs and acts. (Obviously, I am not only thinking of the novel's obsession with marriage, but also of the continuing debate about married women's property rights, divorce reform, and custody reform throughout the nineteenth century.) Neither it is surprising that the women's stance on issues involving female sexual identity was often conflicted, just as early feminist activism for political rights combined arguments for gender equality with an emphasis on proper domestic, maternal, and sexually temperate femininity (a point to which I will return in my fourth chapter).

It should be clear from the foregoing that my own positioning vis-à-vis Foucault is deeply indebted to the feminist negotiations with Foucault—not only the rather early ones collected in Diamond and Quinby's reader but also Jana Sawicki's cautious appropriation—and that my argument, literary and (so very secondarily) historical, is
informed by constructivist, historicist feminist studies. (My tribute to feminist narrative theory and the feminist history of the novel will have its place in the third and last section of this introductory chapter.) My project is thus emphatically a feminist one. However, I have also had to grapple with the fact that there has hitherto been no discussion of female sexuality, feminist or otherwise, that takes into account the importance of defloration, in particular in the historical context that is most relevant to me.

In being blatantly uninterested in the notion of defloration, feminist historians and literary scholars resemble their traditional (if not emphatically non-feminist) counterparts. Feminist and traditional, non-feminist historians alike may discuss the socio-economic and resulting symbolic importance of virginity (although many of these accounts focus on culturally and/or historically very distant views of virginity), and thereby touch on the significance of defloration as the end of virginity. They may discuss the social and legal history of marriage, and thus include the act that paradoxically signals its beginning and its ‘consummation’ at the same time. But they neglect to perform a close analysis of what defloration ‘means’ theoretically and historically for a discourse on female sexuality. It is this missing theory and history of defloration, as the central moment in the narrative of female sexual identity as it emerges in the novel that I need to provide at this point. Thus, I will now attempt to define, theoretically and historically, what I mean when I talk about “stories of defloration.” I will begin with a definition of defloration in its unique bias on female sexual experience and in its relationship to virginity and marriage. Then, I will move on to discussing what it means, in narrative terms and in the history of the novel, to tell a story of defloration.
2. Defloration

In exploring how female sexuality qua heterosexuality is turned into a narrative in British novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, my study centers on literal and metaphorical moments of defloration, on moments of a woman’s first genital heterosexual intercourse. Virtually every word in this definition—“woman’s” “genital” “heterosexual” “intercourse” as well as “moment” and “first”—needs further investigation. My investigation will revolve around the multiple implications of this definition for the construction of female sexual identity. But it is crucial to spell out, first of all, the most pertinent of these implications, in order to make clear how hopelessly overdetermined this moment is.

The moment of: Defloration is a point in a narrative—in other words, there is no uncontested “story of defloration” in the sense of a gradually progressing narrative of a woman’s initiation into heterosexual experience. Stories about defloration are stories that feature a climactic moment, an about-turn, a radical change triggered by a single event. The momentariness of defloration, the emphasis of an instance rather than a process of change, is crucial to the form of the story of female sexual identity told in all the novels I will be discussing. Conceptualized as a moment, not a process, defloration is first of all important to static, nonnarrative conceptions of female sexuality, as the moment in which a woman’s status changes abruptly from that of a virgin to that of a wife or a whore, depending on the legal context in which the defloration occurs. As I will argue in the third section of this introduction, it is this emphasis on the pivotal moment that makes defloration such a vexed and unstable element when it becomes integrated into a (implicitly processual and developmental) narrative of female initiation in the novels of the eighteenth century.
A woman's: Defloration is constructed as a uniquely female experience, firmly grounded in gender asymmetry, in the idea of a fundamental difference between men and women, and between male and female sexuality. Paradoxically, in gender-asymmetrical models, such female uniqueness is inseparable from a male standard against which everything female is measured, and to which everything female is constructed as inferior. Thus, the possessive in the phrase "woman's first ... intercourse" never indicates ownership of the experience: it does, by contrast, indicate a passive submission to the experience, to which the woman is subjected by a man, the only possible agent of the defloration (see: heterosexuality).

First: The emphasis on the first sexual intercourse is probably what connects the idea of defloration most directly to contemporary discourses about sexual initiation, in which the 'first time' for men and women has the prominent status that is assigned to a woman's first intercourse in the discourse on defloration. The fetishizing of a 'first', a hitherto unknown sensation, an experience never before had, is pervasive in stories of defloration. The first sexual experience is troped as unique and unrepeatable, and other experiences can only compete with it (as I will show especially for Cleland's Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure) when they are constructed as unique 'firsts' in some respect.

Genital: Only the penetration of the vagina by the penis (see also: heterosexual), which results in the tearing of the hymen and thus signals the loss of virginity, makes a first sexual experience an act of defloration. Other possible sexual encounters that do not involve both male and female primary reproductive organs are not constructed as 'real' sexual experience—in other words, both same-sex sexual contact and heterosexual acts that do not involve penetration, or acts that involve penetration of the wrong orifice (mouth, anus) or by the wrong object (finger, inanimate object) cannot be figured as defloration.
Heterosexual: Defloration is constructed as heterosexual; it encapsulates a compulsory heterosexuality pace Adrienne Rich that exerts its hegemony by invalidating all others forms of sexual experience, in particular homo- and autoerotic ones, against the exclusive validation of genital heterosexuality, focused on male and female reproductive organs (see: genital).

Intercourse: Although the term allows for the wonderful slippage in meaning between a sexual act and an act of verbal communication, which allows me to connect the moment of defloration directly with the moment of the proposal scene, the primary meaning of intercourse in my argument will, in a reversal of its historical accumulation of denotations, always be "sexual connexion," a meaning for which the OED cites Malthus as the first source (Compact OED, "intercourse," 2.d. 1461). But while intercourse, understood first and foremost as "heterosexual intercourse," is a restrictive term in that is prioritizes the sexual over the social interaction, in its emphasis on mutuality, it tends to undercut the unidirectional emphasis of its modifiers, "genital" and "heterosexual."

While the "genital, heterosexual" act central to defloration constructs the sexual encounter as a male act perpetrated on the female body—the penile penetration of the vagina—within the familiar asymmetry of active masculinity and passive, receptive femininity, "intercourse" indicates an act between people. It thus allows for a certain freedom and bidirectionality within the hegemonic genital heterosexuality of the kind of "sex" which a woman first experiences in the moment of defloration.

Defloration. If this obsessively explicit definition of defloration is already hopelessly overdetermined in its meaning—as exclusively heterosexual, exclusively genital, unique in its firstness, unique in its "femaleness" and singled out as a climactic moment of the story of female sexual identity—why add to the overdetermination by using "defloration" as a shortcut for this event that in itself is a tangled web of assumptions about female sexuality? Obviously, the phrase "moment of a woman's first
genital, heterosexual intercourse” is long and clumsy. But why a stale, tacky word like “defloration” for a moment that is most familiarly referred to by saying “I lost my virginity”? I have consciously chosen to use the term “defloration” as a shortcut for two reasons.

First, I have chosen to use “defloration” because, unlike “losing one’s virginity,” the term “defloration” creates a sense of distance from the ideas connected to the moment of a woman’s first heterosexual, genital intercourse. At the same time, however, the word “defloration” is not completely obsolete or alien like a foreign-language expression—e.g. the German Entjungferung—or the completely obsolete English “devirgination.”

“Defloration” occupies the middle ground between the thoroughly familiar and the completely obsolete. Thus, the term defloration appeals to me: its obsolescence makes its constructedness especially transparent, but this very obsolescence is, to a degree, deceptive and obscures the continuity of constructions of female sexuality, and in particular of sexual initiation, from eighteenth-century conceptions until today.

I thus do not think of myself as blowing the dust of centuries off an obsolete concept that has justifiably been ignored by sexuality studies. Rather, I assume that the construction of female sexual initiation that underlies the specific eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of defloration still has reverberations in the contemporary discourses of female sexuality. And I am not only thinking of the conservative backlash of the moral majority-type groups, of the Christian Coalition, the Promise-Keepers and other religious right-wing groups that are promoting virginity or premarital abstinence. (Indeed, these groups tend to share with a less insanely puritan mainstream culture a construction of sexuality that is based on gender symmetry: Abstinence is promoted for both men and women, just as the first sexual intercourse is troped as similarly important for men and women. The historically different concept of “defloration” that I will be discussing is, by contrast, based on gender asymmetry; within this asymmetrical
framework, it is preoccupied with women’s experience as they are caused by and
dependent upon men.) And yet, the prioritizing of “firstness,” of the first sexual
experience, and its inevitable troping as heterosexual and genital, are central to stories of
sexual initiation today just as they were to the asymmetrical concept of the uniquely
female experience of defloration. Thus, I see the emphasis on both normative
heterosexuality and on the first sexual experience as the most special, most climactic
sexual experience as important elements of continuity between contemporary discourses
of sexuality and the conceptions of female sexual identity implicit in defloration that I
will discuss here.

My second reason for using the term ‘defloration’ is, like the first, partly polemic
and partly an attempt to underscore the emphasis of my study: I wish to prioritize the
moment in which virginity ‘disappears’ over virginity itself and thus make clear that the
moment of defloration—and thus my argument about it—is not only ‘about’ virginity.
Studies of virginity and analyses of the literary representation of virginity are few and far
between, especially for the time period with which I am primarily concerned—the essays
collected by Lloyd Davis in *Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature* are
among the very few examples. But such studies do exist, while defloration remains
unexplored. I am, however, interested in precisely the moment in which virginity
disappears, and what how this moment functions in a narrative about female sexuality.
Using “defloration” rather than “loss of virginity” to describe this moment shifts the
emphasis away from the virgin as icon, and from the attempt to look at the iconography
of the female body. Early feminist attempts to analyze female sexuality, especially its
literary representation, were for a long time preoccupied with iconography—with images,
in particular body images, of the virgins, whores, mothers, etc. and their symbolic
weight.
Now that the focus in feminist (and non-feminist) sexuality studies has shifted to attempts to write histories of female (or ‘generic’) sexuality, this shift in focus has in turn deflected attention away from such icons to the history of such icons. For studies specifically concerned with virginity, such a focus on the history of the iconic female body means an attempt to trace, as Lloyd Davis puts it, “the changing constructions of virginal selfhood” (Davis 7). What I undertake, however, is emphatically not to write a history of the virgin as icon, but to investigate what happens when this iconic “female body” is written and read as a story—when the “process” of turning from a virgin into a whore, into a wife, into a mother, is stressed in constructions of femininity and female sexuality. My argument, as it will emerge in the second part of this introduction, is that this narrativization begins to figure prominently in eighteenth-century novels about heterosexuality, and is thus crucially entangled with the history of the novel as well as with the history of sexuality.

Defloration, not virginity, is the central concept for me in discussing the narrativization of female sexuality precisely because of its vexed status as a ‘moment’, a singular point in a story that carries the weight of the transformation of the virgin into the whore or the wife. Defloration is the pivotal transformative moment which turns the female body as the icon into a story. Where Lloyd Davis argues that defloration merely “condenses the temporal nature of virginity” (Davis 10), I would argue that defloration makes virginity temporal to begin with: virginity only becomes temporal retrospectively. in the moment of defloration. Defloration epitomizes how women’s identity becomes constructed as changeable—becomes subject to time and the subject of stories, a process that becomes highly visible with the emergence of novelistic narrative in the eighteenth century.

Although I thus wish to avoid tautologically defining “defloration” through “virginity” as dictionaries consistently do, the word defloration is, of course, at its
etymological and historical core inseparable from virginity. There is no need for a concept like defloration in a culture in which the presexual state of virginity is not valued. Accordingly, defloration's link to virginity is never more than thinly cloaked. De-flowering is, literally, the "taking away" of the "flower" virginity. The Latin root of the word flower (flos, floris) already signifies virginity alongside the literal meaning of "flower" or "blossom." Virginity is metaphorically connected to the blooming flower because both are constructed as the peak of a development, or the best and most valuable part or aspect of a particular object (cf. the related etymologies of "Florin" and "flour"). This metaphorical link naturalizes and objectifies women by comparing them to plants and their sexual development to "natural" growth. Virginity is thus always associated with a 'natural' and plantlike state of innocence, radically different from the very conscious 'manly' exercise of abstinence by Greek men described by Foucault as "Self-mastery" (History of Sexuality II, 82).

The term "defloration" implies that this "taking away of the flower" of female virginity is always sudden and externally motivated—not part of the plantlike development of female sexuality that "flower" suggests, but its disruption. The meaning of the late Latin deflorare, "to pluck, hence to devirginate" in Eric Partridge's charmingly unquestioning etymological shortcut (222, cf. OED, which provides the more literal translation "to deprive of its flowers" IV, 388), perpetuates the parallel of plant life and female sexuality implicit in the "flower" of womanhood, virginity. But the prefix de-here indicates the idea of the abrupt, violent removal of this "flower." It is thus a sudden moment that marks the end of female "bloom," not a gradual and natural decline. This moment is not initiated by the plantlike, passive woman herself, of course; it is the man who is acting, from the outside, to bring this state of bloom to its sudden end. (Incidentally, the association of a woman's virginal state with plantlike unconsciousness also implies the passive/active binary that divides men and women's sexuality in gender-
asymmetrical constructions: a binary that is reinforced by the conception of defloration as, literally and figuratively, a man's act upon a woman. Women are deflowered by men; their passivity is inscribed, as it were, in the syntax of defloration. Although the term "virgin" has sporadically been used for men since the 1300s, especially in the religious discourse on spiritually motivated chastity, its primary reference is to women, and defloration, the taking away of the virginal "flower," cannot happen to men.)

This construction of a woman's first intercourse as a traumatic loss, an act a man inflicts upon a passive woman, thereby injuring her and depriving her of her highly valued virginity, finds its most aggressive manifestation in the almost seamless association of defloration with rape. In earlier defining defloration as "the moment of a woman's first genital intercourse with a man," I consciously excluded the direct and inevitable association (implied in all three of the OED definition quoted above) of the first intercourse with loss and trauma, with rape, violation, and oppression. I have done so in order to emphasize the constructedness not only of defloration but of its link to rape. In attempting to describe, in the following, the relationship of defloration to virginity, the connection to rape will appear as inevitable, but I wish to make clear that it is inevitable only within the framework of a construction of female sexuality as heterosexuality, as asymmetrically dependent on male sexuality, and as shaped by the experience of defloration. I am, in other words, distancing myself from a type of 'danger feminism' or radical feminism in the vein of Andrea Dworkin's *Intercourse*, which would universalize this connection under the adage that all (implicitly, heterosexual) sex is rape.7

At the same time, however, I need to stress that the troping of defloration as a moment of traumatic and painful loss of virginity, is indeed firmly based on this equation of sex *qua* heterosexual, genital sex with rape. In a discourse on heterosexuality firmly based on gender asymmetry, rape appears merely as an extreme form of the 'normal' dynamics of a sexual intercourse in which the sexually active male is the owner of his
utterly dependent passive female partner. In the context of the homosocial economy, rape evokes moral outrage and a legal response not primarily because it is intercourse without the woman's consent, but because it is an infringement on another man's property. (It is only logical that a man cannot infringe on his own property and that such a discourse does not include a concept of marital rape.8)

The close etymological connection of rape and robbery is a constant reminder of this definition of rape as theft or destruction of property. The particular association of rape with defloration in this context, then, has to do not only with the common denominator of pain and injury, but also with the perception of a virginal woman as an especially valuable property, whose value is diminished substantially through defloration, irrespective of whether it is by rape or not. Definitions of 'defloration' and its cognates consistently refer to this linkage. Thus, the OED definition quoted at the beginning of this chapter does not even distinguish between two definitional categories but creates a nearly seamless definition: to deflower is "To deprive (a woman) of her virginity; to violate, ravish." The transition to the figurative meaning, which inevitably blends rape with theft and property violation in the verbs "To violate, ravage, desecrate; to rob of its bloom, chief beauty, or excellence; to spoil" "is similarly effortless (cf. OED IV, 388)

The association of defloration with rape is, I will argue, virtually ineradicable because even the most euphoric stories of female sexual initiation are narratives about a penetration that causes pain, a traumatic bloodshed that indicates violation even when the sexual intercourse that caused it was, technically, based on consent. Thus, Cleland in The Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure can only celebrate defloration by also celebrating female pain and masochism, and by subscribing to a construction of female sexual experience that fails to provide a definitional boundary between seduction and rape, between consensual and nonconsensual illegitimate sex. (As I have just pointed out, legally sanctioned marital sex also did not provide such a boundary—the boundary that is
valid here is the one between premarital and marital sex.) Even when the story of female sexual initiation is told as a genteel, desexualized story of courtship, there is always the potential of sexual assault, the threat of a traumatic event, as I will show for the coach scene in *Emma*, where the ‘harmless’ Mr. Elton becomes the stand-in for the rapist who is still literally present (and active) in Richardson’s novels. Because the defloration is only accomplished when the hymen is torn and blood is shed, the discourse of defloration puts special emphasis on the impossibility of distinguishing any form of penetration-based heterosexual sex from rape.

I have already pointed out repeatedly that the concept of defloration is predicated on a structure of heterosexual relationships and acts that juxtaposes male activity and female passive, man as penetrator and woman as penetrated. I have referred to this construction as profoundly gender-asymmetrical or, to use Foucault’s term, dissymmetrical (cf. *History of Sexuality* II, esp. 22, 165). But I have not yet discussed why the notion of gender asymmetry, and its counter-construct, gender symmetry, are so central to a discussion of defloration. Gender dissymmetry, as Foucault describes it for ancient Greece in Volume II of his *History of Sexuality*, emphasizes the essential difference of male and female sexuality, and the dependence of female sexuality on a male counterpart that is always conceptualized as superior. It yields the classic double standards in heterosexual relationships, i.e. it assigns identical sexual behaviors of men and women—premarital chastity, marital fidelity, adultery—different meanings. For sexual intercourse, this asymmetry implies the familiar passive/active binary: women are passive receptacles for men—not only in terms of procreation, where they appear as vessels rather than as contributors to conception, but also in terms of sexual pleasure (cf. *History* ii, 129).

Asymmetry in gender construction, however, is juxtaposed, at least as early as late antiquity, with a symmetrical model. Foucault locates the shift to a symmetrical
construction of gender relationships, especially in marriage, in his third volume of the *History*, in late antiquity, especially in Stoic thought. Although he makes clear that this symmetry is based on very different premises than the gender-symmetrical conceptions of marriage in Christianity (cf. especially *History* III, 183), he also stresses the crucial connection between the two models. In seeing a development that leads from asymmetry to symmetry in the construction of gender, Foucault does emphasize the opposition of the two concepts; however, the construction of deflation makes clear what the juxtaposition of Foucault's argument with Thomas Laqueur's in *Making Sex* suggests: that the symmetrical and asymmetrical model of gender relations *coexist*, with perhaps equal prominence, since antiquity.

According to Laqueur, the medical construction of the body is based on the “one-sex body” (19, passim) from Greek anatomical tracts to the eighteenth-century medical treatises, before “the establishment of two sexes” in the nineteenth century (20). This alternative and equally important model of the relations between the sexes or sexual bodies is based on an idea of gender symmetry, although Laqueur is careful to point to the underlying asymmetry of all these models implicit in the use of the male body as “the standard in the game of signification” (23). I would argue, with Foucault and Laqueur (or, as the case may be, against both) that the two models not only exist side by side from antiquity on, but that the incompatibility of both results in the often muddled and contradictory construction of sexuality that one finds in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts alike.

The different ways in which the female orgasm (important to my later narrative analysis of the “climax” in heterosexual narratives) are constructed is a case in point. In speaking about the sexual economy in Hellenic marriages, Foucault points out that a woman’s sexual climax in a gender-asymmetrical discourse is conceived as “not exactly the complement of the male act: it [is] more in the nature of duplicate, but in the form of
a weakened version that depend[s] on the male act both for health and for pleasure” (Foucault, *History*, ii,129). The gender-symmetrical construction, however, which is prominent in Laqueur’s argument, is based much more explicitly on sameness—the female orgasm is equated with the male orgasm (complete with the ejaculation of fluids) and thus held to be necessary for conception, since Galen (cf. Laqueur, Ch.2, esp. 43-52). Both of these concepts thus coexist as models of the female orgasm—and do so, as Mason’s remarks make clear, into the nineteenth century (cf. Mason, *Sexuality* 201-204).

Defloration is central to the contradictions between gender symmetry and gender asymmetry in the construction of physical bodies (a construction which, as Laqueur stresses, implies a whole epistemology of gender and gender relations). Thus, the gender-symmetrical “commonplace,” going back to Galen and beyond, that male and female genitalia are basically identical (Laqueur 4), is incompatible with the idea of the virginal body and especially the hymen. The history of the hymen, sketchy as our knowledge of it is, demonstrates with particular clarity how the body itself is a cultural construct—and a contradictory one at that. As Giulia Sissa has pointed out in her study of virginity in Hellenic Greece, there is no conclusive evidence that Greek culture had a concept of the hymen or any other “physical correlate of maidenhood” (105). The word *parthenos* could denote a virgin or simply a young unmarried woman, and the sexual activity of a *parthenos* was generally not punished unless she was discovered to be pregnant.

More importantly, Greek gynecological treatises describe the presence of a membrane blocking the vagina as a malformation to be surgically removed, rather than as a standard feature of virginal anatomy. Sissa quotes Soranus, a Greek anatomist during Roman times, as speaking explicitly against the notion of a hymen closing off the vagina (Sissa 113). The vaginal bleeding caused by defloration is not seen as caused by the rupture of a membrane but to the reaction of the vagina to penetration, as “an organ not yet fully relaxed” (Sissa 116). Sissa argues that the hymen may have been a Roman
invention: alternatively, it may have been introduced into gynecology in the early Middle Ages via Arabic medical writers, as Esther Lastique and Helen Rodnite Lemay argue in their discussion of a medieval physician’s comments on virginity. The hymen is not mentioned in any medical treatise before 1150. the word itself not used until the fifteenth century (Lastique and Lemay, 59-60).

Once the concept has fully emerged in the high Middle Ages, however, it is clearly based on gender asymmetry. Whether constructed as a membrane or a separate organ, the hymen is constructed unique to female anatomy; the virginal body before defloration, marked by the presence of the hymen as a complete and unviolated body, has no male equivalent. The hymen thus renders the virginal body unique, an Other rather than the equivalent or reversed complement of the male body. Importantly, however, the special status of the virginal female body ultimately means that the female body after as well as before defloration is intrinsically troped as different from the male body: The concept of a split sexual identity itself—the distinction between the virginal and the nonvirginal woman—emphasizes gender asymmetry because it has no equivalent in constructions of male sexual identity. Only the female body is constructed as a body in two physically different manifestations before and after sexual initiation. (I will return to what I am omitting here for the time being: namely, the bifurcation of the nonvirgin into either wife or whore, depending on the legal context of the moment of her defloration.)

The hymen, then, by separating the virgin from the nonvirgin, allows for an intra-gender asymmetry that, in turn, reinforces the construction of the female sexual body as fundamentally different from the male sexual body. This “intra-gender” asymmetry is, of course, central to the idea of virginity and distinguishes it from related concepts like abstinence, chastity, or purity—terms that tend to collapse in many arguments about female sexuality. The difference between virginity and concepts like abstinence and chastity is crucial. While all these terms emphasize the desired lack of sexual activity in a
woman, and all serve rather transparently to control women's sexual activity (whether they are married and unmarried) in the name of patrilinearity, virginity assigns a special value to never having had sexual contact. This emphasis on the total purity and presexuality of the virgin makes clear how important the moment of defloration is, as the moment that decisively ends this idealized state and makes, as I have argued, a temporal one.

The construction of the undeflowered body as the 'different,' as absolutely pure, asexual femininity is the central feature of the enormous, overdetermined spiritual and moral value attached to virginity in medieval Christian doctrine. The untouched body of the Virgin Mary is perhaps the epitome of the Christian emphasis on virginity as sign of spiritual as well as bodily purity. In Catholic doctrine, Mary's hymen becomes the sign of her indubitable virginity, since it remains unbroken not only during conception, but also during childbirth (cf. Warner xxii). By virtue of the presence of the hymen, the virginal body becomes a sign of moral and spiritual perfection, read as "seamless, unbroken, a literal epiphany of integrity" (Warner 73). The concept of virginity is, perhaps, never without this symbolic significance. Even in antiquity, the economic value of virginity metaphorically equals a woman's moral integrity in the sense that it implies her obedience to father and future husband. But it is medieval Christian doctrine that first assigns this overdetermined spiritual and moral significance to virginity.

It is beyond the scope of my dissertation to discuss the medieval religious foundations for the spiritual idealization of virginity—in the cult of Mary as well as in seminal theological texts in praise of virginity, like the anonymous *Hali Meidenhead* and the disputations on virginity by St. John Chrysostom and St. Ambrose. What is important about this idealization of absolute purity embodied by the virgin is that it complicates a discourse in which virginity is temporary, and valued precisely because of the expectation of a future marriage. Making virginity an absolute good in the name of a Christian
celebration of celibacy obscures—although it never altogether obliterates—the 
socioeconomic concerns with a woman's premarital chastity that render the concept of 
virginity hegemonic in many societies, western and nonwestern.

These economic concerns, related to the role of women as objects in homosocial 
property transfers from father to husband—in other words, what Gayle Rubin in her 
seminal essay called "the traffic in women" (Rubin 157 passim)—crucially link 
defloration and virginity to the history of marriage and its importance for the passing-on 
of property. From both historical and anthropological points of view, the property 
transfers implicit in marriage transaction make virginity and the precise moment of 
defloration so important. The "value of virginity," as Alice Schlegel calls it in a 
comparative analysis of attitudes toward virginity in 186 preindustrial societies, depends 
on the degree to which marriage is associated with property transfer. Thus, she concludes 
that "when no property accompanies the marriage, virginity is of little interest" (Schlegel 
725). Schlegel emphasizes the importance of virginity to a woman's family and its 
property: she argues that the prescription of virginity is most directly linked to dowry—as 
she points out, the marriage transaction most common in Northern Europe until and 
beyond the eighteenth century (Schlegel 720). Because it enhances the unmarried 
woman's value by the property which she will bring to her future husband, dowry can 
attract an undesirable suitor who might seduce a woman in order to force the family to 
consent to a marriage that is advantageous to him, but not to the woman and her family 
(Schlegel 724). If a woman's virginity is highly valued, the premarital loss of virginity 
implies her devaluation even to her seducer, and thus protects her and her family from the 
potential hazard of seduction by an unwanted suitor.

A marriageable woman's family is, however, not the only one whose interests are 
being served by a prescription of virginity. In patriarchal cultures, with their emphasis on 
patrilineal descendants, virginity protects the future husband's interests as well. In the
absence of a way to prove or disprove paternity, the absolute prohibition of premarital sex guarantees that no heir will be conceived before marriage, and that the deflowerer—presumably able to prevent his wife, *qua* possession, from having extramarital sex—is the father of a woman’s children. The construction of virginity as provable by virginity ‘tests’—be it by magic, vaginal inspection or, in retrospect, by the blood that is shed when the a bride is deflowered during her wedding night—is crucial in this context. Conversely, the possibility of feigning virginity becomes a tremendous source of male anxiety about women’s bodies. This anxiety is still evident in Cleland’s *Memoirs*, where such feigning plays a prominent role, and certainly palpable in Jacobean drama.⁹

The socioeconomic importance of virginity precisely with view to a future marriage and the absolute value placed on virginity in medieval Christian doctrine combine to produce a very contradictory, conflict-ridden discourse about female sexuality in which the moment of defloration has a vexed and highly ambivalent function. Along with the problematic association of defloration with pain and bloodshed that I have already discussed, the glorification of perpetual virginity renders defloration very clearly a moment of loss, as the end of a cherished state of virginal innocence. But the socioeconomic teleology in which virginity is the prerequisite for a marriage that, by definition, ends the virginal state, also renders the moment of defloration as a moment of gain, of the beginning of a new and highly valued status as wife and, in the ideal scenario of consummation as conception of the first male child, as mother to the patrilinear heir.

This contradiction becomes more apparent when the virginal ideal is increasingly secularized and taken out of the realm of exclusively theological doctrine, especially with the onset of the Reformation and the Renaissance. The emphasis on marriage as a spiritual and moral good rather than as a “remedy against sin”—a lesser alternative, to the true ideal of life-long sexual abstinence—¹⁰—potentially emphasizes the importance of defloration as beginning. But the construction of defloration as a moment of loss and as
the destruction of virginal identity, translated into ‘true’ feminine identity, remains a crucial facet of defloration as well. Defloration thus retains a vexed function in the context of the development of marriage that carries over into the emerging construction of marriage as ‘love marriage’ and thereby as an affair that concerns, primarily, the individual couple and not its extended family with its socioeconomic investment in the ‘right’ transfer of property with patrilineal kinship systems.

Indeed, this shift in the construction of marriage (to which I will return in a moment) might be said to enhance defloration’s conflicted function, because it is a shift that can be seen as based on an increasing emphasis on gender symmetry. Companionate marriage presumes the equality and complementarity of the spouses (cf. MacFarlane 154-59)—of course, with an implicit male standard as the basis of this equality. Even Foucault sees the Christian conception of marriage since the middle ages as fundamentally symmetrical (cf. History Vol. III, 183, 235). Although firmly integrated into this model as the moment of the consummation and thus the legal validation of the marital relationship (MacFarlane 304, 315), defloration is thus again is a striking reminder of the asymmetrical conception of gender relationships that coexists in contradiction with the symmetrical model. Not only does the rupture of the hymen function as a reminder of the asymmetrically different female body, then. The importance of the moment of defloration for constructing virginity as temporal rather than as eternal, as the prerequisite to marriage and the guarantor of ‘right’ heirs, points to the larger socioeconomic context of marriage that fits much more clearly into the patrilineal, patriarchal system of kinship-oriented marriage or (in Foucault’s terms) “alliance” than into the model of the conjugal marriage. Defloration here functions as a remnant of the “alliance” system’s patent gender asymmetry within the ostensibly symmetrical system of conjugal marriage—and thus also of a reminder of the patent power asymmetries of
“alliance” within a patriarchal, patrilinear system that makes women utterly dependent on men *qua* male relatives and husbands.

That “alliance” and “conjugal marriage” did, to a degree, exist side by side is implicit in the fact that different historians of the family have identified such a range of different points of origin for the emerging “conjugal family system,” as MacFarlane calls it (37, following Goode). Many prominent scholars have located its beginnings after the reformation. Lawrence Stone in particular emphasizes the importance of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century for the shift towards the “closed domesticated nuclear family,” the “companionate marriage” both based on the establishment of “affective individualism.” John Gillis locates the beginning of “the conjugal age.” with all the reservations he expresses about the hegemony of the conjugal, in the seventeenth century. For Foucault, the gradual shift from an emphasis on the “deployment of alliance” to one on the “deployment of sexuality” also begins in the seventeenth century. Niklas Luhmann likewise locates the related emergence of a “code” of love out of one of “passion” in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century.11 Other scholars, especially Alan MacFarlane and Jack Goody, emphasize a “deeper continuity, stretching back into the later Middle Ages” (MacFarlane 44)12 between modern and premodern constructions of “Family, Sex and Marriage,” as the title of Stone’s seminal study has it. But it is clear from MacFarlane’s remarks about Stone that remnants of the older system exist far beyond the middle ages, even if they are, as MacFarlane argues, restricted to a social elite in which “marriages were more like alliances” precisely because “very large fortunes became involved” (46).

When it comes to the eighteenth century—the point at which my own investigation of the literary negotiations with marriage and premarital sex begins—all of the above-mentioned studies have a crucial point in common. They are all compatible with the discovery that substantial demographic changes in the second half of the
eighteenth century (especially the rise in population) are linked to empirically traceable changes in behavioral patterns concerning sex and marriage: a decrease in the age at marriage, a decrease in the numbers of men and women who remained unmarried, and a rise in illegitimate as well as prenuptial pregnancies. Depending on the different scholars' interpretations, these changes might either have resulted from rather recent and "radical change in the structure and nature of marriage" (MacFarlane 30) or from a gradual transition that possibly began in the Middle Ages. Importantly, however, either argument is compatible with the picture that emerges of the specific history of heterosexuality and marriage in the eighteenth century: that marriage as an institution, and behaviors associated with it or dissociated from it, are by no means clearly defined and demarcated in the eighteenth century. Michael Mason and John Gillis have made clear that this is also true, to a certain extent, for the nineteenth-century—especially, as in particular Gillis emphasizes, when it comes to the working-class construction of marriage.

As Gillis (in Part II of For Better, For Worse), Stone (Family 605- 648, esp. 605-7) and, more cautiously, Mason (Sexuality 68-72) indicate, premarital sex is a common occurrence especially in the second half of the eighteenth-century, possibly across class boundaries. More importantly, from demographic data and documented courtship practice, one can conclude that such premarital sexual activity, especially in the context of an engagement, is not sharply distinguished from marital sex. Not only were the numbers of illegitimate children high throughout the eighteenth and far into the nineteenth century; premarital pregnancy which resulted in marriage was extremely frequent. Thus, Mason cites evidence that in the eighteenth century at least about 30% of all marriages took place when the bride was pregnant, and that the rate did, indeed, rise to 40% and higher in the first half of the nineteenth century (Sexuality 66-67). Notoriously, English couples married at a comparatively late age compared with virtually all other
European countries (even after the average age at marriage dropped from 26 to 23 for women in the eighteenth century; cf. MacFarlane 26). From this, a number of historians have concluded that protracted courtships, especially long periods of betrothals or spousals, very commonly included sexual intimacy, sometimes in ritualized forms such as "bundling" (cf. Gillis 120-1: Stone 605-7).

But if the distinction between the married and the nonmarried is not clearly drawn in sexual behavior throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, even the legal framework within which marriage and premarital sex take place undergoes massive changes in the eighteenth century. As Lawrence Stone's account of the "making of marriage" in The Road to Divorce makes clear, there is no legal consensus regarding what constitutes a legal marriage in the first half of the eighteenth century. Only with the passing of Lord Hardwicke's Act in 1753, a more clear-cut and specific definition of what constituted a legal marriage emerges from the bewildering array of hitherto valid marriage ceremonies ranging from clandestine marriages, marriage by license, in the church, and via informal promises before and without witnesses, all of which were long accepted by the church courts. The Marriage Act also established that civil courts, and not ecclesiastical courts, had the jurisdiction in cases involving marriage, and thus contributed to the legal consolidation of a secular idea of marriage.

The debates about Lord Hardwicke's Act prior to its passing in 1753 demonstrate how unstable and hotly debated the legal definition of marriage was at mid-century. It can by no means be assumed that the Act itself resolved even all the legal problems; it certainly did not remove the unstable boundaries between premarital and marital sex, or create a less ambiguous cultural construction of women's status. Thus, as Staves points out, the seduced maiden, importantly prominent in the novels of the second half of the eighteenth century, is a figure who is sympathetic rather than condemned as fallen woman, and who sometimes (especially when she is of lower rank) finally does marry
after her seduction. Given that the secular idea of marriage was, crucially, concerned with property and with the link rather than the separation between emotional and monetary ties, drawing a boundary between “love marriage” and economically based marriage so problematic. (Problems with such boundaries are especially evident, as Susan Staves has argued, in Breach of Promise suits and related legal actions that awarded monetary compensation to seduced women or there fathers, where the ecclesiastical courts had been able to enforce marriage “on the ground of precontract:” cf. Staves, “Maidens” 126.)

What makes these unstable boundaries between premarital and marital sex as well as the contradictory attitudes to sexual activity during courtship so important in the context of defloration is that they reinforce the ambiguous positioning of this moment. Hypothetically, the construction of defloration as loss or gain, end or beginning, can simply be linked to the legal context and thus the timing of the defloration. Premarital defloration makes a woman ‘damaged goods;’ it deprives her of her value as an object in a homosocial exchange. Defloration within the context of a legitimate union, on the other hand, does not devalue her, even though it changes her status radically. This bifurcation of female sexual identity into wife and whore in the moment of defloration is an important complication of the “intra-gender” asymmetry that divides the virgin from the nonvirgin. It would appear that premarital and marital defloration are two different events, because of their different consequences for a woman’s legal and social position. But the absolute distinction between premarital and marital defloration, is, of course, one that can only be in place when there is a clear consensus (legally and culturally) about what constitutes a marriage. Since this consensus was, at the very most, only partially reached by the late eighteenth-century, defloration is never neatly divided into the ‘bad’ premarital defloration and the ‘good’ marital one.
I contend that the novels of the eighteenth century negotiate precisely this ambivalence, and that, by doing so, they participate in a discourse about the insecurities about marriage as an institution, about premarital sex, and thus about the way in which these insecurities shape the construction of female sexual identity. The novel's participation in this discourse is simultaneously a reflection of cultural instabilities regarding men, women and the heterosexual connection between them, and an (increasingly visible, but never altogether successful) attempt to remove those instabilities and create a less ambiguous model. In its most simplified form, this model of heterosexual relationships posits that marital courtship is good, asexual and central to a story about heterosexuality, while seduction is bad, sexual, and marginalized. However, as a consequence of the attempt to establish such clear-cut distinctions, the moment that turns women from virgins into wives becomes increasingly impossible to describe directly in novels that portray and promote 'good' asexual courtship. Defloration is thus banished beyond the ending of the story, excluded from a narrative trajectory that ends with the wedding. Defloration does, however, sneak in through the back door, as it were—it manifests itself in metaphorical displacements throughout the narrative, only to reinstitute the very anxieties and instabilities about sex and marriage inherent in the moment of defloration.

In the following section, I will trace how the division of the heterosexual narrative into stories of seduction or rape and of legitimate courtship narratives emerges, and how the exclusive focus on the courtship plot means that defloration is metaphorized in climactic proposal scenes. But before I do so, I need to clarify what it means to talk not only about a moment of defloration, but about a story of defloration—what it means to talk about narrative, and about the ways in which the narrative dynamics of heterosexual stories replicate the very ambivalence of defloration that is so crucially linked to the
unstable definitions of legitimate heterosexuality and, as I will ultimately argue, the instabilities of gender construction itself.

3. Stories

The foregoing discussion of defloration as a crucial concept in the construction of female sexuality has already relied heavily on categories like “narrative” and “narrativizing,” like “story” and “plot,” and on vaguely Aristotelian notions of story as consisting of “beginning,” “middle,” and “end.” In now discussing the actual story of defloration as I see it being told in marriage-plot novels and its predecessors, I need to explain, rather than continue to imply, what I mean by “story” and especially by “plot.” That means, first of all, to acknowledge the influence of narrative theory on my project, then to construct a theoretical model to describe the dynamics of defloration narratives, and finally to position this model within the history of the novel that I attempt to sketch via the three pairs of novels that I will discuss in the subsequent three chapters.

Since my argument is explicitly about narrative, it may seem banal to say that I need to define my own position vis-à-vis narrative theory. But literary critics who focus on narrative often do not acknowledge, and are sometimes unaware of, their debt to narrative theory. On the one hand, narratological terminology (especially such seemingly less esoteric concepts as “plot,” “point of view,” “narrator” or “voice”) is often used loosely, without any sense of its lineage in theory and criticism. I wish to avoid this approach, which implies what Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse describe as the humanist (anti-poststructuralist, anti-deconstructionist) tradition of taking narrative for granted (“History” 46). On the other hand, I also wish to steer clear of the tendency of poststructuralist theory to reject and ignore narrative theory as irrelevant to its projects. Therefore, I find it necessary to situate my own theory of gendered plot explicitly within
narrative theory, but also within the poststructuralist and feminist critique of narrative theory, specifically of narratology. In doing so, I hope to make clear that my own approach to narrative theory is not structuralist, especially in that it questions universality.\textsuperscript{16}

Having said that, I need to emphasize, however, that, because my interest is in plot, I can never escape structuralism altogether. I am concerned with the description of the structure of a narrative, which leaves me indebted to structuralist ideas about plot, even though I do not subscribe to the essentialism of classic structuralism. This indebtedness is problematic. Developing and applying a narrative model that is deeply influenced by structuralist narrative theory within the context of a project that is both feminist and historicist generates problems. Throughout its history, narrative theory has had a tendency to be both gender-blind and ahistorical, and has therefore been seen as incompatible with a focus on gender and on historical context. Indeed, the tendency of narrative theory to focus on universals that transcend all context has become one of the main sources for narratology’s general fall from grace in literary criticism since the early 1980s. But it is not only narratology, whose structuralist heritage has made it particularly insistent on universal narrative rules and categories, that is vulnerable to accusations of essentialism. Attempts at theorizing narrative that have been closer to the critical ‘mainstream’ of the past decade or so—say, Barthes’ poststructuralist revisions of his structuralist beginnings, or Peter Brooks’ psychoanalytic theory of plot—generally betray no interest in the implications that history and gender might have on narrative and on theorizing narrative.

The study of plot and narrative patterns, the area of narrative theory that is most important to my own project, is possibly the most entrenched ‘pocket’ of structuralism in narrative theory. The study of plot never seems to escape the search for universals, for that magic formula through which all plots can be transculturally and transhistorically
connected and categorized. One of the most visible shortcomings of such universalism has been narratology's assumption of gender-neutrality. From Propp and Lévi-Strauss to Gerald Prince's early work, Claude Bremond's more semantically informed model, and Thomas Pavel's and Marie-Laure Ryan's recent rewritings of plot grammars, plot models developed through narrative grammars and theories of narrative functions and modes are not directly gendered. All of these theories of plot assume that there is no gender in plot and that the role of agency or of linear sequencing in a story has no gender implications. (Implicitly, of course, the default gender is here once more male, as is particularly manifest in the focus on male authors in the narratological canon of texts) Plot is thus, unsurprisingly, an area that evokes a strong sense of discomfort among poststructuralist theorists—including feminists invested in social constructivism and historicism. The study of plot has thus become one of the most neglected areas within narrative theory in recent years, and poststructuralist approaches to it are rare. Against this marginalization, I will argue that plot is, in fact, an extremely useful category in analyzing narratives—if plot as a category is both gendered (and sexualized) and historically framed.

In arguing for a gendered, historicized concept of plot, I follow in the footsteps of feminists who have argued for a feminist narratology, and suggest that it can be extended and specifically applied to question of plot or story line. Narrative theory has traditionally claimed to transcend not only gender but also other categories of differences in what it hopes to achieve—the categorizing and systematizing of all narrative. In the past decade, however, an increasing—if relatively small—number of feminists have begun to appropriate and adapt narrative theory to their own purposes. The major proponents of such an expanded and revised narratology that is explicitly feminist are Susan Lanser, Robyn Warhol, and, most recently, the contributors to Kathy Mezei's collection of essays on feminist narratology. They have proposed to introduce gender into narratological discussions of narrative voice, of narrator/narratee relationships and, to
a certain extent, of plot. And they have pointed out that the alleged gender-neutrality of narratology is rendered somewhat problematic by the overwhelmingly male narratological canon.¹⁸

Both Lanser and Warhol call for the use of gender in narrative theory and, conversely, argue for the usefulness of such gender-informed narrative theory in feminist criticism. Lanser specifically emphasizes what narrative theory has been very reluctant to recognize: that sex and gender are “a common if not constant element of narrative as long as we include its absence as a narrative variable” (“Sexing the Narrative.” 87), for example when gender seems ‘unmarked’ in a particular narrative like Jeannette Winterson’s Written on the Body. (In Lanser’s early call for a feminist narratology, gender is still very much used in an essentialist sense in relationship to female authors: however, in her work since Fictions of Authority as well as in Warhol’s Interventions, gender appears explicitly as a constructed category not necessarily related to the literal gender of author and/or narrator).

Both Warhol and Lanser demonstrate the role of gender in narrative analysis in terms of the gendering of narrative voice and the relationship of narrators to various categories of readers and narratees. Unfortunately, this primary interest in narrative voice leads them both to marginalize the question of how plot might be gendered, or influenced by gender. Thus, Warhol merely suggests that “[n]arratological analysis on the level of story... might reveal gendered differences between treatments of relationships among characters, shapes of plot, or influence of ideology” (20), before announcing her own focus on the gendering of the narrator’s direct addresses to the reader. Lanser, who devotes a little more time and space to plot, focuses altogether on voice in Fictions of Authority, and admits elsewhere that plot lies outside her own “area of expertise.”¹⁹ She suggests, however, that the traditional “single definition and description of plot” based on a progressive, implicitly masculine model operating on a principle of “active acquisition
or solution” (“Towards A Feminist Narratology,” 624) may need to be revised or replaced by an alternative. She argues that this traditional model only yields a negative definition of ‘female’ plots as plotless, as “static... not progressive” (623, quoting Donovan). As merely deprived of the agency implicit in progressive models of plot. Lanser radically simplifies ‘traditional’ narratological theories of plot here, especially in terms of agency, which narratologists like Gerald Prince in his story grammars often do not identify with the presumably male hero, but with some abstract principle of intrinsic plot progression. Lanser is furthermore not at all concerned with variations of these narratological ‘male’ plot models, such as Brooks’ psychoanalytic explanation of the progression of plot. However, her suggestion that a single definition of plot might not be sufficient to explain and explore the impact of gender on plot is crucial to my own undertaking.

Not surprisingly, I do indeed suggest a gendering of plot models, a discussion of plot dynamics as, respectively, male and female. I do so, of course, with the understanding that these categories of gender are not universal, but culturally constructed in a flexible rather than a fixed relationship to other (equally constructed) gendered categories in narratives. As Warhol points out, and as many recent studies on narrative ‘cross-dressing’ and ‘masquerading’ have emphasized, the essentializing link between the gender of the ‘narrative voice’ and the gender of authors, characters or readers is deeply problematic and needs to be reconsidered precisely in terms of the cultural constructedness of gender. Unlike categories like authors, narrators, narratees or readers, plot seems to beg the question how it could possibly be ‘naturally’ gendered. It is rarely transparently linked to the gender of the particular gendered ‘person’ of authors, characters, narratees or implied readers. The question of what might possibly gender plot can never be straightforwardly and unambiguously answered: would a female author, a female character, an audience expected to be female, or a specific event troped as female make the plot a ‘female’ plot? Often, such categories merge, for example in the attempts
to define the ‘female’ Gothic or the ‘female’ *Bildungsroman*, where specific plots become identified as female for some critics only when both authors and characters are female. For others, while for others, characters or authors alone are sufficient (Is *Portrait of A Lady* a female *Bildungsroman*? Is *Frankenstein* part of the female Gothic?)

My own approach to how plot is gendered within the context of these multiple frameworks of gender begins with different constructions of gendered sexual desire that, I argue, are culturally inscribed in different models of plot. At first sight, it seems almost parodically simple to equate the dynamics of plot with sexual dynamics, and the climactic moment of a plot with the sexual climax. Indeed, I first encountered this equation in a parodic (and satirized) form, in David Lodge's *Small World*, where a female character delivers an MLA paper in which she compares the episodic structure of the medieval romance to the female multiple orgasm (Lodge 322-3). Admittedly, to evoke the connection of plot to concepts of pleasure and desire that are troped as explicitly sexual is somewhat problematic and limiting, as Jay Clayton argues in his critique of Brooks’ and Bersani’s very different approaches to the link between narrative and desire. As he points out, the expression “desire” has “no single, stable meaning in contemporary criticism.” and yet, it is almost exclusively defined as sexual desire—never as, or even in relation to “cravings for money, power, knowledge, or God”—or food, for that matter (Clayton 35-36).

However, it is precisely the link between the dynamics of plot and those of sexual desire, which has proven so vulnerable to criticism and to ridicule, that opens up a way of talking about the link between plot and gender. The analogy between plot progression and the sexual dynamics of arousal, climax, and relaxation does, of course, beg the question how such an analogy is gendered. Indeed, critics like Teresa de Lauretis (in “Desire in Narrative”) and Susan Winnett, the foremost among the very few feminist critics who have taken an interest in plot, raise exactly this question, in response to the
blatant male gendering of the plot models of Robert Scholes and Peter Brooks. In both Scholes and Brooks, as well as in Barthes, desire, textual and sexual, is rather explicitly troped as male. Thus, in Roland Barthes' poststructuralist work, especially in *The Pleasure of the Text*, gender is aggressively present—not only in Barthes' almost exclusively male canon, but also in his exploration of the (male) erotics of the text and of reading texts. In Brooks' poststructuralist theory of plot, narratology's alleged gender-neutrality is a thinly disguised gendering of plot as male, as has been noted by Clayton (40) and analyzed in some detail by Susan Winnett, who points out that Brook's Freudian plot model is transparently but unadmittedly based on "the trajectory of male arousal" (Winnett 506).

The connection between text and desire, especially between plot and desire, is thus configured first of all as profoundly male. What could an alternative troping of narrative desire, or desire in plot, as female, look like? What could it achieve? Here, I find Winnett's answer disappointing, despite her astute critique of Brooks' male figuration of the erotics of plot. Winnett proposes a plot model based on rhythms of birth and breastfeeding—rhythms which she essentializes as natural patterns that seem to represent a parthenogenic, autoerotic female sexuality (cf. Winnett 509). This essentialist female alternative to the male plot implies Winnett's unwillingness to see female plot dynamics in the same constructivist light to which she exposes Brooks' 'naturally' male erotics of plot. Winnett does not address the possibility of an alternative model of female plot erotics based on the female orgasm, but instead sidesteps the issue of sexual pleasure altogether by instead focusing on sexuality *qua* naturalized female reproductive functions.

My contrary emphasis on the cultural construction of locus and rhythm of female as well as male sexual pleasure and desire are culturally constructed enables me to posit plots as gendered without assuming that they are 'naturally' male or female. My starting point is to make explicit, and take seriously, the construction of plot dynamics as patterns
analogous to sexual arousal and climax—but to emphasize that such patterns are, for one, constructed rather than naturally present, and that these constructions are explicitly gendered. This strategy renders the implicit male bias of much plot theory and in particular of Brooks’ Freudian model, explicit, but also thereby productive for a gendered model of plot. Within this framework, I look at female plot patterns as modeled on different constructions of the female orgasm, and to perceive them as interacting in different ways with a plot trajectory of rise, peak and fall troped as male. Two of these orgasmic models are already available to the critical discourse, but I wish to suggest a third.

The traditional, male-oriented models, like those of Peter Brooks and others (like Robert Scholes), simply collapse the dynamics of the female orgasm with that of a posited ‘standard’ male orgasm. This is a familiar strategy based on gender-symmetry: male and female sexual pleasure have an identical rhythm. The resulting model implicitly foregrounds the similarity (and simultaneity) of male and female orgasms, and insists on one (male) pattern for all plots. (In keeping with this assumption that there is no alternative to the male plot dynamics, Brooks’ own reaction to Winnett’s critique of his model is to argue, without any further explanation, that the idea of a specifically female plot is “a bit debatable.”22)

The polar opposite of this model is a construction of the female orgasm as totally detached and independent from the male orgasm. This model privileges the forgotten, a-climactic moments, moments often perceived as ‘outside’ the plot or the narrative progression. Such a shift of perspective away from the dynamics of plot corresponds to Naomi Schor’s and Jane Gallop’s concept of the “clitoral moment,” or to Susan Stanford Friedman’s somewhat less aggressively psychoanalytic model of the “lyric mode of discourse” in women’s fiction. It is also akin to Barthes’ jouissance and, to an extent, to
D.A. Miller's concept of the "narratatable," although neither concept is explicitly
gendered.23

The model of the female plot as the male plot's Other, as that which escapes and
eludes plot altogether is reminiscent of the description of female stories as "plotless"—a
description that Lanser evokes and dismisses as an altogether negative definition
("Towards a Feminist Narratology," 623). I share Lanser's interest in an alternative
definition of a female plot to this anti-plot construction that is implicit in much *écriture
féminine*-type feminist criticism. Indeed, I would argue that to locate female desire and
female story altogether outside the plot means to identify any plot exclusively as
sequential, linear, authoritative, and *a priori* as male. Plot, in this sense, can never be
female, and certainly never be feminist; linear, highly plot-oriented narratives about and
by women appear as always-already complicit with a hegemonic, male narrative tradition.
In keeping with this definition of plot, Friedman's and Schor's readings thus generally
play down women writer's investment in plot in order to claim their 'femaleness' and
their feminist investment. Unlike Lanser, however, I do not altogether see the
oxymoronic description of female plot as "plotless" as identical with the description of
such plots as "nonprogressive," which she directly associates with plotlessness ("Towards
a Feminist Narratology," 624). It seems to me that the description of a plot as
"nonprogressive" has oppositional and potentially subversive rather than simply negative
connotations. And it is precisely the oppositional potential of the "nonprogressive" and
the antilinear that I wish to render functional in my suggestion of an alternative double
model of female plot as patterned on female dynamics of desire.

In suggesting this double plot model, I propose an alternative to Brooks' allegedly
neutral male plot as well as to Schor's and Gallop's turning away from plot dynamics
altogether in the name of gender. It seems to me that neither model fully explains the
complex interaction of the erotics of plot with gender, and that, furthermore, both models
assume a total identification of plot with the male linear plot. Against the latter argument, I would suggest that narratives can have plots—can focus on the representation of events—without being linear, progressive, or sequential. Thus, resistance or rupture in are not by necessity the plot's Other, but can be part of the narrative, an internally located strategy—a strategy that, importantly, tends to vacillate much more ambiguously between complicity and subversion than those generated by the clitoral or lyrical Other of the plot.

My double alternative to Brooks on the one hand, and Schor, Friedman and others on the other, consists of two diametrically opposed female dynamics of plot based on two mutually exclusive constructions of the female orgasm and female pleasure as either nonexistent or excessive. The two female plot models I suggest are intimately linked to the simplistic binary of virgin and whore. Mary and Eve, saint and sinner. But they differ from this iconic binary in that they are not static, but narrativized—rendered dynamic through their connection with the dynamics of plot and sexual desire. The relationship of plot and pleasure to female icons is thus not simply an equation—the iconic, static constructions of female sexuality become dynamic when they interact with the dynamics of sexual arousal and plot. The female body is narrativized; female sexuality is turned into a story or plot. The processes of constructing plot as sexual and sexuality as story are thus reciprocal and simultaneous.

The first of the two female plots is based on the absence of orgasm and female pleasure from femininity: it denies the existence of orgasm in women. In this construction of female sexual identity, women do not 'naturally' experience sexual desire or pleasure; if they do, desires and their fulfillment indicate a moral corruption of their natural sexual innocence. In the dynamics of plot, this model of absence manifests itself in attempts to erase or avoid the climactic moment in the plot. The second construction of the female orgasm, diametrically opposed to the first one, hyperbolically assigns infinite orgasmic capacity to women. In this construction, often associated with the trope
of female insatiability common in pornography, the climactic moment of the plot is dispersed into multiple, repetitive climaxes. Located in the middle between the extremes of absence and excess is the (literally phallic) male standard. This male standard is the sexual and narrative right measure: the one-time sexual climax between undersexed and oversexed femininity; the linear narrative that lies between the gap in the story and the excess of the episodic narrative.

In that they are constructed against this male standard, both female plot models are, as it were, ‘vaginal,’ not ‘clitoral.’ to evoke Schor’s Freudian terminology once more. They are not the radical, independent Other of the male orgasm, but instead always constructed as dependent on it. In contrast to the clitoral moment, then, female absence and excess alike resist the male climax—and thus the entire male plot—from within a hegemonic construction of genital heterosexuality. They undermine the male plot model, rather than reject it altogether, and thus shape a new, conflict-ridden narrative that is neither completely complicit nor absolutely subversive. Instead, this narrative tends to oscillate between resistance and recuperation in ways that I will trace in detail in my readings, in particular of Cleland’s Memoirs and Richardson’s Clarissa, in which excess and absence are most visibly present. In suggesting these two female strategies of excess and absence, I agree with Teresa de Lauretis that an antinarrative, anti-plot position of radical otherness is not the only way in which narratives resist and subvert the (male) hegemonic narrative. Indeed, as de Lauretis suggests for feminist film, stories can be narrative “with a vengeance” to produce “the sense of a double, self-contradictory coherence” in narrative (“Strategies of Coherence,” 187, 193).

My model of the two female counterplots that interact with a hegemonic male plot in narratives has certain limitations that I would like to spell out. These self-imposed limitations fall into three categories that are related to each other. First of all, plot, in my model, refers to the long, complex narratives characteristic of the novel—i.e. to large
overarching story-lines with traditional, if questionable, milestones of beginning, climax, and end in a given novel, rather than for what Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan has called “microsequences” of events (Rimmon-Kenan 16). Secondly, I do not wish to make any claims for the universal applicability of this plot model across different narrative genres. Although my argument does, to some extent, apply to the novel qua super-genre, as it were. I am primarily interested about the specific subcategory of the feminocentric novel that is emphatically invested in telling a story about heterosexual relationships. Thirdly, I do not argue for any universality across historical periods. The latter two limitations need some further exploration and explanation.

Instead of making any unsubstantiated claims that my model of orgasmic plots is universally applicable, I limit myself to applying the idea of orgasmic plot patterns to the type of narrative for which I have found this model so productive: I use it to read stories about conflicts of sex and gender in heterosexual relationships, in particular stories about the female sexual initiation. I would argue that the interaction of female plot dynamics with an often hegemonic male plot is crucial for such narratives. This is true in particular for the feminocentric novel pace Nancy Miller, in which ambiguous and conflicted constructions of gender are often particularly foregrounded—regardless of whether they were written by men or by women. What this self-imposed and conscious limitation importantly implies is that, importantly, plot dynamics—the ‘form’ of the plot, if you will—is inseparable from the theme of the narrative—its ‘contents.’ The heterosexual ‘contents’ of the story of female initiation are intimately and intricately entwined with the gendered, heteroerotic dynamics of the initiation plot.

This link between ‘form’ and ‘content’ has two important implications. First of all, this link underscores that narrative theory for me exists in its practical applicability to certain narrative texts, and never denies its deductive origins in such texts. Unlike Gerald Prince, I do not distinguish between narrative theory or narratology on the one hand, and
narratological criticism as its application to specific texts on the other. Instead, I see
them, like Susan S. Lanser in her response to Prince, as two "mutually profitable aspects
of narratology, the one theoretical, the other praxeological" ("On Narratology," 77;
"Sexing the Narrative," 92). Secondly, perceiving a model of plot patterns or forms as
profoundly linked to the contents of the plot means that my definition of plot always
implies (and explores) a link between the two aspects of narrative that are popularly but
rather confusingly known as "story" and "discourse," and that I will, for the sake of
clarity, refer to as the events in a story and their narrative representation.24

As Prince sums it up, narratology has always been undecided as to whether it
should define itself as the study of narrative as "a verbal mode of event representation" or
as the study of narrative's "objects (events)" and their structure. As he suggests, narrative
theory concerned with "both story and discourse, narrated and narrating" can integrate
these two aspects ("On Narratology," 75-76). But of course, it is not simply the focus on
both aspects, but the analysis of how they are specifically related that makes it so crucial
to look at events and their narrative representation together. As Jonathan Culler has
pointed out some time ago, the relationship between event and representation, often
described in terms of a causal logic in which events cause their narration, also follows a
reverse logic in which the demands of representation cause the sequence of events. But--
as Culler also points out—even to separate the two aspects of narrative at all is simply a
useful strategy in narrative analysis, a strategy that artificially separates what is
fundamentally inseparable: how can events ever exist without or before some form of
narrative representation?25 My readings will demonstrate what I argue here: that it is
precisely the complex relationship between the (gendered) events and their (gendered)
narrative representation—never quite identical and never quite separable from one
another—that results in what I call "plot."
Refusing to universalize my model of gendered orgasmic plots in terms of its applicability across different genres also means, by extension, that my model is historically restricted. Gendered orgasmic plot dynamics do not “always already” exist in the form in which I have described them, but develop in conjunction with the heterosexual narrative to which it is so profoundly linked—within the history of the novel as well as within the history of sexuality. To look at the historical development of male and female orgasmic plots and the heterosexual narrative in which they come into conflict most visibly, then, means not only to historicize sexual pleasure and desire, but also to historicize novel plots. It is this historicizing of plot that is, as it were, virgin territory (so that, again, I am in the role of the deflowerer). The reluctance to historicize plot may seem surprising, given the recent emphasis of much literary theory on history, but paradoxically, it is usually the plotting of history, and not the history of plot, that critics discuss. In other words, the relationship between narrative and history has primarily been established as one in which narrative structures are discovered in history, especially by Hayden White, but also, for example, in Terry Eagleton’s discussion of the links between “History, Narrative, and Marxism.” Even Armstrong and Tennenhouse, who critique White’s move as one that ultimately assumes the universality of narrative, address mainly the ahistorical and antinarrative tendencies of humanists and poststructuralists alike, and are disappointingly vague about how narrative, defined vaguely as the “trace of intellectual labor,” can be placed in a specific historical perspective (“History,” 46).

Thus, very little work has been done to explore the relationship of narrative to its specific historical contexts and virtually none on the possible history of plot(s)—by either narrative theorists or their critics. Structuralists and other narrative theorists generally tend to argue that plots do not have a history. At best, they situate the overarching changes in plot in a vague and general history of narrative forms that juxtaposes myth and modern narrative genres. Thus, Jurij Lotman argues with Bakhtinian undertones that “the
modern plot-text is the fruit of the interaction and reciprocal influence of [two]
typologically age-old types of texts," namely the cyclical, timeless narrative of myth and
the discrete, linear, temporized arrangement of events (163). Likewise, Northrop Frye's
seminal account of the emergence of romance, comedy, tragedy and irony (in that
historical order) from myth in the Anatomy of Fiction is an ahistorically vague, schematic
sketch of this development.

In the history of the novel, the area of criticism that might be supposed to be most
invested in historicizing plot, the concept of "narrative" itself, and the plot in particular,
are generally not perceived as historically changing categories. This is true despite the
emphasis of many histories of the novel on the historical context in which specific
narratives and narrative forms are situated. When it comes to plot, the insistence on the
novel's context in social, economic and political history falls by the wayside. Thus, the
few attempts to include plot at all as a historical category—many of which date back
awhile—are, again, vague rather than historically specific, and focus on the intrinsic
development of the novel form rather than on its links to "extraliterary" history.

Thus, Bakthin's account of the historical development of the novel form is mainly
concerned with the 'low' heteroglot and the 'high' monoglot style rather than with the
equally binary plots that might be associated with the early novelistic genres. Admittedly,
Bakthin's historical frame is more narrowly defined than Frye's or Lotman's—it begins
with the late Hellenic novel and ends, roughly, with the nineteenth-century realistic novel.
But his dialectical model of formal development is not embedded in a specific
extraliterary history—despite its general association with class. And Arthur Honeywell,
writing in 1968 about the historical development of plots in the novel since the
eighteenth-century, is even more concerned with the intrinsic development of form
(towards unity and coherence), linking it vaguely to a simplified intellectual history. But
the tendency to exclude plot from any but an intrinsic, formalist history of narrative forms
is still prevalent; thus, Ralph Rader’s numerous articles on the history of the novel describe the development of its plots (from plots of “moral action” in the eighteenth century to the modernist “novels of reconstructed actuality”) simplistically in terms reminiscent of Honeywell.26

Among recent critics of narratology’s claims to universality, the prevailing tendency is to demand, categorically, the acknowledgement of historical context without actually providing it. Thus, critics often merely pay lip service to an emphasis of history that remains in the realm of the polemic and theoretical. Thus, Jay Clayton, who argues for the necessity of historicizing desire and narrative alike (52), does not have any concrete suggestions how a historical perspective on narrative informed by narrative theory could be developed. Likewise, feminist critics such as de Lauretis and Friedman demand the focus on specific “textual practices” with their specific historical contexts and attack the “ahistorical essentialism” of (psychoanalytic) narrative theory (“Desire in Narrative.” 106, “Lyric Subversion,” 166). But these demands ultimately fall by the wayside and are replaced by essentialist, ahistorical arguments. Thus, de Lauretis posits—with Barthes—the Oedipus story as “in fact paradigmatic of all narratives” (112), and Friedman concludes without any historical qualification that “narrative is potentially polyvocal and polymorphous” but might be traced back to the “linear ‘story’ of conception, gestation, and birth” as well as to the Oedipal story (180).

Even feminist scholars who are interested in plot within the context of the history of the novel, like Nancy Miller and Patricia Meyer Spacks, ultimately remain in the realm of the general—and even universal—when it comes to the history of plot. Thus, despite the specific focus on the eighteenth-century French and British novel that characterizes Miller’s explorations of plot and other narrative issues, she often suggests a transhistorical application of her ideas, and states very clearly that The Heroine’s Text “remains in the margins of any diachronic argument.”27 Spacks, who specifically speaks of changes in
plot in the eighteenth century, sees these changes in such global terms that they are easily dismantled. Both Miller and Spacks are vague in their attempts at historicizing plot (a point to which I will return in my next chapter)—while they also make cursory use of narrative theory at best: Spacks briefly discusses Caserio’s approach to plot in *Desire and Truth* (3-4) and refers to Bremond in “Plot’s Possibilities.” while Miller claims that she “adapt[s] and adopt[s]” Greimas for her basic distinction of the euphoric and the dysphoric plot (*Heroine’s Text*, 159).

Feminist scholars interested in narrative—including those ostensibly invested in historical change and in de-essentializing categories of gender—thus tend to take a universalizing, essentializing view of plot. Even when plot is seen as gendered or at least associated with gender in their studies, it operates outside of history. In particular, feminist critics tend to see plots that are sexual in theme as universal and transhistorical, as no more than transmutations of the same archetypal narrative. When it comes to such sexual plots, the residual reluctance to see sexuality as a historically changing cultural construct and the problems posed by plot as a historical category combine to make it virtually impossible. it seems, for feminists to historicize plot and sexuality simultaneously. I have already mentioned the essentialism that underlies de Lauretis’ and Friedman’s psychoanalytically informed view of plot. I wish to a couple of other examples that are specifically concerned with sexual narratives—revolving around pornographic plots, rape stories and initiation narratives.

Thus, when Susanne Kappeler describes the patriarchal “archeplot of power” that underlies hard-core pornography and ‘high’ art alike, as two related expressions of “the cultural position of the male gender” as oppressing the female gender, she argues that “it need not worry us that there occur minor variations of plot: these are firmly contained within the structure and ‘morphology’ of the pornographic scenario, reducible to it.”

Kappeler’s approach to plot is a naively early structuralist one (her only references are to
Propp and his predecessors in the study of fairy tales): altogether in keeping with the ahistorical trajectory of her entire argument; she ignores possible historical changes in plots. Feminist approaches to rape narratives have likewise been primarily ahistorical in their reading of the rape plot. Thus, Patricia Klinefelter Joplin, in "The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours," discusses the rape narrative as archetypal through the myth of Philomela. And even Frances Ferguson, whose emphasis is mostly historical in her "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," eventually links "the history of the rape story" back to the myth of Philomela and its implicit questions about the representability of rape (Fergusson 108).30

Notable exceptions to the feminist tendency to essentialize plot are Alison Booth's introduction to the collection *Famous Last Words* and Rachel Blau duPlessis *Writing Beyond the Ending*. Both authors speak of gendered plot as plots with gendered content, and discuss the romance or marriage plot as the most important plot in female fiction (for duPlessis, it interacts and conflicts consistently with a plot of female Bildung). Both insist on a connection between the social history of women and the changes in the closure of conventional gendered plots (Booth 4; duPlessis 4). Unlike me, however, they are particularly interested in the twentieth-century decline of the conventional plot structures, and rather simplistically and problematically posit these plot structures as hegemonic for the nineteenth-century novel. In other words, they do not explore the contested emergence of these plot structures in the eighteenth century, or their continuing instability throughout the nineteenth. Thus, they not only tell stories of the development of the (thematically) female plot without tracing its beginnings, but by telling such a story, preclude the possibility that this plot may have been under attack before the twentieth-century disintegration of its nineteenth-century hegemony, or that its hegemony even in the nineteenth century is itself questionable.
It is at this theoretical and historical point in the argument about gendered plots that the history of the novel *qua* history of heterosexual relationships and female sexual identities comes in. Because I focus (unlike Booth or duBlau-Plessis) on the emergence and the presumed hegemony of the marriage plot in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, I see a different history of the romance or marriage plot, one that is much more vexed and contested from (and especially *at*) its beginnings. Of course, my definition of a gendered plot on the basis of gendered, sexualized dynamics is also somewhat different from theirs, although definitions of female plot via content (e.g. heterosexual romance, female *Bildungsroman* etc.) are, as I have implied, profoundly linked to gendered narrative strategies. Thus, the heterosexual plots of the marriage-plot novel and its forerunners are organized around the tensions between such more abstract ‘male’ and ‘female’ plot dynamics, but also around the tension between male and female characters, and the narrative trajectories that brings them together, or up against each other. The relationship between these two tensions will be explored (rather than in any sense exhaustively explained) in the sequence of novels that I will use to illustrate the history of gendered plot dynamics, gender thematics and sexual thematics in the marriage-plot novel and its forerunners.

The story that I endeavor to tell about the history of the marriage plot through these six novels—and that I also resist telling as a seamless, coherent story through the selective focus on these novels—links the marriage plot as a gendered plot back to the seduction and rape narratives of the mid-eighteenth-century, and its less ‘danger’-focused forerunners in the scandal novels of the early eighteenth century. My story (and I will point forward to the specific role of the three pairs of novels within it) goes something like this:

In the course of the eighteenth century, enormous shifts take place in the ways in which stories about heterosexual relationships are told, and in the ways in which these
stories implicitly construct female sexual identity. At the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, the narratives that are variously classified as emerging novels, romances and novellas, tend to stress premarital sex that is, generally if not exclusively, based on a woman’s consent or at least her seducibility—certainly on the assumption that women feel, and are allowed to feel, sexual passion for men as well as vice versa. Examples abound in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, in the early “amatory fiction” of Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood and Mary Delariviere Manley (pace Ros Ballaster). Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* also construct women as consenting to sex and emphatically not as asexual; however, Defoe’s narratives center much more on the practical and economic importance of women’s sexual involvement, and not, like the triumvirate of early women novelists, on female sexual passion and the conflicts it generates for female characters. Importantly, the heroines of Behn and Haywood (for example, Sylvia in *Loveletters of a Nobleman to his Sister* and Glicera in the Haywood novella “The City Jilt”) are constructed as resistant to becoming implicated in heterosexual relationships—as long as they are still virgins. After the seducer has succeeded, however, the deflowered heroine is not necessarily headed for a tragic ending. Thus, Sylvia in *Love Letters* turns into the heroine of a semi-picaresque narrative of amorous and political intrigue, while “The City Jilt” draws on comedy conventions to stage Glicera’s successful revenge campaign against her seducer. Defoe’s Moll Flanders also turns her initial fall, and her numerous and various further sexual transgressions, into literally financial profit.

Around mid-century, however, from the 1740s on forward, a marked shift begins toward stories that center much more aggressively on the evils of seduction, on the trope of the “virtue in distress” and on the innocent maiden pursued by evil male libertines, who might be either successful or unsuccessful in their seductions. The shift towards this type of narrative can be seen, for example, in Haywood’s late fiction, for example in the
History of Betsy Thoughtless, and in the countless narratives in the second half of the century about "British Seduced Maidens," as Susan Staves calls them. Goldsmith's Vicar of Wakefield (1766) is an example, and Staves points to Amelia Opie's Father and Daughter (1801) as a late manifestation of this narrative as the central plot of a novel. More often than not, these stories are what Nancy Miller calls "dysphoric"—they end tragically with death or insanity after a woman has been seduced or raped. Staves distinguishes the seduced-maiden novels sharply from the narratives of unsuccessful seduction, and stories of rape (Staves, "Seduced Maidens" 114), but I would argue that the similarities between these different variants, all united by their emphasis on female virtue and presexual virginal innocence, are much more crucial than the differences.

Distinguishing seduction of a resisting virgin from rape is indeed rather problematic for the eighteenth-century novel, and even in the legal discourse of the eighteenth century and nineteenth century, as Anna Clark's study of Women's Silence, Men's Violence: Sexual Assault in England 1770-1845 makes clear (cf. 4-6 and Ch. 5, esp. 76-82).

The shift from a plot that allows for consensual sex and female sexual passion to one that juxtaposes male sexual aggression to female resistance, victimhood and the insistence on asexual virginal virtue as a feminine ideal is, however, not a simple, smooth transition. My juxtaposition of Cleland's Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure with Richardson's Clarissa in Chapter 2 will demonstrate how this shift is complicated by precisely the opposition of excess with absence—and the paradoxes implicit in each construction—that I have sketched above as the basis for the two oppositional 'female' plot dynamics in 'male' linear narratives. Both constructions of femininity are 'available' as it were, to the mid-eighteenth-century novel. Although female asexuality, embedded in the emerging sentimental discourse on women, is in fairly clear ascendancy, the conception of female sexuality as excess is clearly present in the simultaneously emerging 'subculture' of the pornographic novel at mid-century. While Cleland is the earliest full-
fledged example of this pornographic subculture within the genre of the novel. Richardson’s *Clarissa* demonstrates some of the internal contradictions of the asexual construction of femininity—contradictions that, potentially, make this construct incompatible with a courtship plot geared towards marriage, and render it in a way a discursive dead end for the heterosexual narrative.

What ensues after the emergence of the late eighteenth-century ‘virtue in distress’ narrative—namely the transition from this plot to a desexualized, domesticated marriage plot a la Jane Austen—is likewise a complex and vexed process. If anything, this transition is more complicated than shift from a narrative of consensual premarital sex to one of premarital seduction and rape. The emphasis on courtship rather than seduction in the emerging marriage plot implies a much more radical excision of premarital sexuality from the heterosexual plot—an excision that goes much beyond the transfer of sexual activity and interest onto the male, figured as the libertine rake. That this excision now also includes male sexual activity (at least for the Grandisonian new hero) means, importantly, that the seduction narrative cannot simply turn into a marriage plot, but that the two are substantially opposed to each other. Thus, despite its enormous impact on the development of the virtue in distress narrative and the marriage plot, Richardson’s *Pamela*, with its story of the seducer who is domesticated into a suitable husband by the heroine’s virtuous resistance, does not become the model for the marriage plot. Even Richardson himself rejects the premise of his first novel when he claims, in the preface to *Clarissa*, that his intent in publishing this second novel is to “caution ... against preferring a man of pleasure to a man of probity, upon that dangerous but too commonly received notion, *that a reformed rake makes the best husband*” (C 36; cf. Ch. 2 for a more detailed exploration of this disjuncture between the Richardsonian narrative and the marriage plot).
But the attempt to separate the marriage plot altogether from the story creates a narrative problem: the seduction novel derives its dramatic tension from the often titillating and always sexualized gender antagonism between seducer and victim. When these scenes are excised in the attempt to tell what amounts to a narrative about heterosocial 'manners' rather than heterosexual passion (and action), the question becomes how this domesticated, desexualized plot will retain its dramatic force. Burney's *Evelina*, the novel which I pair with Austen's *Emma* in Chapter 3 to illustrate the transition from the seduction narrative to the marriage plot, demonstrates how difficult it can be to tell a marriage plot as an exciting plot. As a novel that, conceptually as well as chronologically, lies exactly midway between *Pamela* (1742) and *Emma* (1814), *Evelina* tells two stories side by side—a repetitive, excessive narrative of unsuccessful seduction and sexual assault, and a Cinderella-style, ostensibly linear courtship story that culminates in Evelina’s marriage with Lord Orville. In *Evelina* it is, however, the narrative of seduction that makes the novel progress until far into the third and last volume of *Evelina*—and emphatically not the static and even absence-riddled story of Lord Orville's courtship.

In *Emma*—and in her other novels as well—Jane Austen resolves Burney’s narrative dilemma quite successfully by containing (in both senses of the word) the sexual dynamics of the seduction plot in the climactic scenes of the domesticated marriage plot. The plot of *Emma* demonstrates this strategy of containing the heterosexual narrative—controlling it and preserving it—through its narrative dynamics particularly well because Austen integrates aspects of both plots of *Evelina* into the multiple-courtship plot of her novel. The most striking instance of this integration is the climactic moment of Mr. Elton's undesirable proposal, which I read as a revision of a climactic scene in the seduction plot of *Evelina*, in which the heroine is sexually attacked by a would-be seducer in a carriage.
With the shift from the seduction plot to the marriage plot, the climactic scene of the heterosexual narrative thus undergoes a massive and particularly visible transformation from a literally sexual seduction scene to a proposal scene in which, however, the sexual dynamics of the seduction scene are preserved and, indeed, provide the dramatic impetus for the marriage plot. If the marriage-plot novel does, however, ‘resolve’ the problem of how to preserve the narrative dynamics of the more literally sexual seduction narrative of the eighteenth-century in the marriage plot, its construction of femininity remains largely contradictory. The asexual innocence of the virgin is compromised by the very teleology of the marriage plot, since its telos is, by definition, the loss of this asexual status. The marriage-plot novels of the nineteenth century often gloss over this problem (especially by ending the novel, or any detailed narrative account of the courtship, before the wedding-night defloration takes place).

However, the crucial intertwining of the courtship narrative with the relationship between the heroine and her male relatives, in particular her father, consistently point to the ways in which the Austenian marriage plot fails to construct femininity unproblematically as asexual. The discourse of sentimentiality, which operates so emphatically with the body language and the verbal expressions of passion as well as compassion, allows in both Evelina and Emma for a collapse between the love for the father and the love for the (future) husband that are, ambiguously, either both asexual or both sexual, in either case with problematic implications for the ‘proper’ familial and marital relationships between men and women.

If the marriage-plot is, then, a vexed and complicated narrative of heterosexuality and female sexual identity even in its most canonical and, perhaps, most often discussed manifestation in Jane Austen’s fiction, it is not surprising that its development throughout the nineteenth-century is not as smooth and its role not as conventional and hegemonic as is often asserted. Not only obvious anti-marriage plot narratives, the narrative of the
"counter-tradition" in Joseph Allen Boone’s terms, are thus instances of the disintegration of the marriage plot. The marriage plot is internally destabilized from its beginnings, albeit to different degrees; indeed, marriage-plot novels are often manifestations of the genre’s and the individual author’s obsession with the internal contradictions of the marriage plot. I would argue that this disintegration from within, although never altogether absent in the early Victorian marriage plot, becomes highly visible in what some critics might identify as still very conventional, hegemonic narratives of courtship in the 1860s.

When I thus discuss Mrs. Oliphant’s Miss Marjoribanks and Trollope’s Phineas Finn as two marriage-plot novels of the late 1860s in Chapter 4, I do so in order to stress how this disintegration operates in such ostensibly conventional novels. I pinpoint crucial elements of destabilization (especially in the gendering of the protagonists of the marriage plot) in both the conventional courtship plots and in the political narratives of both novels. I conclude my reading of each novel with a return to the question of male-female family relationships, by discussing how these relationships are refigured in and as tropes of cousinthood in Miss Marjoribanks and as bonds of national identity in Phineas Finn. But as my conclusion will indicate, the destabilization of the marriage plot that is visible in Trollope and Oliphant takes many other forms as well. However, late nineteenth-century seduction stories like Tess, narratives of adultery like Red Pottage, and stories of sexual liberation as they are told in the New Woman novels have crucial predecessors in the earlier decades of the Victorian Era that already foreground the disintegration of the marriage plot and of the institution of marriage as well as the existence of alternative (if often dysphoric) narratives of female identity. The novels of George Eliot and some of the Trollope œuvre in particular, but also many other novels about fallen women, unhappy marriages and even ‘alternative careers’ for women would thus be other
manifestations of the destabilization of the never quite stable marriage plot—manifestations that, for the time being, lie beyond the textual scope of this study.

The gradual emergence of the marriage plot from the seduction story that I have just sketched fits a number of different patterns established by studies in the history of sexuality and in the history of the novel, the two types of ‘history’ that come together in my argument. Let me briefly point how my sketch of the history of the heterosexual novel fits the historical and theoretical ‘master narratives’ that I have already discussed in the previous section before I situate this account within the historiography of the novel, as well as with the literary historiography of the novel that I have not yet introduced.

First of all, my sketch of the development of the heterosexual narrative implies the shift from a much more literal representation of sexual relationships, and from an emphasis on illicit and illegitimate sexual encounters, to more metaphorical, sexually defused representation of ‘decent’, legitimate interactions between men and women. This shift can be described in terms of the Freudian ‘repressive hypothesis;’ however, as I have argued earlier, my emphasis on the ways in which the sexual is preserved rather than repressed or displaced in the marriage plot should have made clear that it is not my intention to retell this master narrative of repression. However, it should also be clear that I do not agree with the Foucauldian counternarrative of the deployment of discourses of sexuality in its most radical form, because the novelistic discourse on sexuality is a cautious and often highly metaphorized discourse on sexuality, partly due to the active and conflicted participation of women in this discourse.

Equally obvious should be the link of the development I describe to arguments about the ‘rise of the domestic woman’ and of a discourse of domesticity that both relegates women to the home (the spatial telos, as it were, of the courtship narrative) and empowers them in this position by making the home a crucial sociopolitical space. This argument, crucially linked to the sentimental discourse that emerges in the late eighteenth
century, has already been impressively tied to the novel by Nancy Armstrong, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. Unlike Armstrong's, however, my work emphasizes the specific narratives and narrative dynamics that are produced by this shift in the construction of femininity, as well as its links to the history of marriage.

The history of marriage is a third pattern that parallels the emergence of the marriage plot. This emergence is linked in direct, albeit very complex ways, to the development of the companionate, conjugal marriage based on the individual couple's affectionate interest, with all the implicit contradictions that I have discussed in the previous section. Even the more specific history of marriage itself as an institution, i.e. the consolidation of marriage law in the eighteenth-century that I discuss above, corresponds to the development that I have described here for fictional narratives. At least tentatively, one could argue that the marriage plot developed as an equally complex literary reaction to the very shifts in the construction of marriage as conjugal, and also as profoundly institutionalized heterosexuality that are implicit in the legal consolidation and stabilization of the definitions of marriage.

I would emphasize, however, that the link between marriage and the marriage plot does not translate into a direct or causal connection between my account of the development of the marriage plot and the sexual behavior. Rather, novels have to be seen as participating in constructing a changing set of 'beliefs' about female sexuality and about marriage practice that may shape but do not altogether control sexual behavior. This set of prescriptions about sexual behavior is, of course, profoundly middle-class, and reflects upper middle-class courtship practice, gender construction and attitudes towards marriage more closely than those of other classes under survey in Mason's, Gillis' and Stone's studies. That the novel, as the middle-class genre *per se*, would participate in the discursive proliferation of these beliefs is not surprising (and its status as a profoundly middle-class genre from its very beginnings is perhaps the only part Ian Watt's argument
in the *Rise of the Novel* that remains uncontested). But it is important to stress that the ‘real-life’ impact of the novel in distributing—but also, at all points, in questioning and contesting—these middle-class beliefs is difficult to trace and, once more, beyond the scope of what I undertake to do in this study.

If my argument about the development of the marriage plot is thus woven into the larger text about heterosexuality and female sexual identity as heterosexual identity that is being created by social historians, how does this argument fit into its other, more narrowly literary context? In other words, how does it fit into the history of the novel as it is being written and rewritten by literary historians? To situate my argument within such a history of the novel is crucial because my argument is, importantly, not one about a “sub-genre” of the novel. The ways in which the eighteenth-century novel becomes increasingly preoccupied with heterosexual plots, and in which it is crucially focused from its beginnings on gender and gender identity, makes clear that talking about the marriage-plot novel and its forerunners means to talk about the novel *in toto*, and not merely about a sub-genre. Importantly, this also means that my account is only partially—in Chapters 3 and 4 of this study—informed by studies that are specifically about the marriage-plot, such as Joseph Allen Boone’s *Tradition Counter Tradition*, Ruth Bernard Yeazell’s *Fictions of Modesty*, Katherine Sobba Greene’s *The Courtship Novel*, and the more specifically Victorian studies of marriage in fiction by Jenni Calder, Shirley Foster, and by Barbara Weiss in her essay on “The Dilemma of the Happily Ever After,” or by Suzanne Graver and Jonathan Loesberg on the specific manifestations of marriage in Eliot and Dickens.33

If it is the history of the novel at large that is central to my argument, to situate it vis-à-vis the existing narratives about the ‘rise’ and the ‘development’ of the novel is crucial. First of all, I need to clarify my argument is part of an attempt to write the history of the *British* novel as it emerges at the end of the eighteenth century. It thus does not
take into account, and does not partake, in the arguments that extend the history of the
genre backward to the long prose narratives of late antiquity and the Medieval verse and
prose romance. The arguments that trace the lineage of the novel back to antiquity, most
importantly in Bakhtin’s *Dialogic Imagination* and, very recently, Margaret Ann Doody
in her provocatively titled *True Story of the Novel*, can only be made part of a ‘history of
the novel’ in a somewhat ahistorical and very broad sense of ‘novel’ as a long prose
narrative. My definition, by contrast, is one that seeks to distinguish the sub-genre of the
long prose narrative which is usually identified as a novel, and which emerges in late
seventeenth century Britain.

Within this definitional framework of the British novel as it is emerges at the
beginning of the modern age (in the sense of the German *Neuzeit*), I agree with Ian Watt
that the novel that is preoccupied with the emerging middle-class and partially Puritan
concept of the individual. With Lennard Davis, I would argue that it is a form that
emerges, fundamentally, from the discursive context of seventeenth-century newspapers
and broadsheets. With McKeon, I would emphasize that the instabilities in the form
throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century are profoundly related to a change in
which the novels raises “questions of truth and virtue” that strike me as questions that
again and again gender and heterosexualize both “truth” and “virtue” (McKeon 21).

Both Davis and McKeon have, of course, voiced profound disagreements with Ian
Watt, and in their arguments about the seventeenth-century origins of the novel, have
refuted Watt’s attempt to pinpoint the emergence of the novel in the early eighteenth
century, with Defoe. Although my own more detailed narrative does not begin until the
1740s, my inclusion of the earlier amorous seduction narrative in my earlier sketch, as
well as my emphasis on Cleland, whose novel emphatically harks back to these
narratives, should have made clear that I agree with Davis’ and McKeon’s argument for
this slightly earlier ‘beginning’ of the novel. But in accord with all three of these seminal
writers on the emergence of the novels, I would stress that the genre definition that is crucial here is, indeed, the ‘novel’—the ‘new’ that is crucially distinct from its premodern forerunners as they are discussed by Bakhtin and Doody.

With McKeon and Davis, I would also the importance of the noncanonical—of novels and prenovelistic discourses that go beyond Watt’s narrowly defined canon of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. Within this general context, it is of course the impact of women authors of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that interests me, since the genre had already become, by the time of Charlotte Lennox’ Female Quixote (1752), a genre to whose emergence female readers, authors and characters crucially contributed. Thus, I rely on the pioneering feminists who undertook to re integrate the female novelists before Jane Austen into the literary canon, like Jane Spencer, Dale Spender, Janet Todd, Ros Ballaster and Cheryl Turner. Equally important are scholars like Nancy Miller who have stressed the importance of feminocentric novels who, written by men or women, feature a heroine rather than a hero at the center, and who have, like Madeline Kahn, pointed to the importance of the vexed relationship of male authors to such heroines.

Like these authors, and others that point to the importance of gender and sexuality in rise of novel in the context of specific narratives (such as Staves in “British Seduced Maidens.” Frances Ferguson and Josephine Donovan), I argue that questions of gender and sexuality are inextricably entwined with questions about the development of the novel. From its beginnings, the novel is preoccupied with gender constructions and the construction of the relationship between the gender; it seems to me that the prominence the ‘cross-dressed’ narrators since Aphra Behn (in Oroonoko) and Defoe (in Moll Flanders and Roxana) point to the importance of the novel as a discursive forum for discussing emerging as well as established definitions of femininity and masculinity, including their contradictions.
It makes sense, then, that in telling stories about the sexual interactions between men and women, authors of eighteenth-century novels would draw on a range of often conflicting and incompatible models of gendered sexual identity. I have argued above that, ‘in theory,’ such models can be related to, or expressed in, narrative strategies that are employed in fictional narratives about heterosexual interaction. I would now add that these strategies do indeed find their expression in novels about seduction, rape and marriage in the eighteenth century and then also in the marriage plots of nineteenth-century fiction. In turn, the ways in which ‘male’ and ‘female’ plots are negotiated in these novels’ plots changes with the changing constructions of gender in these novels. A given narrative’s climactic, deflorative moment (or series of climactic moments) epitomizes these gendered negotiations and tensions between ‘male’ and ‘female’ narrative dynamics. But of course this climactic moment can only become such a moment of gendered tension as the climax of a specific, if historically changing story: namely, the story of a woman’s introduction to heterosexuality.

I would argue that the juxtaposition of gendered narrative strategies is particularly apparent in stories about female ‘initiation’—no matter where they are located on the spectrum that ranges from the explicitly sexual heterosexual initiation to the introduction into a heterosocial society—because these stories expose with particular clarity the gender contradictions at work in the novel: Telling a female initiation story means telling a story that is at once a priori defined as a linear and developmental, ‘male’ narrative, and thematically about a woman. As I will argue in more detail in Chapter 2, the linear ‘male’ plot is not yet established as the ‘right’ way of telling or reading a story of novelistic scope in the eighteenth century. Given that gender constructions are also massively shifting especially in the context of the sentimental discourse, this means that the conflict between different, differently gendered narrative strategies is visible in
virtually all narratives. But it is especially visible in stories in which the attempt is made to tell a male story about a female protagonist.

The link that Ian Watt first draws between the rise of individualism and the rise of the novel is, of course, profoundly complicated by gender, since the feminocentric novel cannot be facilely linked to the rise of the concept of what is, implicitly, a male autonomous individual. I would argue that there is a potential of constructing women as such autonomous individuals, and of telling a linear, developmental story about them, only when these women are perceived to be least restricted by their femaleness—that is, when they are sexually mature (not prepubescent girls, in other words) but not yet married and thus not yet legally subsumed under the identity of their husband. The initiation story here creates a ‘window’ for telling a linear story about a protagonist who, as a woman, is not altogether and at all times perceived to be an autonomous ‘modern’ individual. Especially since the eighteenth-century shift towards the individual is also a shift away from an emphasis on the family, and thus away from a sense of uncontested parental authority over their children. the young, unmarried woman becomes a figure around which such a linear story can be developed. It seems to me that the numerous eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century heroines who are orphans (in the context of this study. Fanny Hill and, by mid-novel, Lucilla Marjoribanks), are geographically removed from their parents (Clarissa, Pamela and the feminized Phineas), or have or socially or physically powerless parents (Evelina and Emma) are a manifestation of the attempt to create a space in which women can be portrayed as autonomous individuals, and thus be endowed with a ‘male’ story.

Since this feminocentric ‘male’ story is, however, most frequently and most conventionally a story of heterosexual involvement (be it in the form of seduction or of courtship), gendered contradictions in the narrative ensue: The telos of the heterosexual plot is, after all, the very annihilation of the autonomy and individuality that permitted the
narrativization of women in the novel to begin with. In the resistance against seduction and rape, there is an insistence on the possibility of avoiding this telos—an insistence most directly manifest in Clarissa's emphatic want to be single, but echoed, if ridiculed, in the stories of Emma and Lucilla Marjoribanks. However, the heterosexual plot pushes in the opposite direction, away from singleness and autonomy; seduction, rape, and later marriage appear as providing the unavoidable teleology of self-annihilation, be it in the slow wasting away of the seduced innocent, or in a marriage that erases a woman's legal identity.

Feminocentric novel thus unsurprisingly center on the premarital period in a woman's life as the only period that allows for the telling of a story of individuality that is also compatible with the heterosexual telos. Nonetheless, this central focus highlights the contradiction between a linear narrative of individualized female identity and a static and unindividualized 'generic' model of identity that draws on female icons. The static model is challenged and transformed when female identity begins to be rewritten as a dynamic and developmental process associated with masculinity and specifically with male initiation. Constructing sexual identity as a process of initiation is implicitly associated with masculinity not only because it is associated with linear process and progress, but also because 'initiation' means taking the initiation and literally "going into" things—into life in general as well as women's orifices in particular. Male initiation implies acting ("going") rather than being acted upon; it is associated not with a loss of innocence but a gain of experience. Most importantly, initiation is troped as a gradual process—not as an identifiable, sudden moment of change. Within this process, there may be (and, in keeping with the male-orgasmic narrative model of rise, climax and fall, there should be) a climactic moment, but there is no specific name, no physical manifestation of this moment that culturally marks either the beginning or the completion of initiation—there is, in other words, no moment of defloration.
The moment of defloration, in whatever specific manifestation, is thus a specifically female feature of the feminocentric narrative of ‘initiation’. It is thus the moment that, more than any other point in this narrative, brings out its internal contradictions and instabilities. Because defloration is so firmly embedded in a static construction of female identity, it is crucially transformed when female sexual identity is told as a story. Within a static model, defloration is a pivotal and traumatic moment that signals the sudden shift of a woman’s status from being one man’s daughter to being another man’s wife or whore—a swift ‘transfer of title,’ as it were, in the homosocial economy. The linear narrative of female sexual initiation incorporates this non-developmental moment of defloration as its climactic moment. But it can only be uncomfortably and ambiguously integrated into this narrative for two reasons: because it is constructed as a uniquely female moment paradoxically present at the very center of a narrative troped as male, and because it implicitly contradicts the linearity of the narrative in its emphasis on the singular moment.

Defloration thus occupies a prominent but highly unstable place in the emerging developmental narratives of female sexuality. This instability results from the uneasy integration of defloration into a narrative of initiation as a gradual, cumulative process as this narrative’s climax. The unstable position of defloration as climax, which can in turn destabilize the linear narrative itself, is radically reinforced by its tenuous and problematic link to the concept of the climax in which, as I have argued, the sexual and the narrative apex of the heterosexual narrative collapse into each other. The rupture of the hymen is, of course, in itself entirely unrelated to orgasms, male or female (it does not even require the penetration of the vagina by the penis that is prescribed by defloration as I have defined it). Even within the confines of a definition of defloration as the moment in which genital, heterosexual intercourse is the only acceptable, valid cause of this rupture, ejaculation is of course unnecessary. Nevertheless, because male erection is
supposed to signal male sexual arousal, and because the *telos* of male sexual arousal is the male orgasm, deflection is linked to orgasm—to the *male* orgasm, that is. Thus, deflection constructed as an event that is dependent on, and provides, male sexual pleasure and orgasmic closure, seems to be quite an appropriate climax of a linear initiation narrative that is troped as male. The narrative convention of male desire for virgins, above all other women, is, of course, not only present in the marriage and seduction narrative, but also in the pornographic *topoi* of the convent and the all-girl boarding school as sites that promise excessive sexual excitement and fulfillment.

But this association of deflection with the male climax is precisely the problem. Of course, because deflection is troped unilaterally as the woman’s experience of the first intercourse. Deflection as climax seems firmly entrenched in a thoroughly male-oriented construction of heterosexuality. Interestingly, however, the association of deflection with the male orgasm means that the relationship of deflection to the female orgasm absolutely undefined—it neither includes nor excludes female sexual arousal or orgasm. It is this very openness that makes it possible to integrate deflection into radically different models of female sexual pleasure: into a model in which female sexual pleasure appears as the symmetrical equivalent of male pleasure as the single female orgasm, ideally simultaneous with the male orgasm; into a model of female sexual pleasure as ‘different’ in the sense of Schor’s ‘clitoral’ moment; and, of course, into my double construction of gender asymmetry in which female pleasure is always constructed as either absent and as excessive in comparison to the male orgasm.

The multiple possibilities of reading deflection as an event associated with male sexual pleasure and the male plot on the one hand, and with the diametrically opposed models of female sexuality and plot as absence and excess makes deflection the epicenter of the conflict between the male and the female plot. Deflection thus becomes the point of origin of a conflict that often structures an entire narrative of female sexual
initiation by questioning or unsettling the absoluteness of this narrative's trajectory.

Defloration thus becomes the vehicle for undermining what it seems to reify so utterly—the absolute orientation of female sexual identity towards male sexuality and male pleasure. Thus, in the stories told in Clarissa and Memoirs, literal defloration is the central, climactic event of the male, linear initiation plot, but also the moment in which the disruptive narrative strategies of excess and absence begin to disrupt this plot. The repetitive sequence of deflorative moments suspends linearity in Memoirs, while the narrative of Clarissa is structured by a central narrative gap at the moment of her rape, which renders defloration ultimately unnarratable in the novel.

In later novels, the function of defloration shifts—first, when it comes to figure as a literal threat that is indeed avoided in climactic moments (as in Evelina's assault scenes or in the 'female' Gothic of Ann Radcliffe and Charlotte Smith) and then, when it becomes a displaced moment of intense sexual tension in scenes that feature desirable and undesirable, successful and unsuccessful proposals, from Austen to Trollope and Oliphant. But although I will argue that defloration is crucially metaphorized in these 'desexualized' marriage-plot novels, this moment's unstable and destabilizing function is just as apparent in the later marriage-plot novels as it is in the earlier, more literally sexual narratives of the mid-1700s. Thus, in Evelina and even in Emma, desexualized assault scenes and proposal scenes continue to echo the unnarratability and the excessive narratives of Clarissa and Fanny Hill, and in Miss Marjoriebanks and Phineas Finn, the climactic moment of the proposal is aggressively re-eroticized by way of excess repetition and reduplication. Defloration thus remains a conflicted and critical moment in the narrative of female initiation into heterosexuality. The paired readings of Clarissa and Memoirs, of Evelina and Emma, and of Miss Marjoriebanks and Phineas Finn in the following three chapters of this study will revolve around the different and always vexed
manifestations of this critical moment, and to its enormous potential for destabilizing the heterosexual plot and, ultimately, its gendered conventions.
Endnotes

1 Defloration is, of course, enormously important to feminist discussions of genital mutilation, which generally serves the purpose of preserving a woman's virginity until her wedding. To locate the concept of defloration exclusively in the "Third World" via genital mutilation rather than to look for it in the history of our own discourse on female sexuality seems problematic to me. A prominent example is Hastrup, "The Semantics of Biology: Virginity." This strategy of looking for the discourse of virginity and defloration elsewhere, preferably in some 'other' social structure constructed as primitive, even if it is troped as the basis of our own universalist perceptions, is already prevalent in Freud's 1918 essay on "The Taboo of Virginity."

2 Compact OED, 710. lists "devirginate" and "devirginization" as obsolete; the latter was still used in the late 19th century.

3 An examples pertinent to my study would be Marina Warner's Alone of All Her Sex; another Shirley Ardener's "A Note on Gender Iconography: The Vagina." Other studies that emphasize female bodies and archetypal images connected to them would be Gilbert and Gubar's Madwoman and Nina Auerbach's Woman and the Demon, while Helena Michie's The Flesh Made Word already goes beyond iconography.

4 Edward Shorter's study, The History of Women's Bodies, is probably the earliest of these attempts.

5 Cf. Walde's Lateinisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch I, 518. Cf. the Compact OED, which lists virginity as an obscure meaning of 'flower' (1033. 6c ). Interestingly, there is possibly a parallel association of virginity with plant life in the etymology of the word virgin. The Latin origin of 'virgin', virgo, virginis, may derive from virga, "a supple and flexible branch" (Eric Partridge, 783; cf. Walde I, 799). A rivaling and equally fascinating etymological possibility is uir + egere + o, "a girl or woman that has lacked a man" (Partridge, 783).

6 Cf. "virgin," Compact OED 3637, I.6 and 7. The Latin cognate "virgo" refers to women only; so does the Greek equivalent, "parthenos."

7 For a summary of the battle lines drawn (or not drawn) between 'pleasure feminists' and 'danger feminists', or libertarian and radical feminists, cf. Carol Vance, "Pleasure and Danger" and "More Danger, More Pleasure:" as well as Ferguson et al, "Forum: The Feminist Sexuality Debates." For the historical genealogy of the division, see DuBois and Gordon, "Seeking Ecstasy."

8 The question of marital rape lies outside the boundaries of my study since it is concerned with what happens—in fiction—before and up to marriage and not in married life. For a discussion of the Victorian discourse on marital rape see Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, Ch. 6.

9 Thus, the Middleton and Rowley's The Changeling prominently features a virginity test (in IV. i) and the heroine's feigning of virginity (IV. ii); so does Middleton's Hengist.
King of Kent. Cf. my argument in “How to Know Whether a Woman be a Maid or Not”: Proving and Feigning Virginity in The Changeling” (unpub. Ms.)

10 MacFarlane 151. In keeping with his broad argument about the origins of modern love and marriage, he argues that the two ideals exist side by side and that the latter view is not “inherently Catholic” or medieval Christian.


13 Both MacFarlane and Mason provide useful summaries of these demographic trends, as established by E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, and of long debate of historians over the cause for the rise in population in the eighteenth-century which they resolved. Cf. MacFarlane. 20-34, esp. 25-27, and Mason, Sexuality, 48-72.

14 Cf. Stone, Road to Divorce, 49-138, esp. 121-8 on the Act. Importantly, it is the beginning of marriage which is defined and normalized in the Marriage Act and in the debates that preceded it. However, as Stone’s treatment of this ‘making of marriage’ together with the ‘breaking of marriage’ in Road to Divorce makes clear, this debate about the legal beginnings of marriage is also virtually the onset of the debate about the ending of marriage, i.e. of the nineteenth-century legal debates about marriage. On the history of divorce, see also Roderick Phillips, Untying the Knot.

15 Cf. Staves, “Maidens” 113. Her examples for these comparatively rare marital solutions are Clara Reeve’s The Two Mentors (1783) and Robert Bate’s Barham Downs (1784).

16 A note on terminology: because I include poststructuralist as well as early pre- or nonstructuralist approaches to narrative in my discussion without simply equating them with structuralist narrative poetics, I refer to all approaches that seek to theorize narrative as “narrative theory,” while I use “narratology” to refer more narrowly to formalist and structuralist narrative theory. In doing so, I am following Robyn Warhol’s use of the terms, as outlined in her introductory chapter to Gendered Interventions.

17 Cf. Robyn R. Warhol, Gendered Interventions, 3-24; and Susan S. Lanser’s work since the mid-1980s, especially “Towards a Feminist Narratology,” “Shifting the Paradigm” (her response to Nilli Diengott’s rejection of a feminist narratology), her chapter “Towards a Feminist Poetics of Narrative Voice” in Fictions of Authority, 3-24, and
“Sexing the Narrative.” Cf. also her “queer theory” contribution to Mezei’s essay collection, “Queering the Narrative.”

Because the underlying assumption is that narratology is gender-neutral, texts by male authors are simply supposed to be representative of all texts. However, as Susan Lanser points out, the choice of texts by almost exclusively male authors as illustrations for abstract narratological models begs the question whether these models can, in fact, be applied to texts by female authors as well (Lanser, “Toward a Feminist Narratology,” 612; cf. also Warhol 7).

“Towards a Feminist Narratology,” 623. Cf. also for the critique of Lanser’s vague and conflicting use of plot definitions in Nilli Diengott’s “Narratology and Feminism,” 49—a otherwise polemic and unhelpful attack on Lanser.

The parody of the gendered sexual plot is, however, ironically invalidated and certainly de-essentialized through the fact that the medieval romance importantly structures the plot of Small World—a plot constructed by a male author around a central male figure, Patrick McGarrigle.

As de Lauretis points out, Barthes’ interest in the link between desire and narrative goes back to his focus on the Oedipus story as the narrative that underlies all stories in his 1966 “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative” (“Desire in Narrative,” 104). Considering the time of its emergence, the emphasis on desire in narrative theory could be seen as part of what Ruth Ronen, in an article with that title, refers called the major “Paradigm Shift in Plot Models” towards a “gradual domination of semantics” (Ronen 817) and a concern with content in the narratology of the late 1970s and early 1980s, with Eco, Culler, and Thomas Pavel.

Cf. the interview of Brooks conducted by John S. Rickard and Harold Schweizer, printed in Brooks’ Psychoanalysis and Storytelling, 112.

For the “clitoral” moment, see Naomi Schor’s “Female Paranoia,” 212-9, esp. 216, and Jane Gallop’s application of Schor’s concept to the reading of texts in “The Monster in the Mirror,” 22-3. Schor herself points out the similarity of the clitoral to Roland Barthes’ jouissance, as developed in The Pleasure of the Text. For Susan Stanford Friedman’s related model, see “Lyric Subversion,” 164. It seems to me that D. A. Miller’s not specifically gendered concept of the “narratable” is related to this concept as well, as a form of resistance against narrative closure that originates outside a novel’s events (Narrative and Its Discontents, ix), and Alison Booth’s critique of his lack of interest in the gendering of the narratable in the introduction to Famous Last Words, 8.

For a recent synopsis of the many different terminologies for this two-level model and alternative models, see Patrick O’Neill’s Fictions of Discourse, 19-26.

Cf. Jonathan Culler, “Story and Discourse,” 169-187. It seems to me that Culler implies the artificiality of separating story from discourse, and that Philip Sturgess, in his attack on what he sees as Culler’s deconstructive reading of narrative, merely renders
precede their narrative representation and are independent of it. Cf. Sturgess' "Narrativity and Double Logics," 163-165.


27 The Heroine's Text, ix (cf. also the argument of Miller's "Emphasis Added").


29 Cf. Kappeller, The Pornography of Representation, 104. For a historically informed view of pornography see my discussion and references in Chapter 2.

30 A more historically informed but unfortunately only marginally feminist perspective on rape is developed in the essay collection, especially in Sylvia Tomaselli's introduction and Roy Porter's "Rape -- Does it Have a Historical Meaning?"

31 Cf. Staves, "Seduced Maidens" 111; see also 112-113 for further examples of eighteenth-century variations on this theme. The seduced-maiden plot does, of course, remain an important plot in the nineteenth-century novel, although it often tends to be a marginalized subplot rather than a central story line in novels from Austen on forward. Focusing on the fallen woman as the protagonist and even titular heroine becomes the exception (Gaskell's Ruth would be such an exception). Cf. the secondary importance of the fallen-woman stories of Hetty Sorel in Adam Bede, Li'l Emily in David Copperfield, or Esther in Mary Barton. The puzzled and hostile reaction to Hardy's Tess at the end of the century shows, it seems to me, that refocusing on the seduced maiden, and attempting to frame her narrative in new ways, is perceived as an important transgression against nineteenth-century conventions regarding this plot.

32 Boone's examples for novels that directly thematize problematic marriage and courtship begin with Wuthering Heights; he traces plots of this 'counter-tradition' that operate with an emphasis of all-male or all-female communities back to Moby Dick (1851) and Sarah Scott's Millenium Hall (1762) respectively.

33 It is not surprising that most of these studies are primarily concerned with novels written after 1800. A look at the scholarship on the history of the novel makes very clear that with the beginning of the nineteenth century, attempts to write comprehensive, all-encompassing histories of novelistic development disappear—simply because, I would argue, the enormous proliferation of the novelistic discourse makes globalizations about its development as a genre become problematic, if not absurd. It is thus at this point that discussions of specific sub-genres and their emergence (say of the historical novel, the industrial novel, the detective novel, or the marriage-plot novel) become central to literary historiography. Although I draw on the discourse on the marriage-plot as a sub-genre in Chapters 3 and 4, in doing so I attempt to open this discourse up to a discussion of the novel plots in general. My readings of Miss Marjoribanks and Phineas Finn should make
clear how the dynamics of the marriage plot are used specifically to construct story lines (here, the political narratives) that are thematically *not* about heterosexual interaction.

34 Although I limit my discussion to feminocentric novels here, I would maintain that the association of antilinear strategies with female sexuality is just as prevalent in "masculinocentric" novels as it is in feminocentric ones. Thus, the prime example of an antilinear novel, Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, often read as a counter-reaction against the increasing hegemony of linearity in the novel, is obsessed with a lack of masculinity and the threat of feminization as emasculation that is discussed in metaphorically and literally sexual terms--with the disfiguration of Tristram’s nose at birth and his ‘wrong’ name and also with his circumcision by window sash and with Uncle Toby’s mysterious war wound.
Chapter 2:

Premarital Plots: Defloration in Clarissa and Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure

Conceptually and chronologically, my narrative about stories of defloration begins with what one might call the premarital plot—a narrative that on premarital defloration, and thus also a narrative that is 'premarital' in that it precedes the marriage plot. The two novels of the 1740s that I pair in this chapter are crucial examples for this plot. John Cleland's Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (M) and Samuel Richardson's Clarissa (C) tell the story of a young woman's initiation as a strikingly literal, physical defloration, not as a metaphorically and or temporally 'displaced' event. The position of this moment of literal defloration in each novel reflects the complex and vexed ambiguities of this moment that I have discussed in theoretical and historical terms in the previous chapter. In both novels, the destabilization of the climactic moment of defloration is the point at which the linear narrative of initiation is most visibly disrupted by narrative absence and narrative excess, i.e. by the two 'female' narrative strategies that interact in the heterosexual novel with the linear, developmental narrative of initiation that is troped as male. In Clarissa, defloration is climactic only to be dismantled as a climax when it becomes a gap in the text: in Memoirs, the same disintegration occurs when this climactic scene is multiplied into a plethora of deflorative moments.

In my separate readings of Memoirs and Clarissa, I will trace how these narrative strategies of excess and absence operate are anchored in the moment of literal defloration.
and how the are linked to the different constructions of female sexuality as excessive in *Memoirs* and as nonexistent in *Clarissa*. Before I read each novel’s strategy of narrative resistance individually, however, I need to position the two novels within the history of the eighteenth-century heterosexual novel and the history of a discourse on female sexuality that I have sketched above. It is this position which makes it historically possible for the two novels to experiment with these two diametrically opposed narrative strategies and models of female sexual identity. These experiments importantly take place before a set of narrative and generic conventions—a stabilized and universally sanctioned form of the heterosexual plot—is established that would separate *Clarissa* and *Memoirs* radically from each other for the next two hundred years.

1. *Clarissa, Memoirs* and the History of the Novel

On December 8, 1748, less than two weeks after the November 21 publication of the first part of Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (later better known by the title of its expurgated revision, *Memoirs of Fanny Hill*), Samuel Richardson published the third and last installment of his novel *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*. It is intriguing to imagine how the beginning of *Memoirs* and the end of *Clarissa* were set in type, printed, sold, and eventually read virtually simultaneously. Although they presumably targeted different audiences, and certainly triggered very different public or publicized reactions,¹ it is certainly possible that a number of readers read both. Cleland, for one, parodies Richardson’s first novel, *Pamela* (1742), in *Memoirs* and thus presumes
that his readers were at least familiar with Richardson's enormously popular earlier novel. and thus probably with the eagerly awaited new work as well..

Importantly, the overlap of the publication histories of two novels is only a partial one—while Clarissa's ending meets Memoirs' beginning, so to speak, in late 1748, more than a year lies between the publication of the first installment of Clarissa (published in December of 1747, with the second published in April of 1748) and the second and last part of Memoirs (published in February of 1749). This partial overlap in the publication history of the two novels seems to be a fitting image for their relationship as two works which seem both so similar and so dissimilar in their historical positioning. Despite their virtually simultaneous publication, the two novels have traditionally been predominantly read as part of separate historical narratives: Memoirs in the context of the 'history of pornography.' Clarissa in the framework of the 'history of the novel.' Only Clarissa is identified with the 1740s as the eighteenth-century high point of the 'rise' of the novel in Ian Watt's still influential, if partially dismantled, narrative of the genre's development. Cleland's Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure, by contrast, though no longer consistently relegated to the 'sub-cultural' counter-canon of pornography, still tends to hover uneasily on the margins of the novel canon in critical discussions. Even the critics who have compared these two novels individually or as part of a genre rarely link these two separate histories with which the two novels are respectively associated, or question their separability.²

In reading Clarissa and Memoirs together and against each other, I implicitly question their separation in literary history—a separation that is based on a distinction
between the 'mainstream' and the 'pornographic' novel that is arbitrary and fundamentally ahistorical for the eighteenth century. I propose instead that their (rather obvious) radical differences can be read as oppositional, but closely linked responses to their rather similar position within the history of the feminocentric novel about heterosexuality. Thus, the binary oppositions that seem to separate the two stories of sexual initiation told in the two novels—whore versus virgin, rapture versus rape, pleasure versus danger, pornography versus puritanism—in fact connect the two novels very tightly to each other.

I explicitly connect these novels and their seemingly disparate contexts because I would also argue that the time at which they were both published was, indeed, a time of enormous unevenness and generic instability within the history of the novel, a time of experimentation with diverse and by no means firmly established conventions of the genre. I thus challenge Watt's traditional construction of the 1740s as the climactic central phase in the rise of the novel—as a phase in which central novelistic conventions are established and cemented into the foundations of the genre. Indeed, it should be clear from my earlier sketch of the prehistory of the marriage-plot novel in Chapter 1 that the 1740s in particular were indeed a time in which the conventions of the heterosexual novel radically shifted to the new 'paradigm' of the seduction narrative and the virtue in distress.

Although I begin my story of the novel in the 1740s, my choice of novels challenges the 1740s as the climactic decade as which they figure in Watt's canonical narrative, rather than to reinstitute them. Simultaneously, however my very focus on the
1740s also resists the revisionist narratives that challenge Watt’s account by unraveling the beginning and end of his narrative, rather than its climactic “middle.” Davis’ and McKeon’s questioning of Watt’s story is one of his beginnings; both move beyond Defoe into the seventeenth century in their search for the origins of the novel. Feminist critics, by contrast, have traditionally focused on the women novelists in the late eighteenth century, and have thereby contested Watt’s idea of the abyss of “literary degradation” (Watt 290) that, for him, encompasses the second half of the eighteenth century.³ The “middle” of Watt’s narrative has thus remained pretty much intact despite its general dismantling, including the identification of this decade with the male canon of Richardson, Fielding, and possibly Smollett (whose first novel, Roderick Random was published in 1748). This focus on male authors is in place even when canonical authors are placed in the context of other less well-known novelists and their works, as in Jerry C. Beasley’s Novels of the 1740s.

The masculinist bias of the history of the novel when it comes to the 1740s is partly justified by the fact that women authors do not figure as prominently during this decade as they do earlier and later in the century. Although Eliza Haywood wrote her last novels in the 1740s, while Sarah Fielding began to publish in this decade, women are otherwise curiously underrepresented in the publication of new novels in the 1730s and 1740s, and do not, in fact, publish any new novels between 1737 and 1744, according to Cheryl Turner’s analysis of publication patterns.⁴ For Turner, this pattern, with its clear division into “two distinct ‘phases’ of development” reinforces the discovery that “women’s fiction published before 1740 was quite separate from that of the rest of the
century” (Turner, 38), and that the middle of eighteenth century is, in fact, a hiatus between two separate narratives. The first narrative revolves around the ‘amatory fiction’ written by authors like Behn, Delariviere Manley and Haywood in the late 1600s and early 1700s, who risked their reputation by writing erotic novels and were reviled by male authors. The second narrative, beginning in the 1750s and 1760s, is that of the rise of women’s ‘domestic fiction’ (which includes seduction as well as courtship narratives) written by respectable “Lady Novelists” like Sarah Fielding, Charlotte Lennox, Fanny Burney, Elizabeth Inchbald, Maria Edgeworth, and the writers of the female Gothic, foremost Charlotte Smith and Ann Radcliffe. In the feminist recovery of the eighteenth-century women novelists, the 1740s thus emerge as a kind of no-man’s land in between these two narratives, generally left undisturbed as a territory where the old canonical authors roam.

Of course, I do not share the view of many feminist scholars who exclusively focus on female novelists, who tend to see the 1740s as a nadir rather than a zenith of the development of the novel because women writers were conspicuously missing from this decade. Since my argument about the history of the novel is emphatically not about the gender of authors, but about the development of a story that is emphatically about women and their introduction to a hegemonic heterosexuality, the essentialist divide into two histories of the genre, one male and one female, is not very productive. Thus, I focus with Nancy Miller on “feminocentric” novels as novels about female protagonists, written by a men or women. (Miller herself initially applies the term exclusively to male authors in *The Heroine’s Text.*) Indeed, I would argue that looking at male authors who use the
female voice can yield important insights into gender construction and its instabilities, as is pointed out by critics like Madeleine Kahn and Terry Castle, who have discussed narrative ‘transvestism,’ ‘cross-dressing’ or cross-gender ‘masquerading’ as phenomena that problematize the relationship between (male) author and (female) narrative voice.

As two male authors that write about and in the narrative voice of women (at least partly in the case of Clarissa), Richardson and Cleland are crucial for the development of a novel that at mid-century had only begun to be perceived as a specifically ‘female’ novel associated with an emerging domestic sphere. The importance of Richardson for this ‘female’ novel has, of course, long been established; Nancy Armstrong’s emphasis on Pamela’s role in the development of domestic fiction theorizes, at it were, what eighteenth-century female authors like Burney already acknowledged when they praised, imitated and transformed Richardson’s model. For Cleland, on the fringes of the canon and seemingly far removed from a domestic narrative, this argument has not been made; however, my reading of Memoirs will make clear how he also participates in the novel’s negotiation with the changing and contradictory constructions of gender and heterosexual interaction that were current in the mid-eighteenth century.

Memoirs and Clarissa—together with the earlier ‘cross-dressed’ novel that is the subtext for both, namely Richardson’s Pamela—thus do make the 1740s tremendously important to the history of the feminocentric novel. But this is not so because the ‘rise’ of the novel reaches its triumphant climax here, as Watt would have it. On the contrary, the 1740s are crucial precisely because the novel is still tremendously volatile in its conventions, and the feminocentric novel in particular in a state of flux. In a period of
generic instability which produces numerous contradictions within and between individual novels written at the same time, Clarissa and Memoirs render the fluid and contradictory character of the novel particularly visible. They interact flexibly with the constantly shifting and expanding parameters of the genre, specifically with those associated with the heterosexual plot. They sometimes follow emerging conventions—often mutually contradictory ones—sometimes challenge them, and to a certain degree produce them, but they are never completely determined by them.

Although I will argue that both Clarissa and Memoirs challenge the emergent linear narrative of female sexuality qua heterosexuality by employing the 'female' antilinear strategies, respectively, of absence and excess, I thus do not assume that narrative strategies of repetition and omission are original with the two novels. Obviously, Clarissa and Memoirs do not 'invent' these narrative strategies. Narrative linearity (or even multilinearity) only gradually and hesitatingly emerges as a crucial feature of the novel, and remains an embattled one throughout the eighteenth century, not just in feminocentric novels about sexual initiation. Repetition and omission exist side by side with the increasing emphasis on linear plot in the novel; they are embedded in the genre's attempt to negotiate new plots and plot patterns.

But Memoirs and Clarissa crucially transform existing antilinear narrative patterns like the episodic sequence of the picaresque novel and the narrative gap which is rendered productive by virtually every epistolary novel. They employ these antilinear strategies within the radically changing heterosexual plot that, at mid-century, contradictorily combines elements of the amorous tale, the seduction narrative and the
proto-marriage plot. The heterosexual theme makes possible a particularly transparent exploration of the erotic arrhythmia that results from the disruptive interaction of the dynamics of absence and excess with the rhythms of the linear plot. By using absence and excess specifically in a feminocentric heterosexual story, characterized by the built-in gender conflict between ‘female’ sexual identity and ‘male’ linear narrative that I discuss in my first chapter, Memoirs and Clarissa give these narrative strategies a new function. They turn them into strategies to negotiate between rivaling constructions of sexual identity.

By thus gendering narrative strategies of excess and absence and linking them directly to a narrative about female sexuality, Richardson and Cleland participate in a discourse about how to tell the story of sexual identity, a discourse has an enormous impact on the development of the conventions of the feminocentric novel. Again, what can and what cannot be said about female sexuality in the novel—or what can be said in what kind of novel—“mainstream” or “pornographic”—is not clearly demarcated at the time when the two novels are written. What is defined as “sayable” about female sexuality and heterosexuality is in the process of changing substantially. What this means for Memoirs’ and Clarissa’s narrative treatment of the sexual is, once more, that the two novels are not the products of established conventions. In other words, Memoirs does not simply obsessively repeat descriptions of sexual intercourse because that is what ‘pornography’ does, and the heroine’s defloration through rape is not just omitted from Clarissa because describing sexual intercourse is taboo in a ‘decent’ novel.
It is crucial to point out that the way in which the sexual is represented in the two novels is not produced by already established conventions, especially for Cleland’s *Memoirs*. In critical discussions of *Memoirs*, the argument that its repetitions can be attributed to the conventions of pornography is a recurrent and problematic trope, ever since Stephen Marcus claimed that the “impulse or compulsion to repeat, to repeat endlessly, is one of pornography’s most enduring qualities” (*The Other Victorians*, 279). To apply this argument about pornography directly to Cleland’s novel means to ignore the historical dimension of pornography and universalizes the conventions of a genre—the pornographic novel—that does not develop until the eighteenth century. This historical dimension has been most recently discussed by Lynn Hunt and, on more narrowly textual grounds, by Peter Wagner. What emerges from their discussions of the history of pornography is that pornographic fiction is an emerging rather than an established genre in eighteenth-century England—and certainly not a genre that has firmly established boundaries or even a name. Thus, although author, printer and publisher of *Memoirs* were arrested and fined in November 1749, Cleland’s novel does not (yet) fall into a specific category of books condemned or banned for being ‘pornographic;’ indeed, the term was not coined until the mid-nineteenth century. Books were banned as frequently for blasphemous and politically undesirable content as for being sexually explicit, and, as Hunt and David Foxon argue, these categories are often not clearly distinguished in legal terminology or in contemporary reviewers’ comments.

Although Cleland’s novel has numerous forerunners among written erotica, as Peter Wagner has shown, only very few of these are, in fact, novels—and these few are
furthermore translations of the French novels with which modern prose pornography begins. Wagner argues that these French novels should be considered as part of the British tradition of pornographic fiction, because the reading public made virtually no distinction between French, translated, and English eighteenth-century pornography. He holds, therefore, that the genre does, indeed, gain prominence before rather than with Cleland (Eros Revived 231-34). However, if one uses a more standard definition of ‘British’ literature, Memoirs’ status as the first pornographic novel remains uncontested. ¹¹ Indeed, I would argue that Memoirs’ links to the ‘mainstream’ British novel are often more pronounced than its connections to earlier and contemporary French pornography mentioned by Wagner, such as L’Ecole des femmes (1655) and Vénus dans le cloître (1683), or Dom Bougre (1741) or Thérèse philosophe (1748). ¹² Thus, Cleland’s parodic use of Pamela, his use of the episodic structure of the picaresque novel (cf. Whitley 401), of the whore biographies and of the seduction narratives of Behn, Manley and Haywood (cf. Wagner 216-225) all make clear that Memoirs is heavily influenced by the ‘non-pornographic’ novel. The repetitive structure of Memoirs in particular is thus not something which, as Marcus would have it, distinguishes pornographic fiction from the (presumably narrative) “work of literature” (Other Victorians 279). Rather, the novel’s narrative strategies of repetition are immersed in the development of the novel and in the gradual development of its narrative conventions. What Cleland does in Memoirs is to adapt the long form of the novel, which allows for repetition and re-narration, to his purpose of telling a sexually arousing tale—and by doing so, he tends to contribute to
creating the conventions of repetition characteristic for the ‘pornographic novel’ rather than being a priori influenced by such conventions.

The Memoirs clearly demonstrate, then, that the rise of pornography is “inseparable from and dependent upon the growth of the novel,” as Marcus himself observes (Other Victorians 282). Unfortunately, Marcus never specifies the link between pornography and the novel. Neither does Lynn Hunt, who criticizes Marcus for his vagueness, but then merely suggests a more specific historical link, and eventually positions pornography and the novel as “oppositional genre[s]” (Hunt, 36; cf. 30-36). I do not intend to provide the missing historical link between the novel and pornography in the eighteenth-century within the framework of this study. But I would argue that Memoirs’ connections to the ‘mainstream’ novel make clear how problematic the separate and disconnected treatment of pornography and the novel is for this time period. The categories to make this separation possible are simply not yet in place at the time when Memoirs is written. Instead, different novels variously categorized as “mainstream” fiction and “pornography” in modern criticism are located within a wide range of novels with more or less erotic emphasis, and with more or less graphic descriptions of sexual encounters. Within this range of novels, what is judged ‘acceptable’ or ‘respectable’ fluctuates heavily—both in the history of the novel and in the eyes of individual eighteenth-century critics and reviewers.

How these judgments change over time is aptly demonstrated by the decreasing popularity of amorous scandal novels as the main genre of the feminocentric novel after the 1730s, and its gradual replacement by stories about sexually pure females (be they
pursued by a sexually rapacious male, or later complemented by equally pure men in the
desexualized courtship plot). When Cleland adopted and adapted strategies and themes
from the scandal novel in the 1740s, once an acceptable and widely popular variant of the
novel, they had already begun to lose respectability, and even Eliza Haywood, famous for
the aptly titled *Love in Excess* in the 1720s, was now writing domestic (domesticated)
moral tales like the *History of Betsy Thoughtless*.

Importantly, however, the ‘decent’ novels of the 1740s and thereafter to which
*Memoirs* is so crucially connected do not themselves escape the general troping of the
novel as a titillating and enticing genre. In particular the seduction novels in which men
still figure as lustful and sexually active, even though women are becoming passive and
asexual victims, are susceptible to the charge of being designed to excite and arouse
readers—a familiar argument against the novel *sui generis* throughout the eighteenth
century. Critics of the novel again and again attack the genre’s attempt to arouse
emotions. This arousal, intended to produce sympathetic reactions to the characters’
feelings and sensations in the reader, is, of course, the very basis of the sentimental novel
à la Richardson. The sentimental emphasis on the detailed description of feelings and
sensations is precariously close to an erotic or sexually arousing description of feelings. It is not surprising that even enormously popular sentimental novels (especially if they
address sexuality at all) are frequently accused of being overly exciting, titillating and
enticing by contemporary critics. Thus, Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa* (as well as
later Sterne’s more explicitly bawdy *Tristram Shandy*) are immediately attacked for their
emphasis on the sexual.
The ‘pomographic’ and the ‘sentimental’ novel, with their common focus on the description and arousal of emotions, are thus difficult to distinguish and categorize clearly. The affinity between these two genres renders the clear separation of Memoirs from Clarissa especially problematic because Clarissa itself transparently oscillates between erotic titillation and moral edification by providing the male seducers’ perspective alongside the victim’s point of view. Importantly, the emerging seduced-maiden narrative, with its juxtaposition of female virtue with male sexual desire, makes it possible to combine the titillating narrative structure of the erotic narrative with the newly emerging and increasingly dominant construction of women as asexual. The dramatic changes in the construction of female sexuality in the second half of the eighteenth century, with the increasing emphasis on domesticity and chastity in the name of the “Cult of Womanhood,” as Marilyn LeGates has called it, are thus not inherently incompatible with a conception of the heterosexual narrative as sexually exciting. Clarissa can thus be both a moralistic tale and erotically titillating: the conventions (which I would argue are basically anti-sentimental conventions) that would make those two incompatible, or that would even specifically point to the contradiction between the two, are merely tentatively emerging at mid-century.

It is thus not with Richardson in the 1740s, but only towards the very end of the eighteenth century that the relative ease with which the novel had hitherto addressed sexuality disappears. Only with the turn of the century, if not later, novels that were not considered scandalous when first published, such as Moll Flanders and, a generation later, Tom Jones, are eventually recast as scandalous reading material—particularly for
female readers.\textsuperscript{16} When \textit{Clarissa} and \textit{Memoirs} are published in the 1740s, this specifically ‘feminine’ narrative taboo that surrounds the description of sexual encounters in the novel is under construction rather than complete. The domestic femininity that seems to demand this taboo is at this point still a contested concept of femaleness among others. With its diametrically opposed construction of a positive female identity that glorifies a hypersexual, hypererotic woman, \textit{Memoirs} makes particularly clear that the construction of femininity as emphatically and excessively sexual—as Eve rather than Mary—is still very much in circulation at mid-century. And \textit{Clarissa} presents an ideal of female identity that points forward to the kind of asexual and domestic ‘femininity’ that is soon to become hegemonic, but is not identical with the domestic ideal. In particular, Clarissa’s investment in singleness—to which I will return in my analysis of the novel—distinguishes her from the marriage-plot heroine whose virtuous asexuality is constructed as compatible with later marriage. Furthermore, the fact that Clarissa’s asexuality is not based on her ignorance or her inability to talk of sexual matters distinguishes her sharply from the next generation of novelistic heroines.

The contradictory but coexisting constructions of female sexuality in the novel are, of course, part of a larger discourse about sexuality that, for the eighteenth-century, was much less compartmentalized into disciplines than the nineteenth-century medical and scientific discourse under scrutiny in Foucault’s \textit{History of Sexuality}. Because the eighteenth-century discourse on sexuality \textit{in toto} was not as professionalized and compartmentalized as it would soon become, the contradictory contributions of novelists to this discourse do not stand out as exceptional—they are part of a contradictory
hodgepodge of scientific, philosophical and folkloric “knowledge” about sexuality and specifically female sexuality. Importantly, this discourse, novelistic and otherwise, did not necessarily exclude women, like the nineteenth-century medical discourse on, say, hysteria—and I have argued in Chapter 1 that the novel in fact preserves the possibility of women’s active participation in an however toned-down discourse on female sexuality when other, professionalized discourses begin to deny this option.

Because of the novel’s explicit and active participation in the discourse on sexuality, the sexual is thus importantly not yet ‘the unmentionable’ or ‘unspeakable’ in either Memoirs or Clarissa. ‘Speaking’ the sexual in both novels is, first of all, based on the premise that women can be theoretically knowledgeable about sexuality. In neither novel is knowledge about sexuality—specifically about sexual intercourse—troped as unfeminine or as inappropriate for women. Indeed, Clarissa’s theoretical knowledge of the sexual is supposed to protect the virtuous heroine from the actual experience of heterosexuality troped as dangerous. By contrast, Fanny’s “tolerable insight into the nature and mysteries” of a prostitute’s life (M 23), gained before her own defloration, leads directly to her greater enjoyment and appreciation of her sexual experience. Although the two heroines use their knowledge very differently, and relate it to actual sexual experience in radically different ways, it is thus always knowledge, not ignorance, that these two authors attribute to their heroines.

If including women as participants in a discourse on sexuality thus did not yet necessarily mean to render sexuality a taboo topic, there was still the question of how to address sexuality ‘properly’ in a genre that is geared towards women and men alike.
Although Richardson and Cleland characteristically give very different answers to this central question, it is important to keep in mind that each heroine's sexual knowledge is verbalized, and sexuality is thus clearly 'mentionable.' In Richardson's novel, the premise of Clarissa's language of sexuality is that it is possible for the heroine to speak about sexuality 'modestly' or 'decently' without ceasing to speak about it altogether. Clarissa can refer to the sexual in the form of moral shortcuts which imply her knowledgeability about sexuality. Thus, she refers to the "marriage-intimacies," which "the purest, although with apprehension, must think of" (C 507), and speaks euphemistically, but certainly not naïvely, of having saved herself "from the vilest dishonour" (C 754) when she escapes from Lovelace during the so-called "fire-scene."

As I will show later in my reading of the scene, Richardson often directly juxtaposes Clarissa's moral euphemisms with Lovelace's descriptions, which, although never graphic or obscene, are highly erotic.

Unlike Richardson, Cleland does not have his heroine use such a language of moral euphemisms to refer to her sexual experiences.\textsuperscript{19} In the interest of the telling the "stark naked truth," his narrator Fanny indeed claims to be "careless of violating those laws of decency, that were never made for such unreserved intimacies" as those between her and her female correspondent (M 1). However, Cleland and his narrator are not only aware of these "laws of decency"—some of these "laws" are, in fact, followed rather than violated in the novel. While Fanny describes innumerable sexual acts and organs in great detail, she is also consistently metaphorical rather than graphic in these descriptions.

Fanny accordingly describes her stylistic ideal in writing about her sexual adventures as a
“mean temper’d with taste, between the revoltingness of gross, rank, and vulgar expressions, and the ridicule of mincing metaphors and affected circumlocutions” (M 91). In comic contrast with the novel’s Defoesque accountant-style realism concerning time and money, all bawdy and obscene expressions are avoided throughout the novel (so that a jilted john can only refer to the female object of his anger, a brothel madam, as a “b—h,” M 19). The effect of the lack of four-letter words is a consciously intended one, as is manifest in Cleland’s letter to the law clerk concerned with the obscenity charge against the author, printer and publisher of Memoirs. Cleland, trying to exonerate his printer and publisher, argues that the latter two “were deceived [into printing and publishing the novel] by my avoiding those rank words in the work, which are all that they Judge of obscenity by, and made them think the Line was drawn between them, and all danger of Law whatever” (quoted in Foxon, 55).

Despite the radical differences between the ways in which sexual matters are verbalized in the two novels, it remains crucial that the sexual is mentioned by women and in the presence of women; and can thus become the central thematic focus of a feminocentric story. Both novels can accordingly tell stories of a woman’s premarital defloration (in Richardson’s case at least partly) through the narrative voice of the female protagonist. However, the possibility of making the sexual, as it were, the central event of a story does not translate necessarily or unproblematically into the possibility of making it into a story that can be told. This seems an almost trivial point: the sexual event—or series of events—is not identical with their narrative representation. As I pointed out in my discussion of narrative theory in Chapter 1, “story” and “discourse.”
narrated events and their narration, are never completely separable—but, as becomes clear here, neither are they identical. The two novels attempt to formulate the relationship between the sexual event and its narrative representation in radically different ways: *Memoirs* presumes the identity, *Clarissa* the separability of the two. Each novels (re)produces the very contradictions that are implicit in these two opposite definitions of the relationship between “story” and “discourse.”

The contradictions implicit in either separating event and narrative representation or collapsing them altogether are most dramatically exposed in the moment of defloration in each novel. I have described this moment of defloration as the anchor for the female counterplots of absence and excess in the two novels: It is the point at which they most visibly disrupt the story of sexual initiation simultaneously in terms of ‘content’ and ‘form,’ or, differently put, of the event and its narrative representation. Excising or repeating this moment and/or its narrative representation doubly questions defloration’s climactic “nature”—as a sexual, thematic and a narrative, formal climax. The sexual thematics of defloration thus render the elusive relationship between event and narrative representation both extremely complex and extremely visible in each of the two novels.

In the name of a feminized ideal of ‘modesty’ and ‘decency,’ Richardson thus tries to organize his narrative around Clarissa’s enforced defloration without narrating it. He thus famously omits Clarissa’s rape from the narrative. Event and representation are thus radically separated here, because *Clarissa* does depend on the rape to have happened as an event. Although the story of the rape cannot be told, the rape is emphatically understood to have happened by Lovelace, by Clarissa, by their correspondents, and also
by Richardson’s readers (with the exception of Judith Wilt, who argued that Lovelace did not rape Clarissa). The separation of the event from its representation ultimately fails, and the lack of representation collapses at least with the desire for the rape to disappear as an event, when both protagonists attempt to undo the rape, as I will discuss in more detail in my reading of Clarissa. The paradoxical attempt to tell the story of a rape without representing it produces contradictions that caused Richardson’s contemporary critics to accuse him (and his heroines) of hypocrisy, of telling a highly titillating story under the guise of moral edification. Richardson’s ‘hypocrisy’ is the result of his attempt to do what turns out to be impossible, but what nevertheless structures Clarissa’s narrative: to make the sexual encounter an unnarratable event without excising it qua event.

While Richardson thus strives (and fails) to separate the ‘narratable’ and the ‘mentionable,’ the event and its narrative representation, Cleland attempts to collapse the sexual event and its narrative representations altogether. He does so by having Fanny match every one of her sexual experiences with a narrative account of this experience. However, this equilibrium of event and narrative representation is constantly disturbed: both by a surplus of sexual events that resemble each other too much to be all individually described, and by a surplus of narrative accounts of an event that is ostensibly unrepeatable, namely defloration.

Thus, the equation of “story” and “discourse” is a model for understanding the relationship between the two that fails just as the radical separation of the two in Clarissa does. The idea of matching each sexual encounter with its narrative representation is fundamentally counteracted by Memoirs’ emphasis on the similarity of sexual
experiences through problematizing linguistic and narrative repetition. Fanny reflects on the problem of repetitiveness, most prominently in her highly self-referential analysis of her narrative at the beginning of her second letter. Like many critics of Memoirs, she constructs the repetitions as intrinsically pornographic when she refers to the uniformity of adventures and expressions, inseparable from a subject of this sort, whose bottom or ground-work being, in the nature of things, eternally one and the same, whatever variety of forms and modes, the situations are susceptible of; there is no escaping a repetition of near the same images, the same figures, the same expressions, with this further inconvenience added..., that the words... so congenial to... the praetise of pleasure, flatten, and lose much of their due spirit and energy, by the frequency they indispensibly recur with, in a narrative of which that praetise professedly composes the whole basis. (M 91)

Eventually, then, the “exhausted novelty” of sexual adventures (M 153) causes Fanny increasingly to summarize and report sexual encounters only selectively. With the final sequence of the novel, Fanny finally abandons repetition altogether by concluding the narrative of sexual encounters with a marriage-plot ending that anticipates, as I will argue, the very trope of unnarratability that Memoirs seems to do be at such pains to contradict.

In addition to this gradual de-emphasis of matching each event with its representation, Memoirs’ obsession with defloration can be said to produce more narratives of defloration than there are occurrences of this ostensibly unique, one-time
only occurrence. In addition to the multiple narratives of different women's experiences of defloration, Fanny Hill makes defloration excessively repeatable by constructing the sexual encounters that follow her actual defloration as yet more deflorations. In her narrative accounts of these encounters, Fanny invariably stresses their resemblance to her first intercourse. Defloration thus no longer causes its narration, but the narration of an event causes it to become a defloration. This strategy not only undermines the concept of defloration as a climactic and unique event in a woman's life by inflation. It also questions the seeming identity of event and narrative as a causal and temporal sequence (first the event, then the narrative) by reversing this sequence—an event is *a priori* constructed as a defloration by its mode of representation.

The paradoxical repetition of the unrepeatable event of defloration in *Memoirs* thus problematizes the assumption that a narrative requires an event at all, just as *Clarissa* questions whether the event can exist without a narrative when what begins as the omission of the narrative representation of rape becomes the attempt to erase the rape as an event from the story. In the stories of *Memoirs* and *Clarissa*, then, the complex relationship between events and their narrative representation is exposed by way of the strategies of excision and repetition anchored in defloration, the very moment in which event and representation, sexual climax and narrative climax, collapse. The sexual thematics are thus directly visible in the narrative strategies used to represent them.

The complicated relationship of event and representation in *Clarissa and Memoirs* makes clear, I think, what I have assumed all along: that plot is an integral part of the discourse about heterosexuality, gender, and gendered sexuality in the novel. Plot is a
central dimension of gendered link between the sexual ‘content’ and the textual ‘form’ as it is formulated in the novel, and as critics have discussed in other, not directly plot-related terms. Thus, I see my discussion of plot in direct context of Terry Eagleton’s analysis of Richardson’s tendency (also Cleland’s. I would argue) to fuse the erotics of heterosexual encounters with the erotics of writing and reading (cf. Eagleton’s *Rape of Clarissa*, esp.49, 59), and of the discussions of how gender ambiguity is inscribed in the “transvestite” narrative voice, the ambiguously gendered reader, and in the psychology of the main characters. I would argue that the plots of Cleland’s and Richardson’s novels complicate gender boundaries as much as narrators, readers, or characters do—and sometimes more visibly so.

Importantly, the significance of plot for the construction of female sexual identity does point back to the historical dimension of plot, which, as I have argued in Chapter 1, is neglected not only in theories of plot, but also in histories of the novel. Because plot seems to elude history, it appears in histories of the novel either as a set of ‘universal’ barebone structures that make novels comparable across time, or as so varied that the sheer variety of novel plots becomes itself a common denominator. Thus, for Ian Watt, the variety of plots in the eighteenth century indicates the novel’s uniqueness and independence from classical models (*Rise* 14-15). By contrast, Nancy Miller sees the “euphoric” and the “dysphoric” as the two ‘universal’ plot trajectories within the feminocentric novel between 1722 and 1786 (cf. *Heroine’s Text* ix-xii). And, within a smaller time frame and with different plot categories, but with the same trust in broad and ahistorical categories, Patricia Meyer Spacks constructs a narrative in which the novels of
the 1740s and 1750s all depict an overt power struggle between the genders that is soon to become less explicit (cf. *Desire and Truth* 56). As my earlier discussion of plot in Chapter 1 implies, plot thus figures for both Miller and Spacks as an ahistorical element within a largely historicized concept of the novel.

Against this view of plot as transhistorically stable, I would argue that plot is, in fact, part of the history of the novel, of its change. And it is this contribution of plot to the volatility of the novel rather than its participation in a process of stabilizing the genre that makes the stories of *Clarissa* and *Memoirs* so important to the history of the feminocentric novel. Written at a time in which the heterosexual plot undergoes the radical changes I sketched above, they react and contribute to these changes. What makes their exploration of radically different models of heterosexual relationships and female sexual identity possible is the very instability of the heterosexual plot in both senses that I encompass in the term—of its contents and their narrative representation—at mid-century. As I have argued in Chapter 1, it is around the mid-century that the shift away from the erotic seduction narrative à la Behn and Haywood takes place. This plot is most immediately transformed into the narrative of the "seduced maiden," to use Staves' term again—with all its implications about a sentimental construction of women (but not yet of men) as desexualized and domesticated. *Memoirs* and *Clarissa* both take this plot as its starting point. *Memoirs* parodically subverts it by showing how the initial, gradual seduction of Fanny Hill brings out the 'natural' excessive sexual desire of women that lurks underneath a superficial veneer of sexual innocence. *Clarissa*, on the other hand, takes the seduction plot and its premise of female innocence to its logical extreme, by
emphasizing that such asexual femininity can only become part of a construct of sexuality as male-oriented heterosexuality via rape. But this new plot of seduction, whether it is parodied or taken to its literally deadly serious extreme, is also linked back to its predecessors and forward to the marriage plot. These links that are visibly present in Memoirs and Clarissa (as well as in their predecessor Pamela).

Thus, Memoirs draws on the construction of women as seducible and sexually active in the scandal novels as well as on the earlier Defoe-style ‘whore biography;’ at the same time, however, Cleland’s novel culminates in a marriage-plot ending, complete with an emphasis on virtuous marital conduct, that heightens and thus radically exposes the contradictions between seduction novel and marriage plot inherent in Richardson’s Pamela. Richardson also draws on a crucial aspect of the amatory novel in Clarissa, and more prominently, engages in a debate about the possibility of the marriage plot. The often neglected beginning of the novel with a scenario of enforced marriage and family tyranny harkens back to earlier narratives of female seducibility and sexual desire: The tyrannical parent or guardian often provides the motivation for a heroine’s elopement with a lover—echoed in Clarissa’s fateful elopement with Lovelace. This escape often culminates in an illicit or semi-legal relationship like the tragic clandestine marriage Haywood’s novella “The Double Marriage.” What is interesting about Richardson’s use of this narrative of enforced marriage and parental tyranny in Clarissa is that he juxtaposes this premodern model of “alliance”-based marriage not with the new concept of the “conjugal marriage” but with a model of female autonomy. This model, implicit in Clarissa’s adamant insistence on singleness, radically questions whether the marriage
is a viable narrative and social option for domesticating the heterosexual narrative. With *Clarissa*, Richardson radically questions whether marriage can be a desirable goal for women if their essential identity is constructed as asexual. Paradoxically, the only alternative to marriage that is suggested in *Clarissa* (i.e. Clarissa’s death) is not only an annihilation of any autonomy, but is also eventually, as I will argue later, constructed as an erotic, explicitly heterosexualized union with God.

Since marriage, in however mitigated a form, is present at the end of the excessively sexual and the asexual, the repetitive and the absence-ridden seduction narratives of Cleland and Richardson, respectively, I would argue that this seduction narrative is from its beginning linked to the marriage plot via the quest for (and the questioning of) a viable narrative about legitimate courtship and marriage. This link is a deeply problematic one in both *Memoirs* and *Clarissa* (as well as in *Pamela*), so that the marriage plot proper emerges, for example with Fanny Burney, from the very dissociation of this seduction plot from the marriage plot. In this respect, it is important to stress once more that *Pamela* does not provide the model for the marriage plot, and that *Clarissa* and *Memoirs* as important revisions and revisitations of *Pamela* help to highlight the problematics of the marriage plot that the earlier novel unsuccessfully tries to gloss over.

Because *Pamela* forges such a crucial intertextual link between *Memoirs* and *Clarissa* and especially between their diametrically opposed ways of questioning the marriage plot, I will now take a brief look at the pivotal contradictions in the seduction / marriage plot of *Pamela*. Although *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* is indeed the novel of the 1740s that most visibly and most aggressively attempts to streamline the new story of
innocence pursued into a proto-marriage plot, I hold that the discontinuities between the later marriage plot and Richardson’s preliminary version of it are more crucial than the continuities between them. Because Pamela combines the seduction plot with a telos of marriage, it is riddled with massive and unresolved contradictions about the teleology of the heterosexual plot. The later marriage-plot will take a new route to eliminate those contradictions and consistencies—but not until Memoirs and Clarissa have brought them altogether out into the open. While it is not my intention to provide a full analysis of Pamela’s plot here, I will sketch the two contradictions in Pamela’s plot that are particularly crucial to the ways in which Clarissa and Memoirs revise this plot.

The fact that Pamela marries the very man who tries repeatedly to seduce and rape her makes the inconsistencies of the construction of male and female sexuality in the marriage plot extremely visible. On the one hand, Mr. B suddenly ceases to be the libertine seducer and becomes the loving husband, a change that Pamela seeks to explain through a narrative of sudden conversion, in which “the dear, once naughty assailer of her innocence, by a blessed turn of Providence, is become the kind, the generous protector and rewarder of it” (Pamela 364). But despite the trope of conversion, Pamela still has to make quite an effort to erase their past encounters from her memory in order to prevent his “attempts, that now I will endeavour to forget for ever” (Pamela 373) from intruding into her new construction of Mr. B as a paragon of virtuous manhood.

Pamela, on the other hand, is praised (and praises herself) throughout the novel as “worthy of the imitation of her sex” because she is an asexually virtuous woman—because “her maiden and bridal purity... extended as well to her thoughts as to her words
and actions” (*Pamela* 533). Paradoxically, however, the reward of maintaining and defending this asexual virtue is marriage. The ideal heroine is thus supposed to strive for the legitimized form of the very heterosexuality which, as a virtuous virgin, she does not desire but instead rejects vehemently. As my reading of Fanny Burney’s *Evelina* in Chapter 3 will show, this contradiction continues to riddle the marriage plot, and is tentatively, but again problematically resolved by redefining marriage as a union based on a familial relationship of father and daughter or brother and sister.

Given the contradictory emphasis on marital sexuality as the harmonious union of once-rapacious seducer and once-asexual virgin, it is not surprising that Richardson cannot actually manage to establish marriage as the *telos* of the feminocentric narrative of heterosexuality. Richardson resists ending the novel with marriage by further and further extending Pamela’s account beyond her wedding day. Eventually, the postmarital narrative in *Pamela* constitutes almost a fourth of her story—even if one disregards Richardson’s later attempt to then further continue the story in the 1741 sequel to the novel. The actual moment of closure in *Pamela* is, finally, not associated with Pamela’s wedding, but with her postmarital reunion with her parents, whose arrival at Mr. B’s estate is eagerly anticipated in Pamela’s last letter. Pamela’s postmarital narrative of the early days of her married life thus necessarily includes the “happy, yet awful moment” (*Pamela* 372) of Pamela’s wedding-night defloration. This defloration appears as a telling narrative gap—alogous to the omission of the rape in *Clarissa*. The unrarrated events of the wedding night occur between two letters, one written “Eleven o’clock. Thursday night” (*Pamela* 372) in extreme anxiety just before Mr. B enters her rooms, and
one, written the following evening, that exuberantly praises him as "the generous author of [her] happiness" (Pamela 372).

Pamela thus merely gestures towards making marriage the moment of closure, but does not altogether follow through on its own suggestion. By including deflation—albeit as a gap in the narrative—the narrative contains the possibility of constructing the moment of sexual initiation as a climactic moment, rather than as an endpoint that eventually is located outside and beyond the narrative. As a climactic moment, the wedding night cannot simply be read as terminating the series of Mr. B's sexual transgressions against Pamela, but is also the culmination of this series, dependent on his transgressions as a narrative and erotic build-up. Pamela thus contradictorily combines two different versions of the initiation narrative: one which the marriage-plot novel will adopt and adapt by troping marriage—as the signal of legitimized sexual initiation—as the event that ends the narrative, and another, that of the premarital plot, in which deflation functions, without the legitimizing context of marriage, as narrative and erotic climax. By focusing strictly (albeit in radically different ways) on premarital deflation. Clarissa and Memoirs resist Pamela's assumption that it is possible to postpone the heroine's introduction to heterosexuality until her marriage. Richardson and Cleland are, of course, both highly conscious of the intertextual dialogue in which they engage when thus question Pamela's story.

Cleland often consciously parodies Pamela in Memoirs, but his use of Richardsonian tropes of sensibility and sentimentality is not entirely parodic. He is on common ground with other anti-Pamelists like Fielding and Haywood in that he ridicules
the notion of a blamelessly virtuous heroine, but also in that he ultimately does not question marriage as a trope of closure. Fanny Hill finds that she cannot postpone her introduction to heterosexuality until marriage—not because she is defenseless against a male aggressor, but because she herself eagerly desires this introduction. However, in the narrative logic of Memoirs, the loss of her virginity (not to mention the series of sexual adventures that follows) does not prevent the heroine from being happily married in the end. Memoirs thus maintains Pamela’s teleology, but reduces it *ad absurdum* by questioning the necessity of female purity and of narrative linearity as the straight and narrow path towards the telos of marriage.

Richardson’s Clarissa, begun shortly after Pamela and often perceived as its tragic revision, takes the opposite approach. By taking the dictum of the heroine’s asexual purity as absolute, rather than as compromised by any form of heterosexual contact (including marital sex), Clarissa radically undermines the telos of marriage. Richardson rejects the very premise that gives Pamela its marital teleology very consciously, as is shown in his remark in the preface to Clarissa, where he claims that his intent in publishing this second novel is to “caution … against preferring a man of pleasure to a man of probity, upon that dangerous but too commonly received notion, *that a reformed rake makes the best husband*” (C 36; cf. Pamela 364). Pamela’s subtitle, Virtue Rewarded (i.e. by marriage) is thus consciously and radically contradicted when Richardson now makes adamant virtue an insufficient defense against the aggressive heterosexual desire of the un reformable rake. Unlike Pamela (but importantly like Fanny), Clarissa is thus unable to prevent and postpone her forcible sexual initiation until
marriage. Her premarital defloration through rape completely unmoors any marital teleology. It is morally impossible for Clarissa to marry the man who raped her—much to the disappointment of Richardson’s early readers, who suggested to Richardson that he let Clarissa marry Lovelace after all (cf. Keymer, 205f.). A new telos thus replaces—but as I will argue also echoes—that of marriage: Clarissa’s repurification and her eroticized spiritual union with God through her death.

Within the framework of the early history, the prehistory, of the marriage plot, *Clarissa* thus challenges its goal, while *Memoirs* challenges the way by which to reach this goal. Although they push it in such radically different directions, Richardson and Cleland thus both push the marriage plot to its limits *a priori*—before this plot is in any sense an established plot. And in pushing this plot to its limits, Cleland’s and Richardson’s narratives of premarital defloration go beyond exposing the contradictions of an emerging sub-genre with a specific teleology closely tied to the legitimation of heterosexuality through marriage. By exposing these contradictions and by disrupting the marriage plot’s linear orientation towards a specific teleology, they ultimately question the enterprise of narrativizing female sexual identity, because such narrativizing implies a woman’s integration, the initiation, into a male-defined, male-oriented heterosexuality.

When *Memoirs* and *Clarissa* disrupt the linear narrative of such an initiation through excess and absence—as narrative strategy and modes of female sexual identity—they work, simultaneously, against both the ‘form’ and the ‘contents’ of the heterosexual plot as the defining narrative of female identity. In other words, absence and excess simultaneously undercut the linear narrative form—the rise, peak and fall of the ‘male’
narrative—of the feminocentric story of ‘love’ and the construction of female sexuality as a monogamous heterosexuality in which one single man figures as the constant point of reference for the woman’s identity. The fact that this undermining of the heterosexual story as the defining narrative of female identity here occurs, in Memoirs and Clarissa, before this story ever becomes a stable, established novel plot, points forward to the heterosexual plot’s even at its ostensibly most hegemonic moments—say, in the novels of Jane Austen that will figure prominently in my next chapter.

2. A Woman of Pleasure: Defloration in Excess

Although Clarissa and Memoirs construct female sexuality overwhelmingly as asymmetrically different from male sexuality, both also evoke gender-symmetrical constructions of sexuality as the same for men and women. Thus, at first sight, Memoirs appears to construct female sexuality as a symmetrical counterpart to male sexuality rather than as its excess, so that many critics argue that Fanny is simply a female version of the traditionally male libertine. Libertinism’s construction of sexuality is based on the fantasy of excessive, infinite sexual desire and prowess, very often and primarily associated with male sexuality—in the amatory novels of the early eighteenth-century, but even more so in the seduced-maiden plots with their mythology of the libertine aristocrat as the seducing villain. In Memoirs, Fanny and her fellow prostitutes can be argued to be ‘symmetrically’ female libertines because the narrative is based on a symmetrical orgasmic economy of the individual heterosexual intercourse. Not only do women and
men alike have strong sexual desires that can only be fulfilled through "the old last act" (M 26) of heterosexual genital intercourse; they also reach satisfaction through heterosexual intercourse in a virtually identical manner. True to the symmetrical construction of the human body as discussed in detail by Laqueur, the female orgasm is here troped as exact counterpart to the male orgasm. It marks the climactic moment of genital intercourse *Memoirs*, and is associated with a secretion of fluids that corresponds to male ejaculation. Ideally, it occurs simultaneous with the man's orgasm as a mutual "melt[ing] away, his oily balsamic injection mixing deliciously with the sluices in flow" from the woman (M 83).

Within the framework of orgasmic symmetry, it is acceptable for the copulating men and women in Cleland's pornographic universe to be occasionally slightly out of sync in reaching their climax. Fanny's quickie with the sailor is an example of how the equilibrium of orgasm is swiftly reestablished even when male and female orgasm are not quite simultaneous: "I got the start of him, and went into the melting swoon, and squeezing him, whilst in the convulsive grasp of it, drew from him such a plenteous bedewal of balmy sweets, as join'd to my own effusion, perfectly floated those parts" (M 141). As long as a final balance is reached, a man's ability to have several orgasms (always matched, but never outdone by the woman who is his partner) is always duly praised and admired (cf. M 75, 124: 185). (Women's capability to have multiple orgasms, while taken for granted, is always dependent on the man's desire to start over again.) Because *Memoirs* is so obsessed with this symmetry, the role of "Deviation in [the novel] is mild—one is tempted to call it orthodox," as John Atkins points out (*Sex in
Alternative forms of sexual pleasure, whether autoerotic, homosexual (M 156-160), or heterosexual with a twist like sadomasochism (M 143-150) or sodomy (M 155) are rejected not only as unnatural, but as unsatisfactory, because they cannot provide the gender symmetry of orgasm identified with the penetration of the vagina by the penis. This heterosexual genital symmetry requires, furthermore, the absolute one-on-one construction of heterosexuality as monogamous (which is, of course, closely linked to the one-on-one relationship of event and narrative representation I discuss above—and turns out to be just as problematic). Although monogamy is emphatically serial in Memoirs, it is thus the basis of this orgasmic economy of individual intercourse, and alternative sexual constellations are, surprisingly, taboo. While the anal intercourse of a homosexual couple, however vilified by Fanny, is at least mentionable in Memoirs, heterosexual or bisexual threesomes or larger sexual clusters, popular stock fantasies of later pornography, are completely absent from Cleland’s novel. Thus, no woman is ever penetrated by two men simultaneously (that would, after all, entail nongenital penetration) and even non-penetrative sexual contact between, say, two women and a man (to name another popular constellation), never occurs in Memoirs. Larger groups, such as that into which Fanny is initiated in Mrs. Cole’s brothel, inevitably break up into heterosexual couples who watch each other perform, but never interfere beyond some assistance in undressing or positioning a woman for what always remains an act of genital intercourse.

This symmetry of genital penetration on the surface of Memoirs is, however, is ultimately based on an asymmetrical construction of female desire as excessive, a reversal
of the libertine construction with its emphasis on male sexuality as the standard matched
by women. The source of this underlying asymmetry is that the object of women’s and
men’s desire for penetration is the erect penis, figured as the instrument that satisfies both
sex partners. This emphasis on the male sexual organ evokes the familiar active/passive
asymmetry that underlies the novel’s seemingly symmetrical economy of orgasm: men
derive their pleasure from (penetrating with) their penis, women theirs from (being
penetrated by) a man’s penis. Critics frequently comment on the obsessive
phallocentricity of Memoirs, the novel’s neverending fascination with “that peculiar
scepter-member, which commands us all” (M 183). However, what is consistently
overlooked is the importance of this phallocentrism in constructing sexuality as
asymmetrical and female sexuality as excessive within an aggressively promoted genital
heterosexual economy.

Female sexual excess is paradoxically motivated by the absence of the penis from
the female body, by the figuring of the female sexual organ as a hole that needs to be
filled, and thus metonymically of female sexuality as never self-sufficient, always in need
of the penis for the satisfaction of sexual desire. Because only men possess what can fill
the gap in the female body, heterosexual intercourse is the constant aim of all female
desire. Accordingly, Fanny dismisses “the foolery from woman to woman” (M. 34)
because she does not find in a female partner “the main object of my wishes... not even
the shadow of what I wanted, where every thing was so flat! or so hollow!” (M 34).
Likewise, female autoeroticism is merely “finger-work... a paulytry shallow expedient” (M
107). “Man alone [is] possess’d of the only very remedy that [can] reduce this rebellious
disorder” of female desire (M 107), and women’s constant search for this remedy makes them sexually insatiable, always ready for intercourse, infinitely capable of pleasure and orgasm.

Importantly, Memoirs constructs this excessive female sexuality as positive. Women’s insatiability appears as the desirable infinite availability of women as the sex partners of men; it is never the frightening, misogynist specter of the ever-demanding woman who exhausts and devours men. What makes this positive portrayal of female sexual insatiability possible is precisely the symmetrical orgasmic economy: It ensures that women do not have more orgasms than men in any given sexual encounter. The female surplus of desire is simply distributed among many men, and thus becomes diluted, so as to never cause any individual male fear of excessive demands. The polyandrous excesses of Fanny and her fellow prostitutes are thus rendered unthreatening to patriarchy because they come under the guise of serial monogamy with rapidly changing sexual partners—until the long-term monogamy of marriage contains female excess completely at the end of the novel.

This troping of women as excessively but unthreateningly sexual is thus a wish-fulfillment deeply entrenched in pornographic constructions of femininity. But because pornographic tropes are not altogether established and because Fanny’s hypersexuality emerges as a direct, partly parodic counter-reaction to the Richardsonian idea of female virtue. Fanny’s is not (yet) a totally co-opted position in Cleland’s Memoirs. The construction of female sexual identity as excess has subversive potential here, not only to counteract the construction of women as ‘naturally’ virtuous, but also—my main point—
in that it undercuts the ‘male’ construction of heterosexuality and with it the linear structure of the heterosexual narrative. The unmitigatedly positive construction of female sexual desire as excess thus radically undercuts not only the image of the asexual woman, but also the notion of women’s sexuality as a symmetrical match for men’s, on which the novel is ostensibly based. Thus, female sexuality is excessive not only in terms of a woman’s excessive orgasmic capacity across the narrative trajectory of the entire novel. Even in terms of the individual sexual encounter, the woman’s sexual desire is in excess of the man’s. Cleland generates this construct of asymmetrical female excess, which fundamentally disrupts the orgasmic symmetry Memoirs is at such pains to established, by linking female pleasure to pain.

Critics consistently ignore the importance of pain to female pleasure in Cleland’s novel—at best, they play down the significance of pain. Thus, Nancy Miller sees Fanny’s pleasure as simply canceling out her pain (Heroine’s Text 56-58), and Carol Houlihan Flynn speaks of Fanny’s pain as becoming “parodic” and a means of ironically deflating the novel’s phallocentricity through its excessive repetition (Flynn 291). The reluctance to address Memoirs’ graphic depiction of women’s pain as the way to sexual pleasure signals an understandable discomfort with the novel’s glorification of female pain and its construction of female sexuality as masochistic. Women’s masochistic desire for pain seems to make them utterly complicit with the hegemonic patriarchal heterosexuality. My own discomfort with female masochism notwithstanding, however, it seems to me that the novel’s obsession with pain needs to be scrutinized because it importantly disturbs and subverts the orgasmic symmetry of Memoirs—because it gives women
access to a height of ecstasy that, although dependent on men, is troped exclusively female. The familiar arguments in favor of sadomasochism in the S/M debates (including the debate on lesbian S/M) are thus implicit in Memoirs in a very specifically gendered context.

Importantly, pain and pleasure—and their anticipation through fear and desire—never collapse completely in Memoirs. They are consistently evoked as a dualism, as two sensations that, although they are constantly connected, always remain distinct and distinguishable from each other. In Memoirs' construction of this dualism, pleasure is always contingent upon pain—and it is this dependence on pain that marks female sexuality as unlike (and, significantly, as more than) male sexuality.²⁶ If female pain increases female pleasure, however, it has no impact whatsoever on male pleasure. While the masochistic element of the novel is thus pronounced, there is virtually no sadistic counterpart to it. Although men cause women pain by penetrating their vaginas, they do not derive their sexual desire or pleasure from the female experience of pain; only women themselves can derive pleasure from their pain—yet another aspect of the exclusively female construction of excess of pleasure and pain.

Female sexual pleasure is, in fact, doubly dependent on pain as the sensation that necessarily precedes it. The rupture of the hymen during defloration is figured as the exceedingly painful introduction to all true sexual pleasure to come, and the pain women experience when penetrated by the enormous penises that are the hallmark of Memoirs accompanies and makes possible the most ecstatic and excessive forms of female pleasure. This double dependency of pleasure on pain is constantly apparent in the
novel’s economy of fluids. Female blood—the “virgin gore” (M 136) of defloration, but also the blood caused by later injuries to the vagina—is continuously added to the equilibrium of male semen and female semen-like secretion, and creates a surplus of fluids on the woman’s side that represents female excess caused by pain and physical injury.

The importance of pain to making female sexuality excessive adds another facet to the novel’s asymmetrical phallocentricity and its obsession with heterosexual intercourse. Memoirs glorifies penetration by penises of Priapic dimensions because such penetration is the source of pain and the fearful anticipation of pain that is figured as the only way to pleasure. Excessive pain, like excessive pleasure, is directly dependent on the penis, particularly on its size. Accordingly, a woman’s desire for penetration is coupled with her fear of it. Thus, after having observed sexual intercourse for the first time, Fanny tells her mentor Phoebe that “great as the promised pleasure may be,” she is “afraid of the pain of the experiment” (M27) because.

having ... compared the size of that enormous machine, which did not appear, at least to my fearful imagination, less than my wrist, and at least three of my handfulls long, to that of the tender, small part of me which was framed to receive it. I could not conceive its being possible to afford it entrance there, without dying, perhaps in the greatest pain. (M 27)

The amused Phoebe reassures Fanny that “she never heard of a mortal wound being given in those parts” (M 27f.), and Fanny’s own sexual adventures as well as those reported by her confirm Phoebe’s reassurance. Women never come to harm in Memoirs:
they only die the proverbial 'little death.' This does not mean, however, that women do not experience the pain that Fanny anticipates here, or that it is any less intense than she anticipates here. On the contrary, the novel constructs pain as real, as excruciating, and as an integral part of a woman's experience of intercourse. But it is welcomed as such, because it makes women's excessive pleasure possible.. Despite the graphic description of "wounded torn passage[s]" (M 41), "sore, and red-raw" (M 110), of "piercing pain" (M 99), "streams of blood" (M 103), of women "so bruised, so batter'd [they] could hardly stir" (M 77), "discompos'd in bleeding ruin, palpitating, speechless" (M 103) and "torn, split, wounded" (M 164), the pain of intercourse is thus never associated with rape or violation. Indeed, this constantly experienced pain is completely dissociated from rape: in Cleland's novel, defloration and rape are not inextricably, as they are in the *OED* definitions I quoted and discussed in my first chapter. This dissociation is crucial to the radically different constructions of sexual intercourse and of defloration as the first sexual intercourse in *Memoirs* and *Clarissa*. I will return to Clarissa's construction of rape as altogether separated from pain in my reading of Richardson's novel. What is crucial to observe at this point is that rape does not exist in Fanny's construction of heterosexual intercourse in *Memoirs*.

It is the very construction of female sexuality as excess that relies so heavily on pain to differentiate female from male sexuality makes it impossible for rape to exist in *Memoirs*. Thus, women cannot be raped because they always desire sexual intercourse and thus always consent. However, there is a seeming exception to this rule about rape in Cleland's pornographic universe. In the exceptional case that a woman does not consent
to sexual intercourse, she cannot be raped either, because the only possible reason for a
woman’s lack of desire and willingness to have intercourse with a man is his lack of
masculinity. This lack of masculinity itself makes it impossible for him to overpower her
physically in the first place. I deduce this second variant of the nonexistence of rape from
the one and only instance in which Fanny is not willing to engage in intercourse, and
accordingly wards off Mr. Crofts, the “liquorish old goat” who had agreed to pay “fifty
guineas peremptory for the liberty of attempting me, and a hundred more at the compleat
gratification of his desires, in the triumph over my virginity” (M 17).

This scene usually serves critics who wish to point out similarities between
Richardson and Cleland, because Fanny’s vehement resistance against this unwanted
defloration recalls that of Richardson’s Pamela in strength and result. However,
Fanny’s motive for her resistance is emphatically different from Richardson’s heroines:
“neither virtue, or [sic] principles, had the least share in the defence I had made; but only
the particular aversion I had conceived against this first brutal and frightful invader of my
tender innocence” (M 21). While in Clarissa and Pamela, sexual aversion is motivated
by the heroine’s asexual virtue, and therefore extends to all male sexual contact, Fanny’s
aversion is clearly limited to “old and ugly” men (M 19) dissipated by their sexual
desires, a category that includes Mr. Crofts and also Mr. Norbert, who buys Fanny’s
“fictitious maiden-head” (M 92) later in the novel.

Unlike the Richardsonian heroine’s horror of physical contact with all men,
Fanny’s sexual aversion is motivated not by masculinity, but by its lack. Fanny despises
these men partly because of their excesses, which render them effeminate, weak and
ridiculous (cf. M 19, M 129, 132-3) because sexual excess is the woman's prerogative in *Memoirs*. Her disgust with these weak and excessive men is closely related to that with homosexuals, "unsex'd male-misses" "stripped of all the manly virtues of their own sex" (M 160, 159) and of the effeminate offspring of the old aristocracy, "our pap-nerved softlings, who are as pale, as pretty, and almost as masculine as their sisters" (M 64). Since it is Mr. Crofts' lack of masculinity that motivates Fanny to reject him, it follows that he can easily be prevented from raping her, since he lacks the true masculine strength that would, paradoxically, make overcoming her resistance unnecessary precisely because this masculine strength would make her desire him. The extreme consequence on the emphasis on the lack of true masculinity is that it is indeed Mr. Crofts' premature ejaculation, his lack of the "power ... to carry him through the full execution" of his attempt to rape Fanny (M 19) that puts an end to this attempt, much more so than Fanny's own resistance.

Rape is thus doubly impossible in *Memoirs*—because women either consent or cannot be coerced into sex by unwanted, but emasculated, suitors. I will argue later that rape is by contrast the only imaginable form of sexual intercourse in *Clarissa*—at least for the heroine. In other words, not only the two constructions of female sexuality in *Clarissa* and *Memoirs*, but also the constructions of sexual intercourse that emerge from them, are diametrically opposed. Just as the construction of female sexuality as excessive demands that women be always willing, the construction of women as asexual does not allow for any consent. The moment of the heroine's defloration is, of course, the epitome of the excessive presence of pleasure predicated on pain in *Memoirs*—just as it is, as I
will argue shortly, the epitome of the absence of both pain and pleasure and ultimately of narration itself in *Clarissa*.

In *Memoirs*, defloration is very clearly troped as sexual intercourse is at its most physical, both its most intensely painful and its most pleasurable. Fanny is obsessed with simply repeating (and repeatedly narrating) the act of intercourse, but with specifically re-living and retelling defloration. Fanny’s narrative very specifically celebrates and glorifies defloration as the absolute climax and as the very essence of female sexual experience in all its excessiveness. Fanny’s ‘real’ defloration, by her first lover and later husband Charles, is accordingly an event that takes center stage and is described in excruciating detail. It is important to look at this scene very closely because of its obsession with pain as the precedent of female pleasure. When Charles tries to penetrate her, Fanny describes a protracted experience of “extreme pain” (M 40), “intolerable pain” and “agony” (M 41), and female masochism seems unmitigatedly in place in the novel when she decides that it is “enough... to submit joyfully to him, whatever pain I foresaw it would cost me” (M 41). Her actual defloration culminates in hyperbolically painful moment of a penetration:

he breaks in, carries all before him, and one violent merciless lunge, sent it [his penis], imbrew’d, and reeking with virgin blood, up to the very hilts in me: then! then! all my resolution [not to scream] deserted me: I skream’d out, and fainted away with the sharpness of the pain; and (as he told me afterwards) on his drawing out, when emission was over with him, my
thighs were instantly all in a stream of blood, that flow'd from the
wounded torn passage. (M 41)

The pain of defloration is hyper-pain, it is the excess of the pain and as such a sign of
female excess—an excess that is, significantly, not yet an excess of pleasure here. The
excess of blood from the torn hymen and the vaginal tears—wounds that are here
indistinguishable from each other—are the physical signs of this surplus of surplus. This
hyper-pain is the defining element of defloration, the element that marks it as a
unilaterally female experience and as a unique experience in a woman's life.

Ironically, it is thus initially pain alone, foreshadowing, but not including
pleasure, which makes defloration the unique and climactic moment of a woman's sexual
narrative. This hyperbolic pain is the precedent of all future female pleasure, however,
even though it prevents for the moment the future pleasure it promises. Thus, Fanny's
defloration, the most eagerly anticipated and most celebrated climactic event in Memoirs,
constitutes an instance of orgasmic imbalance—Fanny does not have an orgasm right
away. But even before her pain has abated, Fanny "drown[s] all sense of pain in the
pleasure of seeing " her deflowerer (M 41), and begins to anticipate eventual sexual
pleasure. Although Charles' renewed attempt to penetrate Fanny "makes a fresh
irruption" (M 42), to see and feel his body now causes Fanny to feel such "insupportable
delight" and "superhumane rapture" that she wonders "what pain could stand before a
pleasure so transporting?" Accordingly, Charles' orgasm "announced the approaches of
that extatic pleasure, I was yet in too much pain, to come in for my share:" and a few
attempts at intercourse later, she finally arrives "at excess of pleasure, through excess of
pain” (all M 42) in the eagerly anticipated symmetrical and simultaneous orgasm with Charles.

that pleasure of pleasures, when the warm gush darts through all the ravish’d inwards: what floods of bliss! what melting transports! what agonies of delight! too fierce, too mighty for nature to sustain: well has she therefore, no doubt, provided the relief of a delicious momentary dissolution, the approaches of which are intimated by a dear delirium. a sweet thrill, on the point of emitting those liquid sweets in which enjoyment itself is drown’d, when one... dies at the discharge. (M 43)

This final achievement of this first ‘true’ orgasm, symmetrically and simultaneously achieved through heterosexual genital intercourse, marks the end of Fanny’s detailed account of the day of her defloration, which the lovers continue to spend “in a continued circle of love-delights.” When she awakes the next morning, “reflecting on all the pain he had put me to, [she] tacitly own’d that the pleasure had over-paid me for my sufferings” (both M 43). In Fanny’s narrative, then, not only the defloration itself, but the series of “firsts” from first intercourse to first orgasm appear as the climactic introduction first to pain and then to orgasmic pleasure—the linking of which define Fanny’s sexuality as excessive throughout the novel. In Fanny’s narrative, first intercourse and first orgasm, separate but linked, are very explicitly troped events of initiation. of being “led into” a new world of sexual experience. It is thus its status as “the first time,” as a beginning, not its status as the end of virginity, that makes defloration such a climactic and celebrated event in Memoirs. At the end of my discussion, I will
return to the way in which Fanny’s reunion with Charles at the end of the novel is a crucial restaging of this ‘first time’ that provides a form of closure, signaling the end of the long sequence of ‘repeat’ deflorations—Fanny’s and other women’s—that structure the narrative until this second ‘first time’ with Charles.

Fanny is fascinated with defloration as an event that comes only once and cannot be repeated, as the loss of a “jewel which can never be twice lost” (M 51). Paradoxically, however, Fanny’s fascination with this experience of the height of pain and pleasure demands its continuous repetition, and the “jewel” is, in fact, lost over and over again. Although it is the singular nature of defloration as the climactic introduction to all genital pleasure that make this moment a narrative and sexual climax, the narrative does its best to repeat this unrepeatable event, to renarrate it. The plot of Memoirs is thus structured by episodes that reiterate and restage the experience of defloration—not only when other women tell the story of their defloration, but also whenever Fanny experiences a new height of ecstasy. All sexual acts are measured against defloration in terms of the intensity of pleasure reached through pain, and in terms of the newness, uniqueness, or singularity of the particular experience. This multiplication of defloration reinforces the hyperbolic presence of the inextricable connection of pleasure and pain, but also dilutes and thus undermines the climacticity and singularity of defloration itself.

In making every sexual act resemble defloration, Fanny not only undermines the climactic moment of her ‘real’ defloration in the plot, but altogether unmoors the plot of which it is often argued to be supposed to be the climax: a linear plot of sexual initiation and education. I am introducing this linear plot at this late stage because it seems to me
that it is always in danger of being abandoned from the beginning of the novel in favor of
the repetitive, episodic account of multiple deflations. With Fanny’s defloration by
Charles, this linear narrative certainly loses all importance; but even beforehand, the
progress from innocence to experience is juxtaposed with the repeated anticipations of
sexual pleasure.

In introducing Fanny’s narrative initially as the linear story of initiation and
education, Cleland draws heavily and often mechanically on a conventional narrative of
lost innocence reminiscent of *Moll Flanders*. Fanny leaves the country for the city, which
is of course a familiar eighteenth-century ‘move’ (*Tom Jones* would be a good example of
how other novels of the 1740s utilize it). She leaves behind not only her “country-cloaths
for *London* finery,” but along with it also the heavily and sometimes clumsily emphasized
innocence of “a young country-girl” (M 6), “childish” (M 5), “artless,” “unexperienced”
(M 7) and of “an unpractised simpleton who was perfectly new to life” (M 9). But
although Fanny occasionally refers to this innocence as being corrupted (M 22), her
narrative of sexual initiation is, like her description of her defloration, not a story of a loss
of innocence and virginity, but a gain of experience. Her introduction to the pleasures
(and financial advantages) of being sexually active appears as an awakening of
slumbering desires, a process to which her initial innocence and virtue quickly yield—
because her “native purity had taken no root in education... all the modesty I was brought
up in the habit, (not the instruction) of, began to melt away, like dew before the sun’s
heat.” (M 22-23).
Prior to Fanny’s actual deflation, moments that anticipate deflation in their novelty for Fanny, are still integrated into this linear narrative and do not yet disrupt it. Although these moments are sexual “first times,” these early intimations of excess are much smaller in scale than the ‘true’ signal of female initiation towards which they gradually progress—i.e. the exceedingly painful rupture of the hymen at the moment of deflation. The scenes that precede Fanny’s deflation are thus constructed as a titillating foreplay that is never fulfilling in itself. The series of anticipatory explorations begins with the introduction of Fanny to her own sexual desires by Phoebe, “whose business it was to prepare and break such young Fillies as I was to the mounting block” (M 9). This first arousal of Fanny’s sexual desires through a woman is already modeled on the genital heterosexuality of deflation: Phoebe attempts to penetrate Fanny digitally, “till an Oh! express’d her hurting me, where the narrowness of an unbroken passage refused it entrance to any depth” (M 11).

Phoebe’s prematurely abandoned attempt at deflowering Fanny is followed by another, heterosexual one by Mr. Crofts, which also fails when Fanny successfully wards off her attacker. Fanny then moves on to further stations on her gradual way towards deflation, through the “luscious talk” (M 23) of the girls in the brothel and a kind of visual deflation, i.e. her first observation of heterosexual intercourse. This “voyeuristic prelude,” as Nancy Miller calls it (Heroine’s Text 55), gives “the last dying blow to [Fanny’s] native innocence” (M 25). Fanny’s “ardent desires” and “ungovernable longings” which overcome “all fears of what man could do unto me” (M 31) are finally fulfilled when she meets Charles, and the narrative culminates in the deflation through
“this idol of my fond virgin heart” (M 37). However, the events that follow this climactic ‘true’ defloration no longer support the developmental structure of the initiation narrative. Instead of undergoing a gradual decline or continuing to rise in expectation of a still more climactic moment, the linear narrative is virtually abandoned in favor of repetitive episodic narrative, until Fanny begins to lose interest in further expanding her sexual knowledge and experience after her feigned defloration by Mr. Norbert. Before this final decline and the eventual closure that comes with her reunion with Charles, Fanny’s episodic account of a series of sexual encounters constantly reiterates the pain and novelty of defloration.

In Fanny’s own story, the experience that is most closely aligned with defloration is her seduction of Will, the valet of Mr. H, whose kept mistress Fanny has become after Charles’ disappearance. Initially, this defloration operates with a gender reversal: like Fanny at the beginning of her story, the valet is a “blushing simpleton” whose “perfect undebauch’d innocence” and “country breeding” (M 71) matches her earlier descriptions of herself. When she finally overcomes his “maiden bashfulness” (M 72), she gives him “his first lesson in pleasure” (M 73), evoking her own initiation story. But here, Fanny returns to her earlier notion of defloration—the pain that accompanies his introduction to pleasure is altogether hers. Her “soft straight passage” is “stretched to the utmost bearing” (M 74) by the enormous proportions of his “unwieldy machine” (M 73), which at the very moment of simultaneous orgasm “triumph’d over a kind of second maidenhead” marked once more by “streaks of blood” running down her thighs (M 76).
Following this ‘rerun’ of her defloration, Fanny becomes a member of Mrs. Cole’s genteel brothel, and as such, the witness and participant in yet another series of initiatory events described in her second letter. This series functions as Fanny’s “remotivation” for sexual exploration, as Nancy Miller puts it (Heroine’s Text, 60): it begins with Fanny’s passively listening to three fellow prostitutes, each telling the story of “that critical period of her personal history, in which she first exchanged the maiden state for womanhood” (M 96). These narratives all repeat the story of defloration, in each case “critical” in its importance because of the event’s inherent novelty and gain of pleasure through pain. Thus, Emily’s defloration is also her deflowerer’s first intercourse (M 98-99). Harriet’s is a literal awakening from a fainting spell (M 103), and Louisa’s is the fulfillment of her precocious desire, an event that puts the end to her unsuccessful attempts to satisfy her utterly phallocentric desires by masturbation (M 108-110). For all three women, defloration means, as it does for Fanny, “pain melting fast away into pleasure” (M 110). As Louisa puts it, in a phrase that expresses drastically how being in pain and being sexually satisfied go hand in hand in Memoirs’ construction of female sexuality as excessive: “split up, tom. bleeding, mangled, I was still superiourly pleas’d, and hugg’d the author of all this delicious ruin” (M 110).

Fanny’s subsequent introduction to a strongly voyeuristic variant of group sex repeats the pattern of having Fanny witness (this time, live) the three girls’ sexual experience; however, this time, the series culminates in Fanny’s own participation. She is “consummately initiated” (M 124) into this exclusive group of prostitutes and “polite voluptuaries” (M 120) by means of “an open publick enjoyment [intended] to see me
broke of any taint of reserve or modesty” (M 112). For the first time, Fanny becomes the observed rather than observer, her naked body exposed to the gaze not only of her own partner, but also of the three other couples. This “general survey” (M 122) of Fanny’s body, immediately followed by intercourse and (of course) a simultaneous orgasm with her own partner, culminates in the close scrutiny of her genitalia, which results in everyone agreeing “that I had not the least reason to be diffident of passing even for a maid... so inconsiderable a flaw had my preceding adventures created there, and so soon had the blemish of an over-stretch been repair’d... in my naturally small make in that part” (M 122). Fanny thus anatomically resembles a virgin, and it is this resemblance that causes her excessive pleasure, because it enables her to relive the pain of defloration during each instance of intercourse.

Fanny’s anatomical features, which make her resemble a virgin, remain important when excessive desire for profit eventually takes the place of excessive desire for pleasure. i.e. when the sequence of repeated initiations culminates in Fanny’s selling and losing a “counterfeit” (M 126) or “fictitious maiden-head” (M 92) to the highest bidder. The culmination of the episodic account of multiple deflations is, however, no longer a sexual or narrative climax for Fanny. Her second loss of “that jewel which can never be twice lost” (M 51) is a grotesque, parodic copy of her first defloration. The fake defloration also harkens back to Mr. Crofts’ failed attempt to rape her in the brothel before she is rescued by Charles and his true masculine virility. Her innocence and country-girlishness during the negotiations preceding this defloration are merely acted, as are her later fear and pain in the encounter with the maiden-hunter. The fears of a “real
maid” have been replaced with “those perhaps greater, of a dissembled one” (M 132); and the real “virgin gore” (M 136) by a phial of blood hidden in the bedpost. But since Fanny feels no pain during this “copy of a wedding” (M 131), she does not feel pleasure, either—“little or none,” as she admits (M 137).

The erotically anticlimactic character of the feigned defloration signals that the potential of repeating the narrative dynamics of defloration to suspend the linear narrative of Memoirs is being exhausted. It is at this point that Fanny’s own interest in sexual adventures declines. She thus finally lives “with a modesty and reserve that was less the work of virtue, than of exhausted novelty, a glut of pleasure, and easy circumstances that made me indifferent to any engagements in which pleasure and profit were not eminently united” (M 153). The few remaining erotic adventures, both hers and her colleagues’, are still patterned on the defloration scene in that they are all new, ‘first’ experiences for the women who experience them. But now Fanny admits and emphasizes that these adventures are undertaken and these narratives provided for the sake of novelty, as a means against boredom. Fanny’s account of her experience with sadomasochism thus begins with the admission that she only agreed to it on the grounds of “a sudden caprice, a gust of fancy for trying a new experiment” (M 145). The fascination with the little that is still unknown to Fanny also motivates her to describe her vicarious, voyeuristic experience of homosexual sex (M 156-160), emphatically denounced as unnatural, and of her colleague Louisa’s almost too natural, too instinctual sexual encounter with the “simpleton” “Good-natur’d Dick” (M 160), who is constructed as nothing but a penis.
Within the context of this increasing boredom (which now causes Fanny to refrain from narrating every single sexual experience, and to summarize selectively instead), the narrative rapidly draws to a conclusion when Fanny is reunited with “the dear possessor of my virgin heart” (M 181). At this point in Fanny’s narrative, the linear plot returns with a vengeance after it had been suspended since Charles’ disappearance, and replaced by Fanny’s episodic excesses. The return of the linear is signaled by Fanny’s marriage to Charles, by the sudden about-face that turns the episodic narrative of the prostitute into a marriage-plot narrative. Fanny here gives up sexual excess for a right-sized, male-oriented sexual identity embedded in a monogamous marriage—importantly a sexual identity that is, however superficially, associated with “the delicate charms of VIRTUE” (187) and to “temperance.” For the plot of Memoirs, Fanny’s act of making “vice” a “sacrifice... to virtue” (188) means that the disruptive, repetitive and excessive narrative of defloration—obsessed with perpetual novelty and perpetual pain—is finally defeated by a male, linear narrative of female sexuality within hegemonic genital heterosexuality. By making legitimized heterosexual monogamy the telos of Memoirs, Cleland here prefigures the very marriage plot that his novel’s anarchic repetitiveness resists so strongly.

That the dominance of the linear is directly connected to a reinforced emphasis on masculinity becomes especially clear when Fanny, in virtually the last lines of her narrative, announces how the intention of her narrative is parallel to that of a father who, “anxious for his son’s morals, with a view to... inspire him with a fixt, rational contempt for vice...led him by the hand thro’ the most noted bawdy houses in town” (M 188).32
These lines evoke the linear narrative of Fanny’s education qua male initiation, which is so dramatically undermined by the nonprogressive, nonlinear female plot of excess throughout most of Fanny’s narrative.

Importantly, Memoirs’ marriage-plot closure and its concession to a construction of women as virtuous (within the context of heterosexual marriage) is directly linked to an “unraveling of sexual and sexualized speech that begins to occur as the plot approaches its domestic resolution,” as Julia Epstein has shown (“Fanny’s Fanny” 144). Thus, the ending of the novel anticipates the unspeakability and unnarratability of the sexual to which Fanny’s narrative seemed so radically opposed. Thus, when Fanny stages her sexual reunion with Charles as the very last sexual encounter that she is able to describe, she specifically invokes the forgiveness of “decency” should she here “once more I violate thy laws, and sacrifice thee for the last time” (M 181). But in her ultimate attempt at narrating the sexual rather than leaving it ‘decently’ unnarrated, Fanny begins to lose the ability to narrate the sexual: “he enters might and main with—oh!—my pen drops from me here in the extasy now present to my faithful memory! Description too deserts me, and delivers over a task, above its strength of Wing, to the imagination” (M 183). Of course, Fanny claims to be merely too aroused to continue (and is then, in fact, still able to describe the last excesses of pleasure after this declaration). But it is crucial that the sexual intercourse borders on the unnarratable here, at a moment that immediately precedes the disappearance of narratable sexual pleasure into the legality of marriage and ‘virtuous’ female identity. When “description deserts” her, Fanny retires
from living, but also from writing, the excessive sexual pleasures that are at the very center of her repetitive, episodic story of multiple defloration.

3. Clarissa's Defloration: "The Hole at the Centre of the Novel"

In Clarissa, as in Memoirs, a linear male plot of development is contrasted, interrupted, and transformed by an anti-progressive female plot—in Clarissa, a plot of absence that culminates in the narrative gap into which Clarissa’s rape disappears. The complexities of the male, linear and the female, antilinear plot dynamics in Richardson’s novel echo and evoke the multi-faceted complexity of Clarissa, a novel that notoriously resists interpretation. In the past, critics have tried to overcome this resistance, usually by simply ignoring whatever textual evidence in the enormous text contradicted their position. Later, critics like William Beatty Warner, Terry Eagleton and Terry Castle began to functionalize this resistance in emphasizing the process of interpretation that goes on both within and outside the novel. Most recently, critics like Madeline Kahn, James Carson and Tassie Gwilliam have linked the "struggles for interpretation" (pace Warner) to the thematics of gender and sexuality by evoking the novel’s gender instabilities. Plot is usually not a major concern among these critics, but I am applying some of the recent insights into the complexities of gender in Clarissa to the novel’s plot when I argue that Clarissa’s gendered plot dynamics work across, rather than along, the direct and literal gender opposition of Lovelace’s and Clarissa’s competing stories as they develop in two separate correspondences. To juxtapose these stories as representing a
gender struggle between Clarissa's "story" and Lovelace's "plots." as Spacks does (Desire and Truth 63), or, with more emphasis on the traditional narratives behind Clarissa, as "the Tested Woman Plot" and "the Don Juan Plot," as Lois Bueler has recently proposed,\textsuperscript{34} simply reifies the superficial gender split. This split, however, does not sufficiently explain how the two male and female plot dynamics interact, especially in the moment of Clarissa's defloration by rape, which remains unnarratable in both stories.

To trace how the gendered dynamics of plot operate across the opposition of Clarissa's and Lovelace's stories, I need to sketch first of all how these two stories are juxtaposed. The struggle between Clarissa and Lovelace is an interaction already conventionalized by Richardson in Pamela and, in the following decades, in countless seduced-maiden narratives: it is the conflict between the virtuous female and the libertine, between representatives of female asexuality and male sexuality. In Clarissa, this conflict is emphatically organized through the different perspectives of the two protagonists on Clarissa's asexual identity. Both Lovelace's and Clarissa's stories are asymmetrically focused on Clarissa's asexuality. For Clarissa, asexuality is the center of her identity and the standard of virtue, while (hetero)sexuality is an external force that has to be kept at bay. But although Lovelace tries to vanquish Clarissa's asexuality and coerce her into a heterosexual relationship, he still constructs female asexuality as positive, while female sexual excess is troped as negative—in diametrical opposition to Memoirs' glorification of the excessively sexual woman, the libertine himself admires and desires asexual femininity.
Female sexual desire, by contrast, is as intensely vilified in *Clarissa* as it is celebrated in *Memoirs*. It degrades the woman is subject to it, renders her despicably unfeminine and even subhuman. She becomes “the impurest animal in nature”, as Belford describes the unkempt whores at Mrs. Sinclair’s deathbed, in contrast to a “truly virtuous... neat and clean woman” like Clarissa who “must be an angel of a creature” (C 1388). Even Lovelace glorifies women who are angelically pure, and Clarissa as a paragon of angelic virtue. He subscribes to the familiar double standard which prescribes asexual virtue for women while it grants sexual desire in men as natural; he even spells out the reasons for a patrilinear society to fear a woman’s, but not a man’s sexual activity:

The wife by a failure may do much more injury to the husband, than the husband can do to the wife, and not only to her husband, but to all his family, by obtruding another man’s children into his possessions, perhaps to the exclusion of... his own.... Virtue then is less to be dispensed with in the woman than in the man. (C 429)

This asymmetrical juxtaposition of glorified female asexuality and positively portrayed male sexuality also allows him to argue (as he does, for example, immediately after this statement on the double standard, C 430-31) that he needs to test Clarissa’s virtue by attempting to seduce her. Her virtuous resistance attracts him, and he argues in the conventional language of love-warfare that characterizes his erotic metaphors as much as it does Fanny’s in *Memoirs*, that “the greater the merit on the woman’s side, the nobler the victory’s on the man’s” (C 559). However, his expectation of overcoming and destroying Clarissa’s asexuality is based on the assumption that the asexual woman is as
attracted to the 'sexual' man as he is to her—that rakes like him, unlike the libertines in *Memoirs,* love modesty in a woman; while the modest women... love and generally prefer an impudent man" (C 441).

But his assumption is erroneous as far as Clarissa is concerned. Clarissa's own construction of her asexuality in contrast to male sexuality is radically at odds with his. Unlike Lovelace, and counter to his expectation, she refuses to accept the male standard that lies behind this asymmetry. Against it, she elevates her own asexuality into a standard for a new feminized maleness that does not inevitably link passion to sexuality. Again in radical opposition to Cleland's *Memoirs,* the sexual symmetry of the simultaneous genital orgasm appears in *Clarissa* as an asexual symmetry modeled on a female ideal. This gender-reversed symmetry produces a new ideal, the gentle and "modest man" (C 481) whom Clarissa praises frequently, and of whose ideality Lovelace is sufficiently aware to use it as a guise in luring Clarissa into his traps. Richardson eventually develops this gentle man into the new, feminized and desexualized concept of masculinity in *Sir Charles Grandison,* and by doing so contributes enormously to the shift in gender construction, to the feminization and domestication of culture so central to the novel of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century.

The emergence of the McKenzian *Man of Feeling,* embodied also in Richardson's own Grandison and in countless other novels of the late eighteenth-century, has, of course, an enormous impact on the development of the marriage plot as a heterosexual narrative in which both men and women appear 'tame' and domesticated in their sexual desires. But in *Clarissa,* the man of sentiment is importantly still a marginal figure, and
the symmetry of gentle men and gentle women has no chance against the asymmetry of 

male sexuality intruding upon female asexuality that is dramatized in Lovelace’s assaults 
on Clarissa. The gentle, modest man, primarily embodied by Anna Howe’s suitor Mr. 
Hickman, is ambiguously portrayed as both infinitely praiseworthy and infinitely boring 
in Clarissa. Anna Howe’s constant hesitation in agreeing to marry Hickman (cf. 
especially Letter 46, C.206-10, and Letter 150, C 514-15) points to the weak position of 
this ideal in the novel. Lovelace’s scorn for the effeminate man of virtue reinforces this 
position: “Common fame says that Hickman is a very virtuous, very innocent fellow—a 

male-virgin. I warrant!.... Now women, Jack, like not novices”(C 802). Thus, the ideal of 
the gentle man remains a marginal and rather disempowered counter-construct to the 
more fascinating Satanic eroticism of the libertine in a novel. Still, the gender-
symmetrical ideal of asexuality is crucial in that it allows Clarissa to construct a version 
of masculinity that excludes sexuality.

With the exception of this marginalized ideal of asexual masculinity, Clarissa 
constructs all men as sexual, and all heterosexuality as a dangerous male force that 
intrudes upon female asexuality. It is crucial to stress that this constructions includes not 
only the Satanic sexuality of the libertine but also that of a potential legitimate suitor and 
husband. As I argued earlier, all intercourse appears to Clarissa as rape—which means 
that she seek to escape marriage as much as seduction and rape. It is often crucially 
overlooked that Clarissa is just as opposed to marriage as she is to illicit sexual unions—
to premarital seduction, and rape. All are equally constructed as an introduction to the 
very heterosexuality that Clarissa wants to banish altogether from her asexual identity.
They collapse into a single category of deprivation and destruction because her introduction to a heterosexuality defined as alien and male can only occur without her consent.

By definition, then, Clarissa’s defloration can only be a rape in the modern sense, sex without consent. For the eighteenth century, rape and seduction frequently collapse because the question of what indicates consent—especially in retrospect—is not altogether clear. Thus, the old conventional wisdom that applies in Memoirs—women cannot be raped because they will always consent eventually—guides much of the eighteenth-century legal understanding of rape, and pregnancy in particular was generally assumed to indicate that a woman had consented, given the prevailing opinion that female pleasure and the orgasm was essential to conception (cf. Laqueur, Ch.2, esp. 43-52). In Clarissa, however, the collapse of rape and seduction—and marital sex—takes place in reverse terms because Clarissa finds consent (even consent to marriage) impossible. All heterosexual intercourse is thus figured as rape, a male transgression, and the link between defloration and rape that I explored in the previous chapter is unmitigatedly present for Clarissa.

Because rape and the consummation of marriage are alike constructed dangerous intrusions of male sexuality into a woman’s asexuality, the libertine and the prospective husband—and the acts they perpetrate upon the woman—are thus at most different in degree, not in kind. Clarissa’s vehement defense against the threatening intrusion of the sexual into her life thus begins not with Lovelace, but with Solmes, whose courtship is just as much of an infringement on her asexual identity as Lovelace’s increasingly direct
sexual pursuit. Thus, the story of Clarissa is not a marriage plot gone awry, as is sometimes claimed, but the story of an (unsuccessful) attempt to escape the construction of female sexual identity as heterosexual altogether. Clarissa (unlike Pamela) thus resists the marriage plot as much as the seduction plot with which it is interwoven. To Clarissa, the wedding night and the “the marriage-intimacies” (C 507) mean the participation in the very heterosexuality that she detests so much. And unlike her predecessor Pamela—who like Clarissa knows what awaits her during her wedding night—she cannot easily gloss over the contradiction between her asexual identity and her expected consent to be married.

Clarissa resists giving up her asexual identity because this identity empowers her to a degree in that it makes her independent from the men outside her family. While a woman’s marriage means subordination and loss of identity; it means “To be given up to a strange man:... to give up her very name, as a mark of her becoming his absolute and dependent property.” (C 148). She thus repeatedly begs her family to be allowed to stay single and constantly reinforces her assertion that “the single life is by far the most eligible to me” (C 172; cf. also 127, 134, 149 et passim). Such female singleness is throughout the novel identified with asexuality, not with, say, a self-sufficient, autonomous, possibly autoerotic or homoerotic female sexuality. The implication of such a smooth translation of female singleness into what is fundamentally troped as female absence from sexuality is, of course, that ‘sexuality’ is always a priori defined through a male standard. A female sexual identity that does without men cannot be recognized as a sexual identity at all; neither Clarissa nor the men who pursue her can envision a
construction of sexuality in which male-oriented heterosexuality does not function as a standard.

Given the emphasis on sexuality as—and only as—heterosexuality, it is not surprising that Clarissa’s family (especially her father and brother) wish to prevent her from reaching “the desired port, the single state, which I would fain steer into” (C 281) and join forces with the detested suitor Solmes. The prospect of marrying “the odious Solmes,” who physically represents the intrusion of male sexual desire into a female community when he sits “as squat between my mamma and sister” (C 87), is sufficiently threatening to cause Clarissa’s rebellion against her family. Clarissa’s pattern of escaping from a heterosexuality that becomes an increasingly literal form of imprisonment thus begins with an escape from marriage.

Lovelace is thus not Clarissa’s only enemy, but rather a more aggressive and more immediately dangerous one than Solmes. His plans to seduce or if ‘necessary’ to rape her, are merely more extreme variants of the attempt to destroy Clarissa’s asexual identity than Solmes’ proposal of marriage. Furthermore, Lovelace’s plot against Clarissa is rendered infinitely more complex and more motivated than Solmes’, because the narrative provides an inside view of these attempts. Through the multiple-perspective epistolary form of his novel, Richardson provides a double narrative (inflected, of course, by the narrative point of view of other correspondences and correspondents beside the main pairs of correspondents, Lovelace/Belford and Clarissa/Anna). The intercalation between the libertine’s narrative and that of the virtuous woman he plans to seduce grants the reader alternate access to ‘male’ sexual desire and to its total ‘female’ absence. The
novel thus always oscillates between the two poles of the sexual economy—and thus also between different positions on the narratability of the sexual, i.e. between the absence and the presence of the sexual in the narrative. Richardson titillates and preaches at the same time by always counteracting Lovelace’s eroticized account with the sobering perspective of Clarissa. This balancing act does not only expose the darkest shades of Lovelace’s evil mind while canonizing the saintly Clarissa, however. By making the sexual present and narratable as a male libertine sexuality that has not yet been muted, marginalized, or written out of the novel, Richardson causes this pre-sentimental male sexuality to exude a certain attraction and fascination that does not only extend to the reader (as Richardson’s early critics often bemoaned), but potentially also to Clarissa.

Because sexuality—always troped as male in Clarissa—is fascinating as well as dangerous, it is not sufficient that Clarissa defend herself against it as an alien, masculine principle that attempts to penetrate female identity from the outside. Her escape with Lovelace is constructed as the misstep that makes her realize that she also needs to search her soul for hidden desires, for the insidious invasion of the sexual into her identity. This possibility of internal corruption is inherent in her own attraction to Lovelace, an attraction she distinguishes very clearly and vehemently from ‘love,’ against Anna Howe’s (and many critics’) insinuations: “I cannot own any of the glow, any of the throbs you mention.... Mr Lovelace... is a man to be preferred to Mr Solmes.... But surely this may be said, without its being a necessary consequence that one must be in love with him” (C 72). She interprets her own interest in him as an interest in reforming him (and Lovelace, conversant in the narratives of reformed rakes à la Pamela, presents himself to
her as not only in need of, but also as capable of, reform: e.g. C 165: 447). However, once Clarissa has made the fatal step of eloping with him to escape Solmes, she begins to doubt her own purity of motive in wishing to reform Lovelace. She begins to engage in a process of constant Puritan self-searching and “self-accusation” (C 372): “One devious step at setting out! That must be it: which pursued, has led me so far out of my path that I am in a wilderness of doubt and error” (C 565-66), as she says in retrospect. Aware of this internal danger, she warns Anna:

   Learn, my dear,... to subdue your own passions. Be the motives what they will, excess is excess. Those passions in our sex, which we take no pains to subdue, may have one and the same source with those infinitely blacker passions which we used so often to condemn in the violent and headstrong of the other sex; and which may be heightened in them only by custom, and their freer education. Let us both, my dear, ponder well this thought: look into ourselves, and fear. (C 550)

At this point, it becomes clear that because she constructs all sexual passion as excess. Clarissa has to wrestle with the central problem of the sentimental construction of feminine identity. She finds out that it is difficult, if not impossible, to uphold the distinction between the legitimate feminine emotions and passions for virtue, for religion, for the suffering, and the forbidden, “blacker” sexual passion troped as male. However, the sentimentalist paradox of pure, virtuous passion is put aside here, and not evoked again until Clarissa’s highly eroticized death scene.35 Once Clarissa has realized that her own desires are a much more severe threat to what she perceives to be the core of her
identity than any external attempt on her virtue could ever be. Clarissa begins to fight the internal collapse of sexual passion and the passion of virtue that her consent to escape with Lovelace signals to her. From then on (until her eroticized death), Clarissa is able to separate sexual from virtuous passion through constant self-policing, and maintain the construction of herself as a sentimentally passionate yet asexual woman. Unfortunately, critics—Margaret Anne Doody and Jean Hagstrum, for example—tend to overlook Clarissa’s ability to thus separate the two passions when they attempt to attribute heterosexual desire to Clarissa by pointing to her passion for religion and virtue.36

During the entire time between her elopement and her rape, Clarissa’s attempts to defend herself against external violation on the one hand and against internal corruption on the other track each other in the narrative. She physically escapes various male forms of entrapment—whether in buildings or in embraces—while rigorously exorcising all inappropriate passions from her ‘inner’ self. Although she cannot escape the external threat of male sexuality that becomes physical reality when she is raped, she is able to retain (or at least, reconstruct after her period of madness) her virtuous asexuality by constructing this external, physical state of violation as separate and apart from the state of her inner, spiritual self. This inner self remains uncorrupted and asexually pure, and gradually becomes the only defining element of Clarissa’s identity.

The teleology of the triumph of Clarissa’s inner self over the violated body from which she becomes increasingly detached thus counteracts the downward path of the narrative of her corruption “in the eye of the world.” (C 382). It provides the narrative with an ambiguous double trajectory: Clarissa simultaneously tells the story of the
spiritual victory and of the physical, worldly defeat of asexual femininity. This double trajectory gives the opposition of Lovelace’s and Clarissa’s story the chiastic structure described by Terry Castle in her analysis of “Lovelace’s Dream” (36). Lovelace’s plot of seduction is an ascent that turns into a descent at the center of the novel; Clarissa’s is a descent that turns into an ascent. Unlike Castle, however, I would argue that the point of intersection of this double narrative—the moment in the plot at which the two trajectories meet—is the rape of Clarissa. Simultaneously zenith and nadir, the rape is a profoundly ambiguous moment: it simultaneously marks the victory of male sexuality over the female body and its defeat in penetrating the internal, spiritual barriers of female virtue.

However, the rape as the point of intersection between these two plots is also the moment at which this neat alignment of plots with male and female characters is most radically undercut by the conflict between the gendered dynamics of plot that moves across superficial gender divisions. Both Clarissa’s “story” and Lovelace’s “plots” to evoke Spacks’ opposition once more, are both linear developmental male plots, organized around the rape as the central turning point; and these linear plots are repeatedly disrupted by the female plot dynamics of gaps and absences. The interaction of the two linear plots is complex and ambiguous. They mutually interrupt and disrupt each other, and thus can be read as counterplots to each other. Lovelace’s plot thus disrupts and violates Clarissa’s narrative of asexual identity; simultaneously, Clarissa’s repeated escapes disrupt Lovelace’s narrative of seduction. The interplay of the two narratives thus causes moments of rupture; gaps open up; momentary narrative silence ensues.
The climactic moment of the rape is the most disruptive of these moments because it remains a gap, a missing event—"the hole at the centre of the novel," as Eagleton puts it (Rape of Clarissa, 61). Unlike Eagleton, however, many critics choose to treat the rape as if it were not missing from the narrative—as if the event stood for its narrative representation—and even those who do, like Eagleton, discuss the peculiar absence of the rape from the narrative do not link this absence to the dynamics of the plot. 37 The total absence of the rape cannot simply be explained either by troping the sexual act as 'unspeakable,' as I have already pointed out, or by assimilating it to the gaps constantly created and subsequently bridged in the epistolary novel because acting and writing cannot be simultaneous. 38 The rape remains unNarrated and unassimilated in both Clarissa's and Lovelace's narrative because it simultaneously disrupts both; it is thus the most prominent manifestation of the female counterplot of absence in Clarissa.

As an event in Clarissa's story, the rape is the most dramatic, traumatic and disruptive moment of the novel because it marks the violent intrusion of heterosexuality into her asexual identity. However, Clarissa is able to retain this asexual identity, which is seemingly so incompatible with her rape, because the rape is absent from her life on two different levels—from her own narrative and from her memory alike. Within the logic of the narrative, Clarissa cannot tell the story of her rape because she was drugged and is not conscious when she is raped. 39 This causality is, of course, problematic because it can be reversed when one gives priority to the trope of unnarratability: Clarissa has to be unconscious, mentally absent from the scene of her own rape, because that is how Richardson can justify her inability to tell the story of the rape. I will return
later to what Richardson’s plot device of having Lovelace drug Clarissa means for Lovelace’s inability to tell the story of the rape: for Clarissa, it means that she cannot tell the story of her defloration, because she has not consciously experienced it.  

The absence of Clarissa’s rape from her experience has important implications for the construction of rape and of all heterosexual intercourse (which is, as I have argued, always rape to Clarissa) in the novel. What is crucial here is that Clarissa’s equation of all intercourse with rape is dissociated from pain. As I argued earlier, in Memoirs all female experience of intercourse is extremely physical and in its most ecstatic moments also most painful. By contrast, Clarissa’s experience of rape is not physically painful at all, because she is heavily drugged. Neither her letters, nor Lovelace’s, ever mention any physical injury; the rape is constructed as a psychological, emotional, never a physical, catastrophe. What later manifests itself physically as Clarissa’s slow wasting away is constructed as a reaction to the emotional trauma associated with the violation of a moral and spiritual principle of asexuality, not with the violation of her body. This lack of physical pain does, importantly, imply a crucial similarity between Memoirs and Clarissa: Despite the diametrically opposed constructions of sexual intercourse that go along with diametrically opposed constructions of female sexual identity in the two novels, both constructions are based on the complete dissociation of physical pain and rape. In Memoirs, pain is real, but rape does not exist; in Clarissa, rape is real, but physical pain does not have any part in it—rape is not a physical, but a psychological experience of violation. Importantly, the physicality of intercourse, or the lack thereof, is in turn linked to its narratability—in Memoirs, the intensely physical experience of intercourse makes it
emphatically narratable, while the absence of the physical dimension in *Clarissa* is crucially linked to the impossibility to tell the story of her rape.

Despite the absence of her rape from her memory and from her physical experience, Clarissa is acutely aware that she has been raped (although the reader does not find out how she would, in fact, be aware of the rape). She begins a narrative account in the fragments she writes immediately after the rape by announcing to Anna Howe:

“What dreadful, dreadful things have I to tell you!” (C 890) only to continue: “But yet I cannot tell you neither”—a statement that turns out to be final, although Richardson’s editorial note after Lovelace’s elliptic letter seems to promise a later account (C 833). Clarissa’s retrospective account to Anna, however, only contains the events that lead up to the rape: logically enough, Clarissa stops short of relating what she does not remember. Her retrospective story thus ends at the same point when Lovelace’s letter, written “to the moment,” also comes to an abrupt halt in the night of June 12 (C 833). The subsequent “scenes” and “fits” are, as Clarissa admits, “faintly indeed, and imperfectly remembered” (C 1011). She eventually breaks off before narrating the rape—although she can problematically be said to imply, in breaking off, that she *does*, after all, remember something: “I will say no more on a subject so shocking as this must ever be to my remembrance” (C 1011). It remains unclear here whether the shock interferes with memory or with talking about the heroine; in either case, the “imperfectly remembered” and “shocking” event that occurred when she was drugged remains absent from Clarissa’s narrative.
However, the rape is not only absent from Clarissa’s letters to Anna. The rape remains a narrative vacuum in Lovelace’s letters to Belford as well, and it is this absence that cannot, of course, be accounted for in terms of a drug-induced amnesia. Lovelace’s account—which has monopolized the narrative for several weeks at this time\(^{41}\)—remains tauntingly detailed literally until the hour before the rape. But on the next morning, the titillatingly slow anticipatory narrative comes to an abrupt halt in the novel’s shortest letter: “And now, Belford, I can go no farther. The affair is over. Clarissa lives.” (C 883) Although Lovelace, unlike Clarissa, has consciously and actively experienced the rape, and although his description of the fire-scene has just demonstrated that he is indeed capable of delivering highly titillating accounts of sexual encounters, he never tells the story of the rape.

Lovelace cannot narrate the rape because it is incomprehensible in terms of Lovelace’s narrative of heterosexuality, just as it is incompatible with Clarissa’s narrative construction of herself as asexual. The declared telos of the libertine narrative is Clarissa’s seduction (cf. C 145-147); its anticipated climax is Lovelace’s sexual intercourse with her. Initially, he declares that he merely wants to try her virtue and moral strength (cf. esp. C 430-1: 501-2; 519; 608-9, 838). His intentions oscillate between wanting to seduce her and thus “bring her to cohabitation (my own darling view)” (C 620),\(^{42}\) and even marrying her if she cannot be corrupted: “Come the worst to the worst, the hymeneal torch, and a white sheet, must be my amende honorable, as the French have it” (C 709). But when all his plans and intrigues to seduce and even marry Clarissa meet with her adamant resistance, they finally collapse in the idea of raping her
to force her into “retroactive consent,” as Frances Ferguson calls it in “Rape and the Rise of the Novel” (92):

Have I not tried every other method? And have I any other recourse left me? Can she resent the last outrage more than she has resented a fainter effort?--And if her resentments run ever so high, cannot I repair [sic] by matrimony?.... the haughty beauty will not refuse me, when her pride of being corporally inviolate is brought down. (C 879)

This construction of rape as the last but acceptable resort is in keeping with Lovelace’s libertine logic, within which rape appears as an extreme form of seduction. Lovelace’s construction of rape here dovetails, predictably, with the eighteenth-century collapse of seduction with rape. For Lovelace, rape different from seduction not in kind, but merely in the degree of violence, because women always ultimately consent—because, as he puts it, “there may be consent in struggle; there may be yielding in resistance” (C 557).

However, Clarissa does not consent, and thus Lovelace can only seemingly fulfill the teleology of his narrative. His eagerly anticipated triumph over the virtuous woman disintegrates when he reaches his goal of a sexual union with her on a merely physical level (cf. Eagleton, Rape of Clarissa, 83). By obviating the possibility of resistance, Lovelace’s “little innocent trick” of drugging her (C 877) also makes it impossible for her to consent (cf. Ferguson, “Rape” 100). After the rape, he declares that he has thus not “completed his wishes” because “the will, the consent, is wanting—and I have still views before me of obtaining that” (C 888). But Clarissa, robbed of her ability to defend herself during the rape, does not consent retroactively—a legal possibility, as Ferguson points
out, in Hebrew and Saxon law that allows for the retroactive ‘cancellation’ of a rape if a rapist marries his victim (Ferguson, “Rape” 92). Indeed, Clarissa remains as unwilling to become Lovelace’s possession and more eager than to escape him than ever before. Because Lovelace’s rape of Clarissa is thus both the completion of his plan and its utter failure, he cannot account for it by means of the narrative and erotic pleasure of anticipation that pervades the letters to Belford in his “lively present-tense manner” until the very hour before the rape (C 882). It becomes an unnarratable moment for him as an unaccountable, incomprehensible moment within his own libertine sexual economy and his narrative of seduction. The event that should be as excessively climactic and triumphant (and narratable) from Lovelace’s libertine perspective as it is for the men and women in Memoirs thus becomes a-climactic and a gaping “hole at the centre” of Lovelace’s as well as of Clarissa’s narrative.

The doubly untold rape occurs at the very midpoint of the novel, following the painstakingly slow build-up in which Lovelace’s metaphorical and literal entrapments disrupt Clarissa’s story of asexual singleness, and her evasions and escapes disrupt his story of heterosexual seduction. The series of events leading up to the rape begins with a moment in which what seems escape turns out to be entrapment: Clarissa is tricked into eloping with Lovelace because it appears as the only escape from heterosexuality, from marriage with “the odious Solmes” (C 87)\(^{13}\), from being “cajoled, wire-drawn, and ensnared, like silly birds. into a state of bondage or vile subordination: to be courted as princesses for a few weeks. in order to be treated as slaves for the rest of our lives” (C 133; Clarissa here uses the same “simile of a bird new caught” that Lovelace draws upon
in discussing how to seduce her. C 557). But the escape makes her an immediate prisoner of Lovelace. The ensuing oscillation between entrapment and escape structures the numerous proposal scenes include those William Beatty Warner describes as well as the dramatic events that are usually described as prefigurations of Clarissa’s rape. In particular, the “fire-scene” (C 1177) is a moment of entrapment followed by Clarissa’s escape to Hampstead that in turn triggers Clarissa’s final episode of imprisonment in the brothel and her rape during the night of her return (cf. C 877-883).

The “fire-scene” is particularly crucial because, unlike the rape scene, it can, in fact be narrated in great detail precisely because Lovelace ultimately fails. It is, here as well as in the scenes of other, later novels that stage or evoke male sexual transgression, the very failure of the attack that rescues these scenes from narrative oblivion. Thus, 

_Evelina_ and in a way even _Emma_, place the dramatic emphasis on such incomplete, failed scenes of sexual assault, as I will argue in the following chapter. In _Clarissa_, this narratable scene is particularly crucial however because it does anticipate the unnarratable scene of the successful rape. In the fire-scene, the gradual build-up towards the rape thus comes to a climax of a series of smaller physical encroachments (C 646, C 705) that seems to be merely preliminary, but turns out to be the last major narrated transgression—a kind of narrative _ejaculatio praecox_ that at first sight seems merely like steamy narrative foreplay. Unlike the never-quite-deflorative scenes in _Memoirs_ that precede Fanny’s defloration, the fire-scene is thus ultimately more of a narrative (and male sexual) climax than the rape itself. Because the scene is one of a failed rape that is, however, not perceived as the last attempt on Clarissa’s honor, both protagonists are able
to narrate their version of the fire-scene. Thus, while Lovelace is able to construct the event as a further turn of the screw of anticipation in his narrative of seduction, Clarissa can perceive it as another escape from the intrusion of the sexual (in a manifestly physical manner) into her identity. Within Richardson’s balancing act between the sexuality and asexuality, narratable and pleasurable sex and unnarratable (not yet unmentionable) and dangerous sex, Lovelace here provides the titillation, Clarissa the moral antidote to it.

Lovelace’s own long and ecstatic narration of the scene almost mimics an orgasm. especially when he describes embracing Clarissa in a foreshadowing of sexual intercourse:

I beheld the charmingest creature in the world, supporting herself on the arm of the gasping [chambermaid] Dorcas, sighing, trembling, and ready to faint, with nothing on but an under-petticoat, her lovely bosom half-open.... I clasped her in my arms with an ardour she never felt before.... Oh Jack! how her sweet bosom, as I clasped her to mine, heaved and panted!

(C 723)

But Clarissa’s subsequent letter to Anna Howe provides the cold shower that prevents the narrative’s premature climax. She sums up the event that inspired such an orgasmic account in sobering moral euphemisms: “the man has at last proved himself to be a villain! It was with the utmost difficulty last night, that I preserved myself from the vilest dishonour” (C 755). She thus manages to desexualize Lovelace’s erotic narrative of this scene—to a degree: the titillating effect of his description is so powerful in this scene that Richardson was vehemently criticized for it after the publication of Clarissa’s second
Despite this seeming overemphasis on titillation, the "fire-scene" provides an excellent example of how Clarissa’s and Lovelace’s narratives—including the gaps that they both leave in their accounts—supplement each other, as it were, before the rape. The balance between the two accounts is partly achieved through the contrasting points of view of the two protagonists; this balance is complemented by the juxtaposition of the two consecutive plot segments that are representative of the pattern of Lovelace’s action and Clarissa’s reaction. Thus, Lovelace’s assault is immediately followed by Clarissa’s retreat and escape—in this case, the escape to Hampstead.

Like the earlier threats of heterosexual intrusion through forced marriage, proposals, and physical encroachments, this climactic fire scene is immediately followed by Clarissa’s escape from sexual danger to Hampstead, where, in turn, Lovelace finds and ‘retrieves’ her almost immediately. In what has by this point of the novel become a rapid succession of mutually, but never simultaneously disruptive events structured as entrapment and escape, her successful flight thus results in yet another, even more literal imprisonment and violation. Together, imprisonment and escape create an equilibrium between the seduction narrative of male libertinism and the narrative of female asexual virtue, and never threaten the linearity of the two narratives altogether. The gradual dramatic build-up to Clarissa’s defloration is structured by disruptions that are never quite final, never quite disruptive enough to bring the plot to the climactic standstill that it finally reaches in the rape scene.

In its relative linearity—in the dominance of progress over its suspension—the build-up toward the rape is similar to that which precedes Fanny’s defloration in
*Memoirs.* But while the narrative that follows the defloration in *Memoirs* disrupts this linearity through the excessive repetition of the ecstatic, climactic experience of defloration, the second half of *Clarissa* is structured by a diametrically opposite attempt to reinforce the absence of the rape—to not only leave the rape untold, but to undo it as an event. In the narratives of Clarissa and Lovelace alike, the erasure of the central climactic event from the narrative representation is thus followed by its excision from the sequence of events—a crucial aspect of the problematic relationship of "discourse" to "story" that I discussed earlier in this chapter. Clarissa's and Lovelace's attempts to undo the rape thus structures the remainder of the novel. Their ways of trying to do so are diametrically opposed, each dependent on a different reading of the rape itself, and each working with a different strategy of making the rape, already an unnarratable event, disappear altogether as an event.

Lovelace tries to make the rape disappear on a secular and legal level by reinterpreting it as a consensual sexual encounter, quite along the lines of Ferguson's "retroactive consent." In Ferguson's words, he "offers a series of ways of domesticating the rape" to generate, if not consent, then "the effect of consent" (Ferguson 102-3). I would go further than Ferguson here in arguing that domestication is here really annulment or cancellation of the rape, but also stress, unlike her, that Lovelace's strategy to cancel the rape is a reinterpretation of the unnarratable event after the fact, rather than an *a priori* conception that causes the rape to "remain[.] incomplete" for Lovelace (cf. Ferguson 102). Lovelace tries to restage the rape symbolically as an event that generates consent instead of making him a criminal—especially in his fantasies about abducting
and raping Clarissa (see Castle, “Lovelace’s Dream.” esp. 33), and about being put on trial for raping Anna Howe. Secondly, he makes repeated efforts to gain Clarissa’s consent retroactively through marriage proposals: He insists on marrying her, even “in the agonies of [her] death” (C 1184), and remains puzzled to the end “that she should refuse, and sooner choose to die... than be mine” (C 1107). Through both strategies, Lovelace attempts to turn the rape into an ultimately consensual form of sexual intercourse because he wishes to restore his and Clarissa’s honor.

On this social and physical external level, however, the rape cannot be undone. Lovelace’s strategy to annihilate the rape fails completely because it meets with Clarissa’s absolute resistance. Clarissa is firmly resolved “That the man who has been the villain to me you have been, shall never make me his wife” (C 901). She also refuses another means of external restitution, namely having Lovelace prosecuted for rape, as Anna’s mother and the Harlowe family suggest (Cf. the letters by Anna Howe’s, C 1016-7, Arabella, C 1255-6, and the Reverend Lewen, C 1251). Indeed, she seems to have an overwhelming desire to have others know of her ruin, and of the share the thinks she has in it (cf. C 985). It is this desire to establish that the rape has, indeed, taken place that occasions new, multiple correspondences.

The only external, worldly matter of importance to Clarissa after the rape is thus to establish that the rape has, indeed, taken place, and to remove herself from all contact with the male sexuality represented by Lovelace, who never sees her alive again after she has escaped from the brothel for the last time (C 962-74). She refuses to see the intermittently repentant Lovelace (e.g. C 1141, 1172), and finally puts him off
indefinitely with the notoriously duplicitous allegorical letter about meeting in heaven that promises him that he “may in time, possibly, see me at my father’s” (C 1233). Clarissa is thus thoroughly aware that she is irreversibly socially ruined by her rape: but she has no intention to conceal or mitigate her ruin. In contrast to Lovelace, she sees her rape not as a social, but a psychological and spiritual catastrophe. Clarissa thus attempts to undo not the social, but the potential psychological and spiritual havoc the rape has wrought, most vividly evoked by the “mad papers” she writes immediately after her rape.

Clarissa’s attempt to undo the rape has thus no dimension of social or legal redemption or revocation; instead, it consists of an undoing of herself through her slow death. In “slid[ing] quietly into [her] grave” (C 1013), she is able to erase the traumatic invasion of male sexuality into her identity and to reestablish her asexual identity. The absence of the rape from her memory and her narrative is not enough—the rape has to be excised from her life as an event, and this excision is possible only through Clarissa’s absenting herself from her story qua story. In her slow progress towards death, then, Clarissa ceases to act, even to narrate events (cf. Keymer 224); she no longer seeks to escape, not even when she is dramatically “arrested by two sheriff’s officers” at Mrs Sinclair’s request (C 1047). Clarissa submits to this new and last entrapment with “strange composure.” no longer resisting but already “so weak and ill” (C 1071) that her death seems imminent, although it takes another two months to occur. Clarissa here reconstructs her plot as one that—although initially still disrupted by traumatic events—is no longer disruptive, but instead a long, slow drift towards dissolution in death. This “gradual sensible death” (C 1337) is a paradox, both ascent and descent: a defeat on the
world’s terms, but a moral and spiritual triumph. It means a rejection of male sexuality and the patriarchal distribution of power that it represents and enacts, but it is also the annihilation of Clarissa’s identity and thus of asexual femininity in this world (cf. Eagleton, 76. 89f., Spacks, Desire and Truth 71-72).

On the one hand, then, Clarissa’s death is a radical rejection of the male sexual plot by a total and final absence, “an eradication of [the] past” (Miller, heroine’s text 93), an undoing of her rape, a revirginization from within—in other words, the final and ultimate manifestation of narrative, sexual and even physical absence. Clarissa’s progress towards death increasingly invalidates and in fact removes her violated body as a marker of her initiation into the despised world of heterosexuality—and again, I would stress, of all heterosexuality, and not just of illicit, unsanctioned heterosexual transgressions.

Accordingly, Clarissa dies not only dressed in “virgin white,” but is herself “white as the lily” (C 1351), in an environment that stresses her nun-like retirement from the world. Her physical wasting away (C 1129; 1183 and esp. C.1336) signifies her decreasing worldliness and her detachment from all physicality, including the physicality of the rape. She becomes what Belford sees as “a beatified spirit” (C 1275). Her absence becomes complete.

On the other hand, however, the progress toward death is also a linear, teleological narrative, and death a moment of recuperation—of submission to a linear narrative and to a spiritual variant of the very heterosexuality that Clarissa has constructed as her enemy. The precarious separation of sentimental, spiritualized passion and sexual passion that Clarissa had achieved earlier, and that became the foundation of
Clarissa’s asexual virtue can no longer be upheld when Clarissa dies. The moment of her death exposes the internal contradictions of the discourse of sentimentality—the difference between the virtuous passion of religion and sexual passion can no longer be maintained. Fervent asexuality and sexuality collapse.

This eventual collapse of sexuality and asexuality in the passion of virtue is foreshadowed by Clarissa’s preparations for death as a marriage (cf. Copeland, 347). She orders a dress with the eager interest of a bride ordering her trousseau and admits:

never bride was so ready as I am. My wedding garments are bought....
they [will] be the easiest, the happiest suit, that ever bridal maiden wore—for they are such as carry with them a security against all those anxieties, pains, and perturbations, which sometimes succeed to the most promising outsettings. (C 1339).

Clarissa may imagine her death as the marriage beyond heterosexuality that she envisions when she tells Lovelace that “the married state... is a state of purity and... not of licentiousness” (C 703). However, she looks forward to this state with an erotically charged anticipation that undermines death’s power to remove her from the heterosexuality that she has always tried to keep at bay. Clarissa’s death is a sexual as well as narrative climax that rewrites her asexuality as an otherworldly sexuality. The union of the revirginized Clarissa with her celestial bridegroom is not only death, but also the little death: her last words of what Edward Copeland calls “romantic ecstasy” (Copeland 348) are, indeed, orgasmic: “and now—and now (holding up her almost lifeless hands for the last time)—come—come—blessed Lord—JESUS!” (C 1362).
The eroticism of Clarissa’s death lies not only beyond the physical, but almost as much beyond the narratable as the unnarrated rape. Thus, Clarissa’s death is a moment of recuperation where a—spiritualized—heterosexual economy is able to contain and sexualize Clarissa’s asexual identity at the very point where this identity disintegrates altogether. However, Clarissa’s dying words are an intimation of narratability of the sexual encounter, and of the possible presence, Clarissa’s identity, of a heterosexuality that is no longer troped as a violent, masculine intrusion, no longer identical with rape. Not only Clarissa’s ecstatic dying words, but also Belford’s painstakingly detailed narrative of her death into which these dying words are embedded, thus undermine the strategies of absence and disruption that support the equation of sexuality with rape around which the sexual plot of Clarissa is organized.

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Paradoxically, then, sexuality borders on the narratable in Clarissa’s death scene, just as it borders on the unnarratable at the end of Memoirs in the final sexual reunion of Fanny and Charles before the onset of their conventional marriage. The narrative strategies of excess and absence collapse here in the brief final affirmation of a right-sized heterosexuality—not too much, not too little: never completely narrated, but always present as a future promise of the narrative’s teleology—that foreshadows the marriage-plot novel of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. To emphasize this ultimate victory of the male narrative and sexual standard over female plot and female sexual
identity, however, would mean to fetishize narrative endings. Both novels still only suggest that the sexual might be banished beyond the narrative and be seen as outside of that which is narratable. In keeping with my own focus on the elusive and embattled climactic ‘middle’ of the heterosexual narrative, I read the encounter of gendered plots not as retrospectively determined by the recuperative ending, but as organized around the central, ‘middle’ moment of defloration. This moment most forcefully encapsulates the radical instabilities in the heterosexual plots of Clarissa and Memoirs. Seemingly complicit with a hegemonic, male-oriented heterosexual narrative, it is this defloration scene, gradually and problematically transformed into a ‘heterosocial’ proposal scene, that remains the point at which the linear marriage-plot narrative is most radically destabilized by the intrusion of narrative and sexual absence and excess.

In turning now to two novels which exemplify two crucial stages in the uneasy transition from a ‘premarital’ plot to the marriage plot, I will again prioritize the climactic but also conflicted moments of metaphorized defloration—the juxtaposed assault scenes and proposals of Evelina on the one hand, and the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ proposal scenes in Emma on the other. I will, however, also discuss the ways in which the marriage-plot endings are problematic in both novels, already anticipated in the conclusions of Memoirs and especially Clarissa, because they still evoke the very paradox of a possibly virtuous and pure but yet heterosexual relationship that is implicit in the lip-service to virtue in Memoirs and in Clarissa’s eroticized union with God. I will suggest that the early marriage-plot novel restages this paradox in the sentimental equation of the husband’s love for the heroine with the father’s. This problematic equation, I argue, can result in
both eroticizing the father-daughter relationship and in radically excising the erotic and thus also the dramatic impetus of the heterosexual relationships. Not only the transformed defloration scenes, but also the endings of *Evelina* and *Emma* will thus demonstrate the new and reconfigured narrative problems that emerge when the premarital plot a la *Memoirs* and *Clarissa* is abandoned for a less literally sexual narrative of heterosocial manners.
Endnotes

1 Peter Sabor's introduction to the World's Classics edition of *Memoirs* discusses only three contemporary references to the novel in print during Cleland's lifetime, and a fourth in the diary of Sylvester Neville (M, "Introduction," xv). *Clarissa*, by contrast, generated an enormous public reaction both in printed reviews and, of course, in Richardson's own correspondence with his early readers. Cf. esp. Tom Keymer's study *Richardson's Clarissa*.

2 Most of the criticism I have drawn upon focuses on either *Clarissa* or *Memoirs*. Although many critics compare the two (or at least their authors) in passing, there are few direct comparisons of the two novels. Cf. mainly Edward Copeland's rather limited comparison, and Peter Sabor's comparative remarks in his introduction to *Memoirs* (xxii-xxvi). However, Richardson and Cleland are frequently read together in a larger generic context, for example by Nancy Miller, who devotes a chapter of *Heroine's Text* to each novel, and by Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Desire and Truth*, whose remarks on *Memoirs* are limited, but compare Cleland's novel immediately to *Clarissa*, cf. 55-9.

3 For contemporary scholars who focus exclusively on the second half of the eighteenth century, cf. for example Spacks, *Desire and Truth*, Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Johnson, *Equivocal Beings*, or Ty, *Unsex'd Revolutionaries*. Even more indicative of the continuing emphasis on this time period are the numerous articles and, eventually, full-length studies that, beginning in the 1970s, began to be written about numerous late eighteenth-century women novelists apart from Fanny Burney (cf. my Chapter 3), in particular Sarah Fielding, Charlotte Lennox, Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Inchbald, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Hays, Anne Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith, and arguably, Hannah More who wrote moral tales that are closely linked to the novel in terms of audience and theme (and at times of plot as well).

4 *Living By the Pen*, 31-41. Turner does not count some works as novels that appear in other lists, for example Eliza Haywood's parody *Anti-Pamela*, which Spender lists for 1741 or 1742 (*Mothers* 110). After the mid-century low in publication of women's novels, which had been preceded by a peak in production in the 1720s (partly caused by Eliza Haywood's enormous productivity), the numbers of novels by women rises slowly, but steadily, until this rise accelerates in the 1780s and 1790s.

5 Cf. Part One of Todd's *Angellica*, Part One of Dale Spender's *Mothers* and Ros Ballaster's *Seductive Forms*.

6 Cf. for example Parts Two and Three of Todd's *Angellica*, the second part of Spender's *Mothers of the Novel* and the other critical studies mentioned in note 3.

7 Many feminist historians of the novel do exclusively focus on women writers. This goes for Jane Spencer's *Rise*, Dale Spender's *Mothers* and Turner's *Living By the Pen*. Although Janet Todd also concentrates on women writers in *Angellica*, she does argue
that feminist literary history should not simply "reverse the faulty procedure" of writing
the opposite genre out of the history of the novel (2).

8 Similar arguments can be found in Spacks, Desire and Truth, 56; and Miller, Heroine's
Text, 65. Two other critics attempt to situate Memoirs' pornographic repetitiveness in a
larger historical context: Robert Markley sees it as indicative of "a more general crisis of
representation" in his insightful "Language, Power, and Sexuality in Cleland's Fanny
Hill," 343. And Raymond Whitley relates the episodic structure of the novel to the
"moralized picaresque narrative pattern" of other novels at the time in "The Libertine
Hero," 401.

9 Cf. the essay collection The Invention of Pornography, edited by Lynn Hunt, and Peter
Wagner's Eros Revived. Marcus's Other Victorians and H. Montgomery Hyde's A
History of Pornography are examples of a much less theoretically informed trend of the
1960s to view pornography historically.

10 Davis Foxon lists a number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prosecutions
against obscene books, but points out that the law lumped them with other books, and that
censorship of obscene books was frequently linked to political censorship. Cf. Libertine
Literature in England, 7, 15. Lynn Hunt has convincingly argued for the French context
that the sexually explicit is often explicitly political and subversive up to the end of the
eighteenth century in her introduction to Invention, 35-45, esp. 42. Cf. also Hyde's
History of Pornography, 11.

11 Cf. especially Peter Naumann who in Keyhole and Candle argues extensively for
Memoirs as the first pornographic novel. See also Randolph Trumbach, "Erotic Fantasy
of a Woman of Pleasure: Pornography and the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Novel."

12 Cf. Wagner, 225-237, on these novels and their embeddedness in the French history
of the novel; cf. also Foxon's earlier discussion of the publication and translation history of
the two earlier novels, 30-37: 43-45.

13 I would wish to emphasize, however, that I am not drawing this connection in the name
of a universalized notion of structural similarity between pornography and all "high art"
produced within the bounds of patriarchy—a notion posited by Susanne Kappeler (cf. my
remarks in Ch.1). My reading of the two novels emphatically denies the existence of
some heterosexual "archeplot" à la Kappeler (104). The similarities (and the differences)
between the emerging marriage plot, Richardson's story of rape, and Cleland's story of
sexually pleasurable initiation are historically specific to the mid-eighteenth-century, even
if our conceptions today are close enough to make these similarities clearly visible.

14 Even the idea of a 'range' implies a two-dimensionality of the relationship between
'pornography' and 'mainstream' fiction that Memoirs itself renders dubious. While
Cleland's emphasis on titillation and the dominance of sexual scenes places the novel
among the most openly sexual novels of his time, his exclusively metaphoric descriptions
of sexual encounters and his avoidance of graphic obscenity make *Memoirs* a rather tame specimen of pornographic fiction.

15 Stephen Marcus speaks most directly about the fact “that the cult of sensibility was at its origins connected with sexuality...—as the conversion, literally without modification, of the language of sensibility into the language of a pornographic work of fiction [i.e. *The Lustful Turk*, 1828, which stylistically resembles *Memoirs*] amply demonstrates” (208). But it is the very same proximity of the language of sensibility to the language of eros that often makes critics argue that Clarissa’s passions are secular as well as spiritual (cf. note 36).

16 This change has, of course, long been noted and documented. Cf. Michael Shinagel, 227-229. Shinagel mainly attributes changes in censorship and the eventual disappearance of erotic fiction from the ‘mainstream’ from mid-century on to the emerging Circulating Libraries and their presumably predominantly female audience, and bases this argument on Q.D. Leavis’ *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1939).


18 As John Allen Stevenson has pointed out in “‘Never in a Vile House,’” knowledge is separated from experience, and experience from knowledge for Clarissa—Richardson’s epistemology is profoundly anti-empiricist. Fanny’s theoretical knowledge, by contrast, is never separated from experience; it does not only prepare her for her experience of defloration; it is gradually gained through her pre-defloration experience. In this respect, Cleland is not only specifically influenced by French materialism of LaMettrie, as Leo Braudy has noted in “*Fanny Hill* and Materialism,” but by eighteenth-century empiricism in general.

19 A very detailed, but also a rather pedestrian and theoretically limited analysis of *Memoirs*’ language is Liliane Gallet-Blanchard’s “Rhetoric and Eroticism.”

20 What also becomes extremely visible in Richardson’s “hypocrisy,” in the contradiction between erotic titillation and moral edification, is the tug-of-war between antagonistic constructions of masculinity and femininity. I would argue that Richardson, like his heroine, promotes the construction of femininity as absence—of sexuality, of story, of sexual story—as a new standard. However, because this construction has not yet become as powerfully hegemonic as it is to become in the nineteenth century—i.e. because it has not yet been safely integrated into a redefined patriarchal power structure—it is never portrayed as uncontested in *Clarissa*. The absence of the sexual is thus not a matter of course in Richardson’s novel; it is aggressively insisted upon because it is an embattled construction of femininity and of a woman’s story.


Cf. Terry Eagleton, who speaks of *Clarissa* as "tragic reality" and of *Pamela* as "a cartoon version of *Clarissa*, simplified, stereotyped, and comic in outcome" in *The Rape of Clarissa*, 39, 37.


Fanny's experience with a male sadomasochist, M 143-52, is an exception to this gendering of pain. The male desire for pain, as well as Fanny's role in producing it and responding to it are, however, troped as 'unnatural,' as is manifest in Fanny's summary of the experience as "the violent expedient of lashing *nature* into more hast than good speed" (M 152, my emphasis).

Cf. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty* (104-5) and Copeland, who points out the similarities between Mr. Crofts and *Clarissa's Solmes* (344-5).

Stephen Sossaman, who assumes that the 'rules' of *Memoirs* apply symmetrically to both genders, concludes from the scorn for male excess that Cleland's novels insist on "balancing appetite and restraint" and are written in "defense of moderation." Cf. "Sex, Love and Reason in the Novels of John Cleland," 93.

Flynn, 289, as well as Edgar Mertner and Herbert Mainusch, *Pornotopia*, 283, comment briefly on the multiple deflorations in *Memoirs* without, however, discussing their impact on the plot of Cleland's novel.
30 For readings of Fanny’s narrative as one of education or Bildung, see Miller, Heroine’s Text, Spacks, “Female Changelessness,” Shinagel, 221-3 and Whitley, esp. 389.

31 For a reading of this feigned defloration as Fanny’s “reminting of herself” as counterfeit money in terms of Memoirs’ persistent equation of virginity with monetary value, see Kibbie, 573.

32 In keeping with her very different reading of pain in Memoirs, Flynn reads the same passage (and thus the novel as a whole) as ultimately non-compliant. She argues that this passage is undercut by “the need father and son share for more compliant pain” (293).

33 Almost all critics of the 1970s (and before) are guilty of willful ignorance to a certain degree. Two extreme examples are Katharine M. Rogers, who in “Sensitive Feminism vs. Conventional Sympathy,” reads Richardson as a “radical feminist” (257) without reserve, and Judith Wilt, who argues that Lovelace is not physically capable of raping Clarissa in “He Could Go No Farther.”

34 Cf. Clarissa’s Plots. Bueler argues that Clarissa’s story also follows the immediately “Christian Prudence Plot” or “Plot of the Purposeful Life” in John Bunyan’s tradition.

35 I would argue that putting this paradox aside is partly possible here because Clarissa has been severed from her family, so that eroticized family relationships cannot consistently re- evoke it. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the ways in which this paradox ambiguously functions precisely in the context of the collapse of heroine’s relationship with her father and with her lover in Evelina and to some extent in Emma.

36 Two extreme examples for critics insisting on Clarissa’s heterosexual passion for Lovelace are Margaret Anne Doody in A Natural Passion and Jean Hagstrum in Sex and Sensibility.


38 Preston’s early discussion of how gaps in the plot are inherent in the epistolary form of Clarissa does not distinguish between gaps that are later bridged and those that are not (cf. Created Self 47-53).

39 The figure of the woman who is raped while she is unconscious remains a crucial trope in the history of narrating rape, and always obviates—as it does here—the tricky question of consent. Cf. for Pamela’s fainting fits in the most dramatic assault scenes of Pamela, but also the circumstances in which the Presidente is seduced in Choderlos de Laclos’ Liaisons Dangereuses, or the rape of the protagonist in Heinrich von Kleist’s novella “Die Marquise von O.”

40 I use “unconsciously” and “consciously” literally here, with reference to Clarissa’s drugged state and not with reference to the Freudian unconscious, which would allow Clarissa to experience the rape unconsciously, and also have an unconscious knowledge
of sexuality in general, as John Allen Stevenson argues in his Freudian reading, "Vile House."

41 Keymer points out that Richardson designed the second installment of the novel (from Clarissa's elopement until Lovelace discovers her Hampstead whereabouts) to be told primarily by Lovelace, but also notes that "the oppressive dominance of Lovelace's viewpoint before the rape" disrupts the usual multiperspectivity of Richardson's epistolary form (Richardson's Clarissa 46).

42 In keeping with his exclusively male libertinism, Lovelace fantasizes several times about the form that polygynous relationships could take, cf. C 720 and C 872.

43 Clarissa's aversion to Solmes is clearly a disgust of his bodily, sexual presence. Being physically close to him is unbearable to her—a male infringement of her own asexual sphere, as when draws his chair so near to hers, "squatting in it with his ugly weight, that he pressed upon my hoop—I was so offended... that I removed to another chair" (C 87).


45 Both Rosemary Bechler, "Reading the Fire-Scene in Clarissa," 152, and Keymer, 154-7, note that Richardson was heavily criticized for the titillating and pornographic effect of Lovelace's account. Interestingly, Lovelace's account is retroactively excised when Belford excludes it from the copies of the Lovelace's letters that he lets Clarissa read (C 1177).

46 Leo Braudy provides an analysis of Clarissa's turning "more and more against her own body" along similar lines; however, he generally neglects the gender implications of her rejection of this "physicality." Cf. "Penetration and Impenetrability in Clarissa," 193.

47 Importantly, Lovelace's death also resembles an orgasm—in a sexual union not with God so much as with Clarissa, whom he invokes on his deathbed as a "blessed Spirit" (C 1487). Like Clarissa's, his dying words evoke both religious and sexual fulfillment when "he again with great fervour (lifting up his eyes, and his spread hands) pronounced the word Blessed—Then, in a seeming ejaculation, he spoke inwardly so as not to be understood: at last, he distinctly pronounced these three words, LET THIS EXPIATE" (C 1488).
VOLUME II

SEX AND THE MARRIAGE PLOT:
STORIES OF DEFLORATION IN THE BRITISH NOVEL

by

ANTJE SCHAUML ANDERSON
Chapter 3:

Rakes, Husbands, Fathers: The Marriage Plot from *Evelina* to *Emma*

Unlike *Clarissa* and *Fanny Hill* in the previous chapter and *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Phineas Finn* in the following one, the two novels I will read against each other in this chapter were not written at or around the same time. Approximately a generation—thirty-six years, to be exact—lies between the publication of Fanny Burney’s *Evelina*, published in 1778 (Ev), and Jane Austen’s *Emma* (Em), which appeared in 1814. What I want to show by reading *Emma* via *Evelina* is how the feminocentric novel develops from explicitly sexual novels about premarital sex like *Fanny Hill* and *Clarissa* to Jane Austen, whose novels are often seen as the epitome of the genteel (read: coyly and primly asexual) marriage plot. I will show, by way of *Evelina* and *Emma*, how the heterosexual narrative becomes increasingly domesticated and desexualized marriage plot—and how this process of desexualization is constantly disrupted because the marriage plot retains the narrative dynamics of the more explicitly sexual narratives of defloration. Within this framework, *Evelina* is a transitional novel in which the desexualized marriage plot is directly and almost clumsily juxtaposed to a narrative of seduction and sexual danger in the vein of *Clarissa*. Austen, a generation after Burney, seems to exclude any explicit representation of such sexual danger from *Emma*, but I will argue that this exclusion is never complete. Heterosexuality, troped as dangerous but also titillating, is contained in *Emma* both in the sense of being curbed or controlled and in the sense that it is, indeed, still visibly present in climactic moments. The most strikingly sexual scene, Mr. Elton’s
unwanted proposal, is thus set up as an entrapment scene that still closely echoes
\textit{Evelina}'s narrative of sexual assault. But climactic moments within what appears as the
proper marriage plot of the novel (Emma's and Knightley's courtship) also preserve the
sexual dynamics of the defloration scene.

I will also argue that this never-quite-complete process of desexualization of the
heterosexual plot—i.e. its domestication into a marriage plot—is significantly entangled
with changes in the construction of father-daughter relationships. The domesticated
novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century—unlike their predecessor
\textit{Pamela}—tend to draw clear-cut distinctions between the rake and the worthy suitor, but
they are instead struggling with the separation of the worthy suitor from the positive
father or brother figure. When suitors and future husbands are represented as fatherly
and/or brotherly, the most immediate implication is that their own relationship to the
heroine is desexualized. However, the climactic scenes that make for disruptive 'pockets
of resistance' against desexualization, threaten to reverse this implication: instead of
desexualizing the relationship between the heroine and her suitor, they point to potential
sexual relationship between the heroine and her father (or secondarily her brother).
Although the discourse about incest is more blatant in \textit{Evelina} than in \textit{Emma}—just as the
sexual dangers of seduction and rape are more literally present in Burney's novel than in
Austen's—both novels draw the connection between the father and the lover, between the
familial and the heterosexual narrative.

It remains to be said that, despite the general trajectory of this chapter and its
implicit chronology. I do not attempt to create a seamless narrative that leads from
Richardson in Cleland to Austen (and on to Trollope and Oliphant). Indeed, by leaving the gaps around and between Burney’s and Austen’s novels unfilled, I consciously resist my own penchant for such a seamless narrative. What I undertake in this chapter, then, is, on the one hand, to tell a developmental narrative that leads from Richardson to Burney and from Burney to Austen, and, on the other hand, to show how this narrative breaks down. In other words, I replicate in my argument the very disrupted (and disruptive) structure of the domesticated heterosexual plot that I see at work in both *Evelina* and *Emma*.

1. **Revising the Sex Scene: Heterosexual Intercourse**

If my story were the linear and predictable story I initially set out to tell, it should defloration narrative should continue into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century along the following lines: A number of interlinked factors contribute to what might be called the ‘mainstreaming’ of the narrative of female sexuality—*qua* heterosexuality—in the novel after Richardson. Generally, literary critics who attempt to link the rise of the marriage plot to sociohistorical developments tend to point to the increasing dominance of what Stone famously terms “affective individualism” (and what John Gillis calls “conjugalit”) as the ideological foundation of the companionate marriage in the late eighteenth century (cf. Green 1; Boone, 58-64). An equally important factor is that marriage becomes increasingly stabilized and ‘mainstreamed’ as a legal institution with the passing of Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act in 1753. The definitions of what
constitutes a legally valid heterosexual union become much more specific with the Act; importantly, however, the Act implicitly supported not the companionate marriage, but parental and larger social control over couples, especially by making clandestine and secret contract marriages illegal (cf. Stone, *Road to Divorce*, Part 1, esp. 121-28). This tension between the emphasis on the individual couple’s feelings and the larger social structures to which their union is expected to conform is present in a variety of forms in the marriage-plot novels of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century.

The focus of these novels is in many respects the positioning of the heterosexual couple in a larger social environment—to social rather than sexual intercourse. This somewhat tired analogy, used by Fergus when he observes that, “in significant ways, social intercourse is sexual intercourse” in Jane Austen (84), seems crucial when one stresses (as I would) that social “intercourse” in the sense of “social communication between individuals” (Compact OED 1461, 2) is *heterosexual* intercourse here, in analogy to the sociological term ‘homsociality’ popularized in literary criticism by Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick. In other words, the social interaction between men and women as man and women, and as potential sexual partners in marriage, becomes the displaced focus of the heterosexual narrative. Thus, the desexualization of the heterosexual plot implies an increased attention to appropriate behavior, verbal and physical, in the interaction between the sexes. In other words, the new, streamlined heterosexual narratives emphasize learning the rules of conduct. It is thus not surprising that the generic categories “novel of manners,” “novel of education” (or Bildungsroman) and “marriage-plot novel” almost always overlap. This generic overlap does not only apply to
Burney and Austen alike, but also to many other feminocentric novels of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, like Maria Edgeworth's or Elizabeth Inchbald's.¹

The emphasis on codes of conduct and on heterosexual relationships go hand in hand, because it is precisely the interaction of men and women with each other that is being newly defined and regulated within a larger social context that includes the institutionalization of marriage as well as that of forms of courtship. Desexualizing the heterosexual plot by focusing on such heterosocial behavior is, to a certain extent, a way out of the narratological dead-end of unnarrativity created by the construction of female sexuality as absence. The discourse about social codes that governs heterosexual interaction makes it possible to construct heterosexual intercourse not as a literally sexual act, committed in private and in silence, but to turn it into a narratable social act. Thus, it is not surprising that both Emma and Evelina place such a heavy emphasis on public context for even the most intimate encounters between men and women.²

In terms of narrative structure, the story that results when this desexualized heterosocial narrative develops is, on the surface, a narrower, more streamlined narrative that has marriage as its inevitable telos. This plot is emphatically less explicit in its inclusion of sexual encounters than the rape and seduction plots of the amatory novels, erotic fiction like Cleland's, and virtue-in-distress novels like Richardson's. It is also, concomitantly, more linear in its trajectory, and purged of the disruptive excess and absence in narrative as well as sexual terms. The tamed heterosexual plot thus no longer seems to resist the 'male' linear narrative of initiation, narrated as the story of one couple.
united in a legitimate, monogamous sexual union via a clearly marked single climactic proposal scene. Although the marriage plot is generally a feminocentric narrative, it thus appears to be altogether complicit with such a male linear story, producing a perfect amalgamation of feminocentric thematics and male, linear plot. In this plot, the central, climactic deflation scene is, seemingly, altogether excluded. Instead of centering dramatically on the premarital deflation of a heroine (as in Clarissa or Fanny Hill) or on the threat of such deflation (as in Pamela), the marriage plot displaces this blatantly and immediately sexual plot, by postponing the literal deflation beyond the ending of the novel.

Deflation does not, however, disappear completely; rather, it is preserved in the narrative dynamics of climactic scenes in the marriage plot, in particular in the proposal scene. In comparison to the literal sex scenes of Clarissa and Fanny Hill, this new climactic moment of the heterosexual story seems to lack sexual explosiveness. But the proposal scene preserves much of the heterosexual dynamics of the deflation scene through its climactic function and position in the narrative. It does so not only in terms of its directly and physically sexual connotations—i.e. in that it promises, for the near future, the excluded event of the first sexual intercourse during the wedding night, and in that it allows the lovers to express, physically as well as verbally, a sexual passion legitimized through the ‘proper’ context of marriage as the telos of the proposal. Beyond these promises of future heterosexual experience, the proposal scene itself also exhibits the very narrative dynamics of disrupted climacticity that structure the deflation scene.
What is crucial about the underlying narrative dynamics of the proposal scene—its orgasmic qualities—is that these dynamics make clear that the marriage plot is never quite as desexualized as the above sketch implies. The streamlined and tamed heterosexual plot as a plot of courtship and marriage preserves sexual gender relations as much as it defuses it. In other words, the quasi-Freudian narrative that I have sketched above—the story about the repression and displacement of the sexual encounter by a story of courtship and (anticipated) marriage—is disrupted and undermined by a sexual subtext that is preserved even in the most pronouncedly asexual and a-physical courtship scenes. Individual marriage-plot novels—and I take *Evelina* and *Emma* to be typical rather than exceptional in this context—bear witness to this double movement of ‘repressing’ and activating the sexual dynamics of defloration that underlie the courtship narrative as its unspoken and unnarrated *telos*.

The double movement of desexualization and its undermining can once more be seen as the textual oscillation of affirmation and subversion of the dominant sexual ideology—now that of the legitimizied, domesticated marriage plot. As before, I take this oscillation for granted, and wish to investigate in *Evelina* and *Emma* how both the powerful dominant ideology of the marriage plot and its disruption manifest themselves in the narrative structure. Part of the marriage plot’s enormous ideological power is, of course, its linearity and climacticity. Its teleology and closure produces readerly satisfaction—even when readers are conscious of the problematic ideological implications of a heterosexist plot in which only heterosexual couples count, and in which women’s life stories end with the wedding. And it is precisely this linear and
teleological trajectory of the narrative that is disrupted, disturbed, momentarily deflected, when absence and excess intrude into this narrative at its most climactic moments.

Very few critics who have made the marriage plot the focus of their research emphasize this aspect of the power of the marriage plot qua plot. Virtually all marriage-plot criticism agrees that this plot is an ideologically very powerful narrative in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel. Julie Shaffer points to its "ubiquity" (51) in the novels of the time, and critics frequently note that authors are rarely able to write outside of it (cf. Magee 198, who points to Scott's Heart of Midlothian as an example for the pressures exerted by this hegemonic plot). As Joseph Allen Boone points out in Tradition Counter Tradition, one of the earliest theoretically driven explorations of the marriage plot. "[T]he marriage tradition in the novel ... has exerted a tremendous power over the development of fiction" that can be either positive or "crippling" (17).

Discussions of the marriage plot, then, tend to negotiate between two extremes. A minority of critics endorses, for many different reasons, the marriage plot—some precisely because it is a satisfying narrative pattern (cf. Laura Mooneyham White's essentialist argument, in which the marriage plot functions as a transhistorical, gender-neutral "achievement of psychic identity" for the protagonists, 76). Katherine Sobba Green, who seems very optimistic about the marriage plot's subversive potential, sees what she calls the "courtship novel" as empowering both its authors—primarily women writers, whose marriage-plot novels "feminized" the genre of the novel—and its heroines, whose stories celebrate the "brief period of autonomy" between childhood and married life (Green 13, 2). And since the marriage-plot novel is the primary form of fiction in
which the "rise of the domestic woman" (Armstrong 3 et passim) takes place. Nancy Armstrong also argues, from a very different vantage point, for the political empowerment of women through the domesticating and domesticated marriage plot.

A much greater number of critical discussions point to the stifling, restrictive effect of the marriage plot. Feminist criticism has, of course, been especially invested in exploring the oppressive powers of a plot and an ideology that dictate, in particular for women, that marriage is a person's "one true source of earthly happiness" (Boone 9), the only acceptable ending to a woman's narrative, the only means of establishing an identity, which is, even in legal terms, subsumed under the husband's. Predictably, most feminist critics use this argument about the problematically restrictive character of the marriage plot to explore, in turn, the ways in which the boundaries of the marriage plot are undermined if not transcended in the novel. Usually, the attempt to vindicate the marriage-plot novel by pointing to elements or moments of resistance to the dominant heterosexual ideology is restricted to individual novels or authors. 

Burney and Austen are equally popular targets of such rescue missions, since they were traditionally categories, without fail, as conventional and conservative in their treatment of gender and sexuality.

Unsurprisingly, then, recent critics interested in the narrative manifestation of this conservatism in the marriage have focused on those elements in their novel that undercut it. I will discuss a number of these approaches below, but two examples may suffice here: Julie Shaffer identifies moments of resistance against the suitor's scripted authority in the behavior of Edgeworth's and Burney's heroines, while Karen Newman argues that
Jane Austen's seemingly recuperative endings are indeed full of "unresolved contradictions" that produce a merely "false" unity and harmony at the end (Newman 695, 699). I would argue against these points that such instances of resistance and internal contradictions are a generic feature of the marriage plot from its beginnings, rather than the feature of individual and especially subversive novels by specific authors. Such built-in resistance within the genre of the marriage-plot novel reflects the paradoxical narrative and ideological dynamics of the more literally heterosexual plots with which the marriage plot begins.

Because desexualization changes so many of the parameters of the earlier heterosexual plot, the marriage plot has to grapple with narrative problems that are different from those of the earlier seduction narrative. The basic problem is: how can a sexual narrative be told without narrating sex? In more plot-oriented terms: how can the marriage plot be a dynamic, dramatic narrative without the narrative dynamics of sexual excess that had propelled both *Clarissa*'s and *Fanny Hill*'s plot forward? The focus on the desexualized marriage plot takes away the central narrative dynamics of the seduction plot, namely the series of combative and titillating, patently sexual encounters between the heroine and her seducer or would-be seducer.⁴ The transformation of the seduction plot into a marriage plot, centered on the honorable suitor, potentially endangers the narrative.

*Evelina* and *Emma* present very different solutions to this narrative dilemma of how to preserve the dynamics of the heterosexual plot without the seduction plot's cumulative series of exciting clashes between the heroine and her pursuer. In *Evelina*, the
seduction plot itself is simply preserved—as a story that runs parallel to the marriage plot and functions as its rivaling counterplot. This counterplot gives Evelina's story its dramatic force throughout the first two volumes of the novel, and eventually infuses the dormant marriage plot with the energy necessary for its ultimate victory over the seduction plot. Despite the eventual dominance of the marriage plot, Burney's reliance on the seduction plot tends to undercut Evelina's Cinderellaesque marriage plot. By virtue of its emphasis on seduction and sexual danger, Evelina's seduction plot ultimately remains very much in the Richardsonian virtue-in-distress tradition, and thus works against the desexualized marriage plot that the novel also features.

*Emma*, by contrast, does not feature a seduction plot. Instead, the novel operates with an internally differentiated system of different 'right' and 'wrong' marriage plots. Seduction is thus displaced into the 'wrong' plots—into potential matches that are represented as a misdirected and excessive, as not sufficiently domesticated, within the genteel heterosocial courtship narratives. This excessive, misdirected desire for marital unions takes the place of sexual desire, and the excess of courtship narratives that it produces provides *Emma* with much of its narrative dynamics. It leads to Emma's own disastrous plotting of marriages, and to unwanted and unexpected proposals and matches, such as Mr. Elton's proposal to Emma, and Frank Churchill's secret engagement to Jane Fairfax.

The narrative problem of preserving the drama of the excessive seduction plot without representing the literally sexual segues into another problem—that of agency in the plot. The desexualized marriage plot, as opposed to the seduction plot, does not
revolve around a battle between a pursuer and his intended prey. It demands, instead, a hero whose very status as hero implies that he does not pursue but stand back, that he postpone expressing his sexual desire for the heroine if he ever expresses it at all. How can the honorable suitor be an agent in the plot? He runs the risk of being a rather passive background figure who merely steps forward at the end of the novel, a *deus ex machina* whose sudden activation as suitor seems contrived. This peculiar passivity of the hero is directly linked to the changing and precarious status of 'proper' masculinity in these novels, which goes hand in hand with a change in the construction of 'proper' femininity.

Female sexuality in the desexualized (but emphatically not a-sexual) marriage plot appears neither as absent nor as excessive, but as 'right-sized' in the sense that female sexuality becomes completely identified with legitimized monogamous heterosexuality. In this new construction, female sexual desire is neither the excessive sexual desire of Fanny Hill nor the declared asexuality of Clarissa. Instead, it is a desire that is constructed as present yet subdued, a passive compliance with male sexual desire—provided that this desire takes the appropriate, marriage-oriented form of an 'honorable' proposal. This new construction of female sexual desire as neither absent nor excessive, as perfectly matched to male sexual desire as its passive and receptive counterpart is, however, concurrent with a shift in the construction of male sexuality and masculinity. I had hinted at such a shift when reading Mr. Hickman in *Clarissa* as an early but unsatisfactory representative of a kinder, gentler version of male sexuality. Richardson's later *Sir Charles Grandison* popularized this new masculinity, however, and even after
the famously excessive *Man of Feeling* (1771) by Henry McKenzie had been ridiculed and rejected, figures of a domesticated male sexuality became increasingly more common (cf. Barker. *Grandison’s Heirs*). The standard figure of masculine desire is now no longer the libertine seducer with an aggressive and promiscuous desire for women. Indeed, the libertine begins to function as a negative foil for the hero rather than as the protagonist—for example, Sir Clement Willoughby or Lord Merton in *Evelina*. Thus, in Jane Austen’s novels, the rake is only residually present—for example, in Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*, in Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, and, in extremely muted form, in Frank Churchill, whose secret engagement to Jane Fairfax is as close to a seduction as *Emma* ever gets.

What, then, is the ‘proper’ motivation for the figure who represents domesticated male sexuality to act in the marriage plot? If sexual desire cannot be expressed, or if, at the very least, its expression has to be postponed until the actual proposal scene, how can his interest in the heroine be trooped? Both Lord Orville in *Evelina* and Mr. Knightley in *Emma* are figures in the mentor tradition, who observe the heroine’s action, teach her by modeling proper behavior or admonishing her directly, and offer her protection that is constructed as fatherly and brotherly. This identification of the proper suitor as a fatherly or brotherly interest seems to ‘work’ as a new way of figuring the suitor’s interest and agency in the novel without reference to sexual passion. But the image of the fatherly suitor cuts both ways. While it ostensibly desexualizes the suitor’s relationship to his beloved, it also potentially evokes the possibility of incestuous sexual desire—in both *Evelina* and *Emma*, primarily centered on the father-daughter relationship. The teleology
of the marriage plot dictates, after all, that the suitor be sufficiently attracted to the heroine to marry her and consummate that marriage, and sufficiently attractive in her eyes for her to agree to a marriage. The proposal scene in particular, as the displaced moment of defloration, has the dangerous power not only to re-invoke the sexual in the heroine’s relationship with her suitor, but simultaneously to eroticize her relationship to her father.

The problematic collapse of the lover and the father that ensues here is based on the discourse of sentimentality that figures the lover’s and the kinsman’s relationship to the heroine in almost identical terms of emotional hyperbole. This discourse, as Lynda Zwinger points out with Jean Hagstrum, is always intensely physical and “implicitly erotic” (Zwinger 8). Just like the collapse of the sexual and the religious in Clarissa’s sentimental religiosity at the end of the novel, the collapse of the sexual and the familial undercuts the prescriptions of a desexualized marriage plot. The equation between the lover and the kinsman evokes an incestuous and thence illicit dimension of sexual desire which renders the heroine as always-already exposed, and even participating in eroticized heterosexual relationships with men.

In Evelina, where the bonds between the heroine and her foster-father on the one hand, and between her and her real father on the other hand, are explicitly eroticized, the incestuous thematics are very prominent, and intricately interwoven with the double plot of seduction and marriage. But even in Emma, where Mr. Knightley functions as a corrective to a less than ideal father, the menage à trois of Emma, Mr. Knightley and Mr. Woodhouse at the end of the novel indicates that the father—quite literally—never stops
being a participant in the “heterosexual romance” (pace Zwinger) that ostensibly becomes
an increasingly streamlined story of courtship and marriage from Evelina to Emma.

2. Evelina’s Double Plot: Seduction versus Marriage

... a young female, educated in the most secluded retirement, makes, at
the age of seventeen, her appearance upon the great and busy stage of
life: with a virtuous mind, a cultivated understanding, and a feeling
heart. her ignorance of the forms, and inexperience in the manners, of
the world, occasion all the little incidents... which form the natural
progression of the life of a young woman of obscure birth, but
conspicuous beauty, for the first six months after her Enttance [sic]
into the World. (Ev 7-8)

This famous sketch from Frances Burney’s Preface to her first novel, Evelina, or
the History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World, announces Evelina as a story of
initiation—of literally going into a new sphere. The “World” is that of the high and not-
so-high society of London and Bristol during a somewhat extended ‘season,’ from March
to October of an unidentified year in the 1770s. Evelina’s social and sexual initiation
takes place, at a great geographical as well as social distance from Evelina’s childhood
home. Berry Hill, the secluded home of Evelina’s foster-father, the Reverend Mr. Villars.
“is a retired place, to which Dorchester, the nearest town, is seven miles distant” (Ev 19)
that is associated with Evelina’s presexual, virginal state, with the “inexperience and innocency” of a seventeen-year old hyperbolically described as “innocent as an angel, and artless as purity itself” (Ev 21, 20). When Evelina’s genteel friends, Lady Howard, her daughter Mrs Mirvan, and her granddaughter, take Evelina to London, the unstated intention is to present her as a marriagable young woman in a sphere in which she would be able to meet with eligible suitors. Evelina’s “entrance into the world” is thus very much the traditional “coming out,” and Evelina’s first season ends, very properly, with the expected result of her debut, namely, with a good match.

Although Burney no longer tells the story of female initiation as a story of literal defloration, the pronounced telos of the desexualized initiation process is the legitimized form of the first sexual intercourse during the wedding night. Evelina’s initiation is thus still linked to the defloration stories of Fanny Hill and Clarissa Harlowe thirty years earlier, despite the fact that Evelina is not literally deflowered in the novel. But if Evelina’s story is an initiation story, a story about her progress towards this telos of legitimate heterosexual union and intercourse with Lord Orville (as well as towards her parallel legitimation as Sir John Belmont’s daughter), it is simultaneously an anti-initiation story—a story of how to avoid being deflowered (premaritally, by rape or seduction). What is new in Evelina—as compared to, say, Pamela, which might be described in the same terms—is that the double question of how to be deflowered and how not to be deflowered no longer revolves around one single man. Unlike Mr. B, Lord Orville would never attempt Evelina’s virtue; the role of the pursuing rake is deflected onto other men who are relegated to a strictly separate seduction plot.
Importantly, seduction plot and marriage plot share an important premise about the "world" into which Evelina is initiated. All social interaction between young men and women in the novel is constructed as heterosexual, as geared toward matching them as potential sexual partners. This equation of social with sexual behavior is carried so far that it is almost impossible to read any conversation or event that involves men and women as lying outside this heterosexual framework. Evelina's initiation is, first of all, an introduction to the etiquette that governs the interaction between men and women. Learning the proper behavior is enormously important because public behavior is constructed throughout the novel as a direct expression of a person's innermost motives and intentions. Inappropriate behavior (often, but not always, closely linked to social class in the novel) is an almost unmistakable sign of a morally corrupt character—just as impeccable manners like Lord Orville's indicate a flawless personality. Thus, the "ungentle... temper" and "unamiable... manners" of Evelina's grandmother, Madame Duval, imply that she is both "uneducated and unprincipled" (Ev 13). Her manners indicate not only her lowly class origin (she was "a waiting girl at a tavern" before she married Evelina's grandfather, Ev 13), but also bespeak her lack of morality, most directly demonstrated in her carrying on a barely concealed sexual relationship with her French companion, M. du Bois.

The equation of proper manners with good morals, and of inappropriate behavior with moral corruption is directly translated into the division between marriage plot and seduction plot in Evelina. Unsurprisingly, the man who stands out as impeccable in his manners from the very first time Evelina encounters him, becomes the hero of the
marriage plot. Lord Orville turns out to be as faultless in character as he is in his demeanor—despite temporarily misleading appearances. He thus remains the one and only possible match for Evelina in a marriage plot that is strictly monogamous from its very beginning. Other suitors display a wide range of rude and impertinent behavior which indicates their sexual aggression and corruption, and their participation in the novel's seduction plot. Paradoxically, however, both kinds of behavior towards Evelina—and thus both plots—are similarly triggered by Evelina’s “entrance” to the marriage market. Without being introduced to the marriage market—to a public environment in which men are explicitly invited to consider her a possible sexual partner—Evelina could not find a husband, but neither would she have to be exposed to would-be seducers, assaulters, or even rapists that seem to surround her. Thus, Evelina is constantly placed in a sexual double bind in which her virginal beauty and naïveté, exposed to public male scrutiny for the first time, attracts both the desired husband and scores of undesirable suitors.⁶

By giving Evelina both a marriage plot and a seduction narrative, Burney splits the heterosexual plot in the Pamela vein into two rivaling plots, and by doing so is able to preserve much of the dramatic (and erotic) dynamics of seduction and the telos of marriage without resorting to Pamela’s problematic plot device of male conversion. She thus tells a very openly sexual as well as a desexualized version of heterosexual courtship side by side. As two contrasting plot lines, seduction plot and marriage plot in Evelina constantly negotiate the gendered narrative strategies of absence, excess, and 'rightsizedness.' I had initially conceptualized the novel’s marriage plot as the right-
sized, linear, male plot that, though eventually victorious, is still competing throughout the novel with a seduction plot rife with sexual and narrative excess. However, a closer look at the narrative dynamics of the marriage plot itself shows that this ostensibly linear master plot with its all-enveloping closure is, in fact, a plot riddled with moments of absence, only to be launched on its linear trajectory by way of the very excess it seeks to exclude. In more concrete terms: Lord Orville’s status as a passive bystander (paralleled by that of Mr. Villars) makes for the virtual absence of the marriage plot from the novel’s first two volumes. His passivity is only transformed in the last volume of the novel because the forged letter to Evelina makes him suddenly appear as a participant in the excesses of the seduction plot. The novel thus negotiates excess and absence in an attempt to construct a linear story of Evelina’s Bildung, of her “entrance into the world”—without, I would argue, ever producing such narrative linearity.

Although the separation of seduction plot and marriage plot is not altogether as clear-cut and simple as it might seem, the novel is nonetheless organized around a rather emphatic juxtaposition of the two narrative strands. Roughly, they can be seen as manifestations, in the narrative structure of Evelina, of the contradictory or “divided” construction of femininity on which recent critics have focused in their discussion of Burney’s œuvre. The division of Evelina’s Bildungsroman into a marriage plot and a seduction plot roughly traces the ideological contradictions between Burney’s prescriptive portrayal of conventional femininity and an implicit critique of its problematic restrictiveness. On the one hand, the happy union between Orville and Evelina affirms an ideal of female powerlessness under genteel masculine protection. On the other hand, the
constant threats of seduction and rape from other men point to the dangers of excessive male power and male sexuality, and to the double binds implicit in prescribing female innocence, passivity and obedience to authority figures. To these contradictions, criticism has returned again and again since the feminist discovery of Burney as a subversive writer in the late 1970s and early 1980s, by Susan Staves (in “Evelina”). Judith Lowder Newton and Rose Marie Cutting. Predictably, the more recent successors of these “subversion feminists” have partly bolstered this view of Burney as a proto-feminist critic of patriarchal ideology (especially Julia Epstein, Joanne Cutting-Gray and Julie Shaffer) and partly complicated it by refocusing on Burney’s investment in proper femininity and in the marriage plot (Katharine Rogers, Patricia Meyer Spacks in Desire and Truth, Martha Brown, and D. D. Devlin).

Kristina Straub has, perhaps, produced the most insightful readings of what she calls Burney’s “divided fictions” by arguing that the internal contradictions in Burney’s novels reflect an “ideological double standard” to which Burney was exposed (Straub 4) rather than Burney’s intention to either support or subvert a hypothetically hegemonic ideology of femininity. Straub speaks of these contradictions in terms of “textual disruptions” (2) that I would read, on the level of plot, as the mutual disruption and interruption of seduction plot and marriage plot. But Straub, like most other Burney critics, has very little investment in how the thematics she discusses reverberate in the development of the plot. The subversive is figured as anti-plot, as the clitoral moment, the disruptive event outside the mainstream of what is read as Evelina’s only plot—the
marriage plot. In particular, the disruptive and startling violence between the genders that preoccupies Staves and Epstein is not generally seen in terms of a plot pattern.

Kenneth Graham is a notable exception to a tendency to the reductive view of Evelina’s plot as a marriage plot, and by extension, of plot as a conservative element of the narrative. He speaks of a “Double Plot” in Evelina that juxtaposes the marriage plot or Cinderella story of Evelina (pace Marilyn Butler) with a plot that “directs attention to violent and vicious social realities” (Graham 96). But while he observes that this violence is “significantly centred on conflict between the sexes” (93), it is not quite clear how the instances he mentions (attacks on Evelina and Madame Duval, as well as the history of Evelina’s mother, Caroline) consolidate into a plot. I would argue that the sequence of assault that directly involve Evelina is a separate, distinguishable plot just as her marriage plot is distinct from the portrayal of other marriages, or the several minor marriage subplots in the novel. Although Evelina’s seduction plot is embedded in the general atmosphere of gender relations characterized by male violence and tyranny, it is also distinct from it in as a separate sequence, focused altogether on the heroine.

Because Evelina’s seduction plot relies very heavily on episodic excess, it is reminiscent of Fanny Hill in its narrative strategy. Such a claim may seem absurd at first sight, since Burney’s novel, like Pamela or Clarissa—and patently unlike Fanny Hill—organized around male sexual excess. Evelina thus has to ward off the attempts at seducing her that Fanny is permitted to encourage, enjoy and reciprocate. But the sequence of dramatic and climactic encounters with sexually aggressive males does not provide the dramatic build-up to a tragic climax like Clarissa’s rape, or the comic reversal
of fate like Mr. B’s conversion in *Pamela*. Rather, *Evelina*’s seduction plot, like Fanny’s narrative, has an episodic structure without a particular teleology or trajectory that finally peters out when the marriage plot becomes dominant in the novel.

Like *Fanny Hill*, *Evelina*’s seduction plot is doubly excessive in its emphasis on episodic sequence—both in the number of men involved and in the number of individual events described. Thus, the seduction plot with its countless restagings of male pursuit of female virtue does not only lack the climactic teleology, but also the linearity and one-dimensionality of Clarissa’s encounters with Lovelace and Lovelace only. Thus, although Sir Clement Willoughby emerges as most prominent of Evelina’s representative of the seduction plot, he is not its protagonist in the sense that Lord Orville is the hero of the marriage plot. Rather, the construction of the seduction plot as excess demands a polygamous structure. Evelina is constantly surrounded by a whole host of men who, regardless of their social status, court her more or less aggressively and with more or less sinister intentions. Thus, Sir Clement is merely one of two old-style upper-class libertines: Lord Merton, Lord Orville’s prospective brother-in-law, is the other. Indeed, Merton is a man who is distinguished by being so “deficient in good manners” that “[e]ven Sir Clement Willoughby appeared modest in comparison” (Ev 106). Among the men of lesser status, Mr. Smith and Evelina’s cousin (twice removed), the young Braghton, pursue Evelina most relentlessly. In addition, the men that prey on Evelina in the safety of anonymity and numbers (most notably in Vauxhall and in Marylebone Gardens) might be upper- as well lower-class. Even her grandmother’s mild-mannered lover, M. du Bois, shocks Evelina by declaring his love for her—a move that
conveniently brings about the break with Mme Duval that allows Evelina to return to Berry Hill halfway through the novel.

Given such a wide range of men in pursuit of Evelina, it is not surprising that the seduction plot involves an almost seamless series of attacks, assaults, and other transgressions against Evelina. It is the excessive presence of such scenes that led Judith Lowder Newton to call the entire novel a “chronicle of assault” (23) and Katharine Rogers to admit, despite her focus on the less aggressive aspects of *Evelina*, that the heroine is constantly “eyed, grabbed and coveted by men” (Rogers, 26). Along with many other critics, both Newton and Rogers here emphasize the patently physical violence that is involved in these attacks. Although the series of assault scenes does not culminate in the unnarratable rape scene as does *Clarissa*, many assaults are patently physical, and extremely threatening and terrifying to Evelina in their physicality. The threat of excessive male sexual desire, however, lies not in the palpable physical danger of being raped or seduced alone. In *Evelina*, the literal—and often justified—fear of being raped is almost always complemented by a fear of appearing to be implicated in inappropriate sexual behavior. Evelina’s fear for her reputation is as central to the repeated assault scenes as the actual physical threat. Evelina is thus concerned, even obsessed, with “being thought to be indelicate” (Staves 374; cf. Devlin 94), and is particularly “mortified by being seen by Lord Orville … in inappropriate conversation with a man” (Epstein 114).

Indeed, I would argue that the binary of appearance and reality that still seems in place in Richardson’s *Clarissa* collapses completely for Evelina. Clarissa’s lack of
concern for her reputation, her certainty of her own purity and incorruptibility even after being raped, contrasts very sharply with Evelina's sense of forever being implicated in—and even to blame for—the sexual desire men express for her. Merely having provoked an assault, having become the object of inappropriate attention, is enough to make Evelina agonize over her own possible missteps. Evelina's anxiety about her own behavior is rooted in the fact that she is not constructed as asexual, like Clarissa, but merely as sexually passive and reactive. In Evelina, there is no desire for singleness to correspond to Clarissa's. Despite her vehement desire to escape from sexual threats, Evelina does not object to marriage—in other words, she welcomes the appropriate, non-threatening, legitimate desire later represented by Lord Orville. She is very much aware that the marriage market expects her to cause men to be attracted to her. This awareness means that she is unable to read herself as an innocent victim, and is instead continually plagued by a sense of having caused the male assault because she was the source of the desire that provokes it.

Given the potential taint that is built into the construction of female sexuality as a passive response to male sexual desire, it is not surprising that Evelina is as anxious about her reputation as she is about physical assaults to her body. The discourse about a woman's intact reputation collapses with the discourse about intact virginity in a physical sense, but importantly does not yet completely displace it. Thus, in a famous passage in a letter from Mr. Villars, reminding Evelina that "nothing is so delicate as the reputation of a woman: it is, at once, the most beautiful and most brittle of all human things" (Ev 164), his language still evokes the virginal hymen, just as his descriptions of Evelina's purity
always refer to her virginity as well as to her lack of knowledge about the ‘world’ of heterosexuality.⁸

Evelina’s double fear of physical violation and of appearing to be implicated in compromising situations is most dramatically present in three scenes that are, by far, the most frequently discussed moments in Burney’s novel—namely, the two anonymous attacks in Vauxhall and in the Marylebone Gardens and Sir Clement’s ‘abduction’ of Evelina in his coach. In a way that is very characteristic for the repetitive structure of Evelina’s seduction plot, the Vauxhall and Marylebone episodes mirror each other. They are organized around what might be called a gang-rape scenario from which Evelina is rescued only to find herself in worse circumstances. The physical threat is in each case foremost in her mind, but the problem of a tainted reputation (although located at different moments in the sequence of events in the two scenarios) becomes almost equally prominent from hindsight.

When Evelina and her female cousins get lost in the “dark walks” during the visit at Vauxhall, they are suddenly surrounded by “a large party of gentlemen, apparently very riotous... who... formed a kind of circle, that first stopped our proceeding, and then our retreating, for we were presently entirely inclosed” (Ev 195-6). Trapped by the men, Evelina is in acute danger of being raped at the moment when one of them “rudely, seizing hold of me, said I was a pretty little creature” (Ev 196). She is “[t]errified to death” (Ev 196) and manages to break free only to be caught again. The scene evokes the specter of a gang-rape very strongly, but simultaneously plays upon Evelina’s worst fears of appearing morally corrupt. The men who are hunting her down like an animal think
that she is an “actress” (Ev 196), here very clearly a euphemism for a prostitute which
Evelina immediately feels the need to reject: “‘No.—no.—no.—’ I panted out, ‘I am no
actress…’” (Ev 196).

When Sir Clement unexpectedly appears as part of the crowd (known by Evelina’s
attackers by name, and presumably part of the “party of gentlemen” that had encircled
her) she pleads for his assistance, and he leads her away from the scene. But as in
numerous preceding scenes, Sir Clement turns from a rescuer into an attacker. He
becomes as physically and verbally aggressive as the men from whom he had just rescued
Evelina. With “a freedom so unexpected” that Evelina breaks away from him as well, he
addresses her, like a lover, with the informal “thee” and leads her “into another of the
dark alleys.” When Evelina reproaches him, he responds, “why do I see you here? – Is
this a place for Miss Anville? – these dark walks! – No party! – No companion!” (Ev
197). Sir Clement implies here, and in his repeated request for “some explanation,” that
Evelina’s situation casts a doubt on her own reputation—an implication of which Evelina
is vaguely aware when she “bursts into tears” at his “strange manner of speaking” (Ev
198). Evelina’s subsequent reunion with her “vulgar” relatives (Ev 206) leads to her
exacerbated sense of herself as tainted in reputation, now with respect to her social
status—a sense that is reinforced by Sir Clement’s “alteration in his manners.” his
“unrestrained curiosity” that parallels, in its intrusiveness, his earlier physical and verbal
assault on Evelina (Ev 201).

Sir Clement’s behavior in Vauxhall is directly juxtaposed with Lord Orville’s in
the parallel Marylebone scene—again, one of numerous scenes that contrast the two to
underscore Orville’s position outside the seduction plot. Again, Evelina finds herself in an extremely embarrassing situation during a visit to Marylebone (the “Marybone-gardens” of the novel, Ev 231). Once more, Evelina is attacked, and once more, she is taken for a prostitute—worse yet, she finds herself in the company of prostitutes when she is rescued from her pursuers. Again, the attack is both verbal and physical: a group of men address her with “impertinent witticisms, or free gallantry,” and one finally seizes her by the hand “with great violence,” implying that she can, literally, be hired or recruited for sex when he says “You are a sweet pretty creature, and I enlist you in my service.” Evelina escapes the situation by appealing to “two ladies” for help, only to find out that “I had sought protection from insult, of those who were themselves most likely to offer it” (all Ev 233).

The taint to her reputation is here intensified when being in the company of prostitutes makes more probable what is already presumed by the earlier attackers: that Evelina is herself a prostitute. Evelina’s anxiety, her “terror, which I have no words to describe” (Ev 233) are exacerbated when Lord Orville sees her in the company of the streetwalkers. Her “shame” and “vexation” (Ev 235) reach their pitch at this point, but Orville, characteristically, remains an uninvolved observer at this point. He seems “greatly concerned” (Ev 235) but does not come to Evelina’s rescue—a passivity that she reads as a much more appropriate reaction to a compromising situation than Sir Clement’s in Vauxhall. Evelina explicitly compares the two:

let me observe the difference of his behaviour, when nearly in the same situation to that of Sir Clement Willoughby. He [Orville] had at least
equal cause to depreciate me in his opinion, and to mortify and sink me in my own: but far different was his conduct:—perplexed, indeed, he looked, and much surprised,—but it was benevolently, not with insolence.... whatever might be his doubts and suspicions, far from suffering them to influence his behaviour, he spoke, he looked, with the same politeness and attentions with which he had always honoured. (Ev 238)

A similar contrast between Sir Clement—always the most prominent of Evelina’s many attackers—and thereby between the seduction plot and the marriage plot is implicit in the juxtaposition of Orville’s and Sir Clement’s offers of transportation after Evelina’s opera visit with the Brangthons and Madame Duval. Orville very properly offers his own carriage for her use (without him in it)—“a proposal so considerate, and made with so much delicacy” that it contrasts sharply with Sir Clement’s behavior (Ev 96). Promising to conduct Evelina from the Brangthons to the Mirvans at the opera, Sir Clement instead guides her to his chariot and joins her in it before the eyes of the ever-observant Lord Orville (Ev 97), who will, indeed, be at the Mirvans to see her arrive after the suspiciously long ride with Sir Clement (Ev 100).

Evelina is thus once more in the doubly dangerous position of being actually attacked and of being seen in compromising circumstances. Given the highly physical assault that ensues, it seems that the fear of being raped should outweigh the mortification at being known to have been alone with Sir Clement. Alone in the coach with Evelina, Sir Clement assaults Evelina both verbally and physically, first by grasping her hand repeatedly, eventually “between both his [hands], without any regard to my resistance”
(Ev 97) and then by passionately declaring his love for Evelina. Evelina, “thunderstruck”
(Ev 97), retains her composure and reprimands him “gravely” (Ev 98). But she begins to
feel seriously threatened when she realizes that the coach is going the wrong way,
presumably on Sir Clement’s own order. Her ensuing panic is not alleviated by Sir
Clement’s question “Surely you can have no doubts of my honour?” because his body
language is so clearly at odds with his protestations of honorable intents: He draws
Evelina “towards him” and “passionately kisse[s her] hand” (Ev 98-99). His persistent
use of passionately intimate terms of endearment reinforce this patently sexual body
language: she is his “sweet reproacher,” his “dearest angel” and “dearest life” (Ev 98-99).
Evelina, “terrified” (Ev 99), reacts with vehement physical and verbal resistance. She
makes “a sudden effort to open the chariot-door” (Ev 98) and, when Willoughby tries to
embrace her, breaks “forcibly from him” (Ev 99). Her plea to let her go “if you do not
intend to murder me” finally succeeds in making Sir Clement relent, apologize, protest
his honor and, eventually, ask for Evelina’s forgiveness and silence about the episode.
Evelina agrees, because she characteristically feels that she herself is at fault—for having
let her “own folly and pride ... put me in his power” (Ev 100). Accordingly, she resolves
“never to be again alone with him” (Ev 100); however, her ensuing encounters with Sir
Clement throughout the novel demonstrate that it is characteristically not in her control
whether she is alone with him or not.

Despite the literal sexual assault that takes place in this scene, it is still the
mortification of being seen in compromising circumstances, and not Sir Clement’s actual
assault, that seem to cause her more permanent anxiety. It is, importantly, Lord Orville
who functions as the judge of her behavior and whose negative opinion she fears most.

Orville’s observer position here provides the frame for the scene that turns it into an event that is as much focused on Evelina’s reputation as it is on her physical purity. Orville had seen her leave with Sir Clement meets her and is waiting for her arrival at the Mirvans, having “found it impossible to return home, before he enquired after [her] safety.”

Evelina reacts with “shame and confusion; for I could not endure that he should know how long a time Sir Clement and I had been together” (Ev 100). Ultimately, it is Evelina’s concern with her reputation, not the danger of being raped or seduced with Sir Clement’s attack, that causes her the sleepless night that concludes the episode:

I am under the most cruel apprehensions, lest Lord Orville should suppose my being on the gallery-stairs with Sir Clement was a concerted scheme, and even that our continuing so long together in his chariot, was with my approbation, since I did not say a word on the subject. (Ev 100)

Given this anxiety about her reputation, it does not really matter that, as Katharine Rogers claims, Evelina “cannot know whether [Sir Clement] intends to rape her, to seduce her or to flirt playfully” (Rogers 26), because each scenario would likewise taint her reputation.

Although the coach scene and the two mirroring scenes of anonymous assault are among the most climactic, most physically threatening and altogether most anxiety-ridden moments of the seduction plot in *Evelina*, it is crucial to stress that they are merely individual scenes among many others. Sir Clement in particular places Evelina again and again in compromising situations, be it when he rescues her from the overturned coach at Ranelagh, when he seeks her out in the gardens at Howard Grove, or when he attempts to
declare his passion again in Bristol. The assault scenes are restagings of one another which, importantly, take place at public gatherings. They do not take place in the intimacy of private chambers, lonely manor houses and brothels turned to prisons (as in the Gothic novel or in Clarissa), but in the extremely public atmosphere of dances, balls, morning visits, operas, plays, and outings to parks and exhibits. Evelina gets lost in the crowd, separated from her companions by throngs of people, and it is this isolation in the crowd that again and again isolates her and makes possible highly intimate encounters that threaten her body as well as her reputation. The public and the private are inseparable here, the heterosocial conduct of men and women with each other has direct sexual implications.

No gathering makes this equation clearer than a dance; indeed, as Epstein points out, the “most problematic of these coded social transactions [between men and women] occur at public assemblies that involve actual or metaphorical dancing” in which the locale of the dance again and again “represent... symbolic prisons” (109, 110). It is not surprising, then, that Evelina’s sojourn in London is framed by balls—the “private ball” (Ev 28; 28-36) and the public ridotto (Ev 39-49), which she attends in the first ten days of her arrival, and the Hampstead ball that Evelina attends less than two weeks before her return to Berry Hill (Ev 219-225). On all three occasions, dancing brings to the foreground the sexual implications of public heterosocial conduct. A sexual power game underlies not only the choreography of the dance itself, but also the proper etiquette that regulates the choice of partner. Thus, Evelina discovers at her first ball that the men “looked as if they thought we [i.e. the “ladies in general”] were quite at their disposal, and
only waiting for the honour of their commands” (Ev 28). Evelina’s sense of such male behavior at her first ball as “provoking” (Ev 28) makes her decide that “I would rather not dance at all, than with any one who should seem to think me ready to accept the first partner who would condescend to take me” (Ev 29). But because she has heretofore “danced but at school” and thus “with a school-girl” (Ev 28, 30). Evelina is not adequately prepared for the complex rules that govern the heterosexual choreography of dancing. In declining to dance with a man she dislikes for his foppishness, but later accepting the more likeable Lord Orville as a partner for a dance, she commits, very literally, her first social fauxpas. Although her very first dance thus prefigures, characteristically, the marital and sexual outcome of the novel, its direct consequence is that she is misconstrued as ill-bred, perhaps even consciously defiant of ballroom etiquette and its underlying rule about the male prerogative to choose a dance partner. True to the premise of the novel that manners are indicators of character, her fauxpas is read as a character deficiency by the observers. so that even Orville sees her as “a poor weak girl.” either “ignorant, or mischievous” (Ev 35-36).

Evelina is mortified when she realizes her fauxpas, her false step in the dance, but manages to entangle herself even more deeply in inappropriacy at the ridotto a week later. Having learned from Mrs. Mirvan that it is “highly improper for young women to dance with strangers, at any public assembly” (Ev 40), she very appropriately rejects the advances of a stranger, Sir Clement Willoughby. However, she does so with the help of the inappropriate “artifice” of claiming to have a dance partner already, “by which I meant to keep myself at liberty to dance or not, as matters should fall out” (Ev 40). Once
more. Evelina’s desire to have some control over her choice of partner causes her to make up her own rules about heterosexual conduct. Again, she tries to choose Lord Orville as her partner—this time as a fantasy partner, her alleged engagement for the evening. Orville is kind enough to support rather than expose her “artifice” when Sir Clement, already at the center of the episode, becomes suspicious. Just as Orville’s behavior during the ridotto anticipates the passive but impeccable demeanor that eventually makes him Evelina’s partner in the marriage plot, Sir Clement’s success in pressing Evelina to dance with him prefigures his multiple assaults. His “urgent entreaties,” his “boldness” and his “importunities” (Ev 45) in asking her to dance with him have a direct physical dimension. Uncomfortable with having been forced into this form of heterosexual interaction with a stranger, Evelina indeed evokes assault, abduction and rape in the hyperbolic language she uses to accuse him: “you have forced me from my friends, and intruded yourself upon me. against my will, for a partner” (Ev 44).

Like these two balls that open Evelina’s “season” in London, the last dance she attends there—less than two weeks before her return to Berry Hill—follows the pattern of forced heterosexual contact, and thus rounds off the entire series of pursuits and assaults Evelina has had to endure. Evelina herself sees primarily the contrast between the high-society balls she initially attended, and the lower-class Hampstead ball to which she unwillingly accompanies her grandmother and a would-be suitor, Mr. Smith (cf. Ev 223-4). However, Evelina’s encounters with the Hampstead young men, “of whom the appearance and language were... inelegant and low-bred” (Ev 223), resembles her initial experience of being surrounded by an unwanted excess of men who express their desire
for her through pressing her aggressively to dance with them, and who expect her to be at their disposal. Similarly, Mr. Smith himself, Evelina’s most aggressive lower-class suitor, is not that different in his intentions from Sir Clement—in fact, he at least considers marriage (Ev 224) while Sir Clement never mentions it. Nevertheless, Evelina compares him unfavorably with Sir Clement, whose “language, though too flowery, is always that of a gentleman” while Smith’s “vivacity is... low-bred, and his whole behaviour... forward and disagreeable” (Ev 178). As Lowder Newton has pointed out, Evelina’s class anxiety makes assaults from lower-class men more worthy of contempt (36), but therefore also more easily dismissed and ridiculed. Evelina, who shares her foster-father’s attitude that her lower-class suitors are “objects too contemptible for serious displeasure” (Ev 217), finds them non-threatening, while Sir Clement has enough social power to prevent being dismissed outright by Evelina. Indeed, Sir Clement himself exploits her class-consciousness—in particular her sense of shame at being seen in lower-class company—when he appears as her rescuer at Ranelagh and at the opera, only to turn into a predator when she is in his hands.

But if Sir Clement’s aristocratic status and authority makes him a much more serious threat because he cannot be dismissed or avoided, he is emphatically not the model gentleman. Both he and Lord Merton, the other aristocratic libertine of the novel, are negative foils against which Lord Orville’s gentlemanly character is emphasized. Orville embodies the new masculine ideal that Richardson’s sentimental Grandison had prefigured, but, as Gerald Barker points out, Burney “deliberately depreciated that characteristic masculine qualities of assertiveness and boldness in favor of delicacy and
propriety" (74). He is thus, as Janet Spencer (156) and Julie Shaffer (58) point out, like Knightley in *Emma* a suitor in the tradition of “lover-mentor,” who educates his beloved; but his role as her protector and thus his agency in his encounters with Evelina is limited. Although Orville is thus the model for the new domestic man—the marriagable man who is gentle, benevolent, sexually not aggressive, observer rather than pursuer of women—his passivity is problematic in terms of the narrative of Evelina. As Patricia Spacks observes, he is a “strikingly passive” hero (144), so that the marriage plot whose hero he is to become, is not a highly dynamic plot, and lies dormant throughout the first two volumes of the novel.

The marriage plot is thus deeply riddled with moments and motifs of absence. If narrative and sexual excess is troped as all male rather than female in *Evelina*, absence is here also associated with masculinity rather than with femininity. It is Orville who is absent from the story; through the first two volumes of the novel, he passively observes Evelina rather than actively interfering in the many seduction plot scenarios he partially witnesses. Orville’s absence generates a marriage plot that is, initially, not structured as linear, but as missing—as a plot that obstinately refuses to get under way and function as the right plot for Evelina.

When the marriage plot takes off after all, it is, interestingly, only by way of the seduction plot and its excessiveness. The inception of the marriage plot proper in the third volume is predicated on the illusion that Orville is not, after all, a passive and gentle bystander but instead a rakish participant in the seduction plot. Evelina’s written apology for her relatives’ use of her name to obtain his coach (Ev 249) enables Sir
Clement, who steals it, to forge a letter in Orville’s name whose sexual implications shock her deeply. The writer addresses Evelina with extremely inappropriate intimacy as “most charming of thy sex.” “my lovely girl” and “my sweet girl” (Ev 256-7). Suddenly, Orville appears to Evelina as yet another participant in the seduction plot. His impeccable behavior is, seemingly, no more than a devious mask for a corrupt libertinism that is all the worse for having been concealed.

What makes the letter so traumatic for Evelina is that the possibility of Orville having written it violates her (and the novel’s) presumption that external behavior and inner character are identical. Evelina, her faith in appearances shattered, writes to Miss Mirvan:

could you ever have believed, that one who seemed formed as a pattern for his fellow-creatures, as a model of perfection,—one whose elegance surpassed all description,—whose sweetness of manners disgraced all comparison,—oh, Miss Mirvan, could you ever have believed that Lord Orville would have treated me with indignity?

Never, never again will I trust to appearances... never believe that person to be good, who seems to be amiable. (Ev 256)

Of course, Evelina’s faith in the external is eventually reinstated, and the novel’s equation of external appearance and true inner self is ultimately upheld. Even before Sir Clement reveals himself as the author of the letter (Ev 387-88), Evelina has returned to her earlier opinion of Lord Orville. Seeing him again in Bristol quickly convinces her that Orville’s public behavior indeed represents the truth about his character, while the letter is ‘untrue’
to his 'real' self in some sense. Even Villars had suggested that the letter is out of character for Orville, that he was not "in his perfect senses" but rather "intoxicated" when he wrote it (Ev 237). Orville's polite and considerate behavior in Bristol reinforces this impression (Ev 282-3).

Although the letter only temporarily creates the impression that Orville is a participant in the seduction plot, the seeming admission of Orville's desire that it contains is enormously important in initiating the marriage plot's active phase. First of all, it enables Evelina to become aware that she is pleased to be sexually desired by Orville. Evelina's first reading of the letter triggers not indignation and outrage, but "delight" (Ev 257). She admits to Miss Mirvan: "I perceived not immediately the impertinence it implied.—I only marked the expressions of his own regard; ... I could only walk up and down the room, repeating to myself, 'Good God, is it possible?—am I, then, loved by Lord Orville?'" (Ev 257). True to the construction of Evelina's sexuality as passive-reactive, feeling "loved by Lord Orville" and reciprocating that love seem to be indistinguishable. so that Evelina only narrowly averts this danger: "I fear I was in greater danger than I apprehended, or can now think of without trembling,—for oh, if this weak heart of mine had been penetrated with too deep an impression of his merit,—my peace and happiness had been lost for ever!" (Ev 258). Evelina's own image of being 'penetrated' of course points very directly to the immediately sexual dimension of this danger, to the seducibility of women that implies their guilt in any illicit relationship.

What makes Evelina's resistance necessary is the massive inappropriacy of Orville's seeming declaration of his love for her—even in its medium, the illicit
correspondence with a young unmarried woman. Although Evelina relents initially when Orville’s behavior in Bristol does not seem to warrant her continued “coldness and reserve” (Ev 282), Villars’ letter, advising her to distance herself from Orville, reinforces her attempt to detach herself from him and from the taint of sexual desire. Like Orville’s earlier letter, Villars’ letter serves the double function of making Evelina aware of her growing attachment to Orville on the one hand, and of the necessity of resisting this attachment on the other (Ev 321-3). The obvious disparity between Evelina’s feelings and her attempt to follow Villars’ advice causes a dramatic inner conflict: as Evelina puts it: “my feelings are all at war with my duties” (Ev 336). Conflicts, though, “generate the best stories” in Evelina, as Spacks points out (142), and it is, finally, this inner conflict that lends dramatic force to the marriage plot when becomes externalized as a tension between Evelina and Orville, whose interest in Evelina is intensified by her sudden and inexplicable withdrawal.

Evelina’s resistance is so crucial to the dynamics of the marriage plot because it provides the obstacle that is necessary to motivate action on the part of Orville, who is showing more active interest in Evelina in Bristol, but is still mostly an observer of Evelina’s life. Orville does, indeed, reprimand Sir Clement when he makes another attempt at Evelina (“Sir Clement, you cannot wish to detain Miss Anville by force!” Ev 345), and admonishes him afterwards in a private conversation that reveals his own admiration for Evelina (Ev 346).

But it is not the external obstacle of a rival or even a rivaling plot that ultimately forces Orville into action. Instead, it is the resistance from within the marriage plot—
Evelina’s attempt to withdraw from Orville—that finally brings about the climactic scene in which Orville declares his love for Evelina. Her attempts to withdraw from him according to Villars’ advice bewilder him, and she declines to explain herself (Ev 349). When told that Evelina is preparing to leave for Berry Hill in her most radical attempt to distance herself from him, Orville finally declares his love for her.

In pronounced contrast to Sir Clement, his declaration is not accompanied by any physical transgression; neither is it phrased in the libertine’s language of sexual passion. In fact, when Orville confesses: “I admire you above all human beings!—you are the friend to whom my soul is attached as to its better half! you are the most amiable, the most perfect of women!” (Ev 352), the spiritual sexlessness of the love he describes contrasts with Evelina’s reaction, described in pronouncedly physical terms: “I scarce breathed; I doubted if I existed,—the blood forsook my cheeks, and my feet refused to sustain me” (Ev 352). The detailed description of the climactic scene ends abruptly here with Evelina’s claim “I cannot write the scene that followed, though every word is engraven on my heart” (Ev 352). That Evelina evokes the trope of unnarratability here points to the closeness of this desexualized proposal scene to the literally sexual scenes it displaces—just as Pamela avoids describing her wedding-night, Clarissa her rape, and even Fanny Hill her sex life after her marriage with Charles. Evelina needs to leave untold the new climax of the heterosexual plot, the scene in which hero and heroine confess their mutual love. Despite the emphatically unerotic language of Orville’s proposal, the proposal scene as stand-in for the first sexual union of the two lovers is read as infused with sexual desire to such a degree that it cannot be fully told. Evelina,
"agitated" and "overpowered" with "the excess of joy" after this scene, retires to her room only to reflect on her own properly passive role in this thoroughly proper union: "To be loved by Lord Orville—to be the honoured choice of his noble heart!" Orville is, of course, as much enthused about taking possession of Evelina as she is eager to be taken possession of, and wants "To hasten the time... when your grateful Orville may call you all his own" (Ev 353).

Evelina, as heroine and as narrator, comply with this request "to hasten" this moment—her story is now drawing very quickly to a close. Bringing it to its point of closure, however, entails the solidification of a link that the narrative had all along implied, but that is only now foregrounded with the twofold resolution of the marriage plot and the narrative of Evelina's origins. This link is that between the father-daughter relationship and the explicitly heterosexual relationship between husband and wife. Burney critics have, in recent years, commented on the multiple dimensions of the father-daughter thematics in Evelina, frequently making direct biographical connections to Burney's own relationship to her father (cf. especially Kowaleski-Wallace's remarks on Evelina in Their Fathers' Daughters, 8-11). Most of the criticism focuses on Evelina's desire for legitimacy via being acknowledged by her biological father, on questions of naming and namelessness and the entanglement of legitimation and naming with notions of subjectivity (cf. Cutting-Gray, Campbell and Oakleaf).

It is indeed crucial that the parallel between fathers and husbands is worked out partly through the sequencing of Evelina's names as Anville, Belmont and eventually Orville. But what makes this parallel startling and intriguing in terms of the heterosexual
plot is the ambiguous construction of sexual desire that emerges from equating fathers and husbands in *Evelina*. To what degree this sexual desire can be labeled “incestuous” is somewhat questionable, since Burney defuses the central father-husband analogy of her novel—that between Villars and Orville—by making Villars Evelina’s foster-father. Their eroticized bond is thus not incestuous in a biological sense. Nevertheless, it is the relationship between the two and its collapse with that between Orville and Evelina that brings the incest thematics to the fore. The subplots of *Evelina* that deal with potential ‘real’ biological incest seem to merely reinforce this primary analogy, partly by creating a contrast between two different kinds of incest in analogy with *Evelina*’s two plots. This goes less for the subplot that revolves around Evelina’s illegitimate half-brother Mr. Macartney than it does for the incest that threatens to occur, as Irene Fizer argues, between Sir John Belmont and his unacknowledged daughter.

Fizer discusses the sexual implications of the father-daughter relationship in *Evelina* in more detail than any other critic, and has thus influenced my reading substantially. However, unlike her, I would argue that Sir John, Evelina’s biological father, is not the most important father in the novel. Fizer focuses her reading on Evelina’s two encounters with this “rake father” (Fizer 78), whose presence I see as a means simply to underscore, almost clumsily and crudely, the problematics of incest implicit in the relationship between Evelina and Villars. These two encounters are indeed climactic and, as Fizer convincingly shows, replete with barely suppressed sexual desire of the father for the daughter (cf. 91-96). Sir John Belmont is unable to sublimate his desire for a daughter who appears as a replica of his unacknowledged wife, Caroline. The
second encounter is entirely organized through the mutual embrace of father and
daughter, first with Evelina on her knees, then with Belmont kneeling in front of his
daughter in what Fizer describes as a "perversion of the betrothal" (Fizer 97), in the
course of which Orville had classically kneeled before Evelina (Ev 351). But the
climactic, overly dramatic encounters each end abruptly with Sir John’s fleeing the scene
(Ev 373, 386), and when he disappears altogether from the narrative once he has
bestowed his name on Evelina (Ev 404), this disappearance underscores that his role as
Evelina’s father is short-lived and localized. Ultimately, his relationship with Evelina is
characterized by absence, and despite the immediate juxtaposition of father-daughter
encounters with Evelina’s marriage plot.\(^{12}\) it serves to contrast rather than link Sir John
and Lord Orville as participants in Evelina’s homosocial transfer from father to husband.

Sir John’s ultimate marginalization is, it seems to me, directly linked to his
association with the seduction plot rather than the marriage plot. I would underscore
Fizer’s observation that the Belmont’s behavior towards his daughter is violent and
implicitly a suppressed sexual assault, and therefore "correlate[s] to her molestation by
men in public" (95). Just as the seduction plot eventually peters out, the relationship
between Sir John and Evelina eventually vanishes along with her short-lived paternal
name (Ev 404), displaced by the ultimately more powerful marriage plot.

By contrast, Evelina’s marriage cannot (and need not) displace the relationship of
Villars and Evelina, precisely because this relationship is most explicitly equated with
that between Orville and Evelina. Fizer’s sees this equation as well, but reads it as that of
two father figures that are removed from the incestuous sexual bond that threatens to
develop between Sir John and his daughter. Fizer’s Lacanian distinction between Sir John as the “sexual father,” who sexually desires the daughter, and Orville and Villars as manifestations of the “legal father” (who has a phallus, but not a penis) downplays the sexual dimension of Evelina’s relationship to her fiancé and her foster-father (Fizer 82). Fizer argues they are “desexualized” (98) and “lack the body of the father” (82); when she later revises her argument to admit that the relationship between Villars and his foster daughter “is embued with a subtle eroticism” (102), she nonetheless argues that there is no “threat of incest” because the relationship “poses no sexual threat” (103). In other words, Fizer implies that only the violence that links Sir John to the assault plot makes the relationship truly incestuous, whereas a relationship that seems consensual cannot be incest.

Incest, in other words, is equated here with incestuous rape. Arguably, one might say that all father-daughter incest can never be based on consent because of the implicit power hierarchy that does not allow the daughter to refuse the father. (Against Glenda Hudson’s arguments about sibling equality, I would also argue that this goes for brother-sister incest as well.) But in Evelina, incest (between Evelina and her foster-father) appears as much toned down as the exogamous heterosexual relationship between Orville and Evelina; both only indirectly point back to their origins in more directly sexual and transgressive relationship. The heroine’s eroticized relationship thus appears as a domesticated family romance in analogy to the legitimate, domesticated heterosexual desire. The kinder, gentler form of father-daughter eroticism shared by Villars and his foster daughter has its analogy in the more benevolent form of patriarchal ownership and
male sexuality embodied by Lord Orville. It is precisely the alternative construction of heterosexual desire as nonviolent and non-intrusive and also as legitimate that makes the novel's equation of fathers and husbands so intriguing—and so problematic. By trying to construct the father-daughter and the husband-wife relationship as identical, *Evelina* explores the paradoxical consequences of an equation between the good father and the good husband relationships when this equation is concurrent with a cultural requirement for heterosexual desire for husbands and wives and its prohibition for fathers and daughters.

Ever since Evelina reported her first impressions of her future husband, Evelina has emphasized the resemblance between Orville and Evelina's foster-father:

I sometimes imagine that, when his youth is flown, his vivacity abated, and his life is devoted to retirement, he will, perhaps, resemble him whom I most love and honour. His present sweetness, politeness, and diffidence, seem to promise in future the same benevolence, dignity, and goodness.

(Ev 72; cf. also 261)

Both Orville and Villars are here seen as admirable models by virtue of their domesticated, gentle as well as gentlemanly masculinity—a parallel that is reinforced by their similar roles as Evelina's passive observers and mentors, authority figures that are largely absent as participants in the story but central as Evelina's literal and figurative readers. The parallel, worked out via the paternal, non-threatening, muted masculinity of both men, allows the relationship between Orville and Evelina to be constructed as a direct continuation of the father-daughter relationship.
Importantly, the easy slippage between husband and father is bi-directional: the novel constantly oscillates between turning the husband into the father and the father into the husband. Thus, on the one hand, the legitimate heterosexual relationship is desexualized by its close association with the father-daughter relationship. This desexualization enables the strict separation of the marriage plot from the seduction plot and legitimizes Evelina’s admiration for Orville by constructing it as respect for a father-figure. On the other hand, the father-daughter relationship is infused with heterosexual passion by virtue of its similarity to the relationship between bride and bridegroom.
Thus, when Villars gives his written consent to Evelina’s marriage, he evokes death in her arms when he wishes that he may close “these joy-streaming eyes in her presence, and breath[e] my last faint sights in her loved arms!” (Ev 405). That death functions here as Villars’ metaphor for a sexual union with Evelina, is reinforced when he tells her not to “grieve at the inevitable moment” (Ev 405)—a phrase that importantly echoes Orville’s reference to Evelina’s initiation earlier. Orville comments on Evelina’s desire to postpone another inevitable moment, i.e. the wedding-day (and thus the wedding night) by saying: “the day which will make me the happiest of mortals, would probably appear awful to you, were it to be deferred a twelvemonth” (Ev 379).

The analogy between Orville and Villars thus reinforces the strong metaphorically incestuous bond that so obviously structures Evelina’s relationship to her foster-father. As Evelina puts it at one point, Villars is Evelina’s “more than father” (Ev 130)—not only in her sense, i.e. in that he is more of a father to her than her biological father, but also in that he is a lover. In a similarly ambiguous sense, Evelina is to him “the best
beloved of my heart" just as her mother, another daughter/lover-figure, had been before her (Ev 125). The bond between Evelina and Villars is blatantly infused with the erotics of embraces, terms of endearment and hyperbolic declarations of mutual devotion. Villars thus fantasizes of dying in Evelina’s arms not just in his last letter, but several times before (cf. Ev 15, 25). His desire to protect her from the evils of male sexual aggression, but later also from the dangers of falling in love, can easily be read as sexual jealousy.

Emma’s devotion to her foster-father seems equally infused with desire. When Evelina returns to Berry Hill after her two trips to London, she describes the reunion with Villars at length and with a passion that not even Orville’s declaration of love will ever trigger:

when we arrived at Berry Hill,...how did my hear throb with joy! And when... I beheld the dearest, most venerable of men...—good God! I thought it would have burst my bosom! .... I sprung forward, and with a pleasure that bordered upon agony, I embraced his knees, I kissed his hands, I wept over them... while he,... folding me in his arms, could scarce articulate the blessings with which his kind and benevolent heart overflowed. (Ev 254-5)

The language of heterosexual passion is used so overtly here that it is difficult not to think of incest. What makes this kind of description of father-daughter love possible without making the narrative scandalous is, of course, the hyperbole of late eighteenth-century sentimental discourse. *Evelina* operates within the same parameters of the language of
sentimentality that, in *Clarissa*, had so problematically eroticized the heroine’s religious fervor. Within these parameters, the passionate devotion of Villars and Evelina to each other is constructed throughout the novel as a legitimate and appropriate relationship between father and daughter to each other.

As Lynda Zwinger points out, this sentimental construction of the father-daughter relationship is directly linked to the “history of heterosexuality” (4). It seems to me that this link is crucial to the desexualization and domestication of the heterosexual plot qua marriage plot. But I am not as certain of the causal nexus that, for Zwinger, makes the “father-daughter story…the foundation of culturally sanctioned heterosexual desire” and the “cornerstone [of] heterosexual desire” (9). It seems to me that the implicit chicken-egg question is more difficult to answer than any Freudian reading, based on the primacy of family triangulations, would grant. Although I cannot develop and historically support this tentative argument in detail here, I would like to suggest that a transformed father-daughter relationship might be said to emerge *in reaction to* the massive changes in the construction of heterosexual relationships that come with the rewriting of masculinity as well as femininity, the rise of domesticity, and, most of all, the solidification of marriage based on “affective individualism” with its disempowerment of the patriarch.

Based on my reading of *Evelina* (and also *Emma* below), the causal link that I suggest is at least as likely as the traditional (and usually essentialist rather than historicized) reverse assumption about the primacy of the father-daughter bond as a woman’s first heterosexual relationship. Indeed, *Emma*'s demolition of the very image of the good father that organizes Evelina’s relationship to Villars, makes rather strong case
for prioritizing the husband's relationship to his wife as that of the better father to his daughter. By contrast, all that is visible in *Evelina* is the total equation of the two relationships, their virtual collapse into one, which causes the perpetual oscillation between the two poles of desexualized husband-wife bond and sexualized father-daughter relationship. No passage illustrates this more clearly than the last sentence of *Evelina*, which anticipates the moment when the newlyweds will arrive at Berry Hill for their honeymoon. The hyperbolic epithets for father and husband are here altogether the same. Evelina, who has just "united herself for ever with the object of her dearest, her eternal affection"—i.e. her husband—is now waiting for the chaise which is to them together "to dear Berry Hill, and to the arms of the best of men"—i.e., her foster-father (Ev 406).

Indeed, as Fizer points out, "the arms of the best of men" can be read as a plural that refers to both Villars and Orville at once (Fizer 100). This final double embrace of both father and husband reinforces, in the last lines of the novel, the impossibility of separating the heterosexual relationship of man and wife from the—equally legitimate, but thus also equally eroticized—relationship between father and daughter in this novel.

3. *Emma*: Sex and Seduction Inside the Marriage Plot

My reading of *Emma* takes as its starting points the overall pattern and climactic scenes I have just described for Burney's *Evelina*: the division of the heterosexual narrative into seduction plot and marriage plot, the dynamics of climactic moments in each, and the link of the division into those two plots to the father-daughter plot. But
although I thus read *Emma* through *Evelina*, as it were. my argument does not concern the extent of Fanny Burney’s direct influence on Jane Austen. Austen did, of course, read Burney’s novels, including *Evelina*, as both her letters and remarks and allusions in her novels show.\(^{13}\) Austen herself was perceived from her own time on as a writer in the Burney tradition—as one whose novels “have been placed on the same shelf as the works of a D’Arblay”, as her brother Henry put it as early as 1817 in the “Biographical Notice” prefacing *Northanger Abbey* (NA 3). That Burney influenced Austen—beyond being, famously, the source of the title of *Pride and Prejudice*—has thus long been a commonplace in criticism, even though the terms in which the two writers are compared have changed radically from Henry Austen in 1817 or Macaulay in 1843 to the slew of dissertations of the 1980s and 1990s that focus on such a comparison.\(^{14}\)

Interestingly, however, comparative discussions of the plots or narrative dynamics of Austen’s and Burney’s novels are scarce.\(^{15}\) In the context of the development of the marriage plot, the popular choice of an Austen novel to read against predecessors like Richardson, Burney, or Edgeworth is always the more excessively marriage-focused *Pride and Prejudice* rather than *Emma* (cf. Boone or Lowder Newton). Although it is tempting to argue that *Emma* is at times directly based on *Evelina*—in particular in the instance of *Emma*’s coach scene with Mr. Elton—these resemblances can also be attributed to the fact that *Evelina*’s plot constellations, characters, and narrative devices are so typical for late eighteenth-century feminocentric novels. Thus, it is generic link rather than a specific one between Burney and Austen that both novels feature motherless heroines and fatherly suitors in the “lover-mentor” tradition that I discussed briefly for
Evelina. Although not necessarily the direct model of Emma, Evelina provides a good foil for Emma because it is so typical of the emergent, somewhat rough-edged early attempts to construct the heterosexual plot as a marriage plot in the late eighteenth century.

What seems rough-edged in Evelina in comparison to what has always been praised as “subtlety” and “elegance” in Austen criticism is, of course, the rather explicit presence of the sexual in Burney’s novel. At first sight, Austen seems to exclude sexual dangers (and pleasures) altogether; the domestication of the heterosexual narrative is apparently complete. There are no rakes and seducers;¹⁶ no dangerous city parks to get lost in: no physically violent attacks on women, no crude jokes being played, and no assaults, imagined or real, on the heroine’s honor and virtue. But ironically, it is this very absence that has provoked critics to look, very pointedly, for “sexuality” or “sex” in Jane Austen’s works. Where earlier readers (famously, Charlotte Brontë and George Henry Lewes) did not find any sexual passion in Austen’s novels and deplored this lack, other critics have, of course, found sexuality represented in them. Depending on critical approach, a critic might find it in the repressed desires lodged in the characters’ subconscious (cf. Gross, Page); as manifest in the “social intercourse” of the novel’s courtships (cf. Fergus and virtually all critics who discuss the marriage plots and proposal scenes in Jane Austen); or as the central “secret that is not a secret” within a Foucauldian model of a ubiquitous discourse of sexuality (cf. Preus, esp. 199).

Interestingly, however, other critics, like Susan Morgan, have returned to the original claim that there is “No Sex in Jane Austen’s Fiction,” as the title of her article
has it (cf. also Shields’ note on the lack of the body in Austen, in “No Fingers, No Toes”).

Morgan’s return to the dictum of the sexless Austen novel is refreshing in its emphasis on
the liberating aspects of a desexualization that frees early nineteenth-century authors and
their heroines from being “sexually defined by nature” (Morgan 354). But it overlooks
the presence of the sexual on a level that the Freudian critics, and even Preus’
Foucauldian search for the “secret of sex” also ignore—namely, in the narrative dynamics
of Emma. Both within what many critics see as the only marriage plot in Emma (i.e. the
plot that eventually unites Emma with Knightley) and outside of it, Emma’s most
climactic scenes replicate patterns of omission and repetition that are as resonant of
sexual absence and excess as are the parallel scenes in the more literally sexualized
narrative of Evelina.

Interestingly, critics who discuss the marriage plot, rather than the presence or
absence of sex, usually come closest to discussing at least one aspect of this narrative
dynamic because, as I will discuss later in more detail, they have to face the fact that Jane
Austen does not narrate the very proposal scenes that constitute the culminating moments
of courtship. But if the unnarrated moment of the proposal, associated with female
sexuality defined as absence, points directly back to the narrative gaps in Clarissa.

Austen’s novels likewise preserve vestiges of dangerous and excessive sexuality. Austen
includes scenes that exude and preserve all the anxiety evoked by the sexual assault
scenes of Evelina. The coach scene with Mr. Elton is the foremost of these, of course,
but by far not the only one in Emma, or in Austen’s œuvre.¹⁷ What makes Austen’s use
of such scenes of anxiety, embarrassment and entrapment so interesting is that they all
ostensibly take place within the framework of the marriage plot. *Emma*, unlike *Evelina*,
does not juxtapose the marriage plot with an assault plot; instead, the novel integrates the
anxiety-ridden moment into the ostensibly desexualized courtship plot. The presence of
this transformed assault plot, ironically, prepares the ground for the marriage plot's
resexualization. By restricting herself rigidly to the marriage plot as the only possible
version of the heterosexual initiation plot, Jane Austen introduces into the marriage plot
the very dynamics of sexual excess that in *Evelina* organize its counternarrative, the
seduction plot.

Some of Austen's novels do, of course, still present an alternative, if thoroughly
rejected, heterosexual plot—most aggressively present in Lydia's elopement with
Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, and still faintly visible in the inappropriacy of Frank
Churchill's and Jane Fairfax's secret engagement in *Emma*. Beyond the inappropriacy
of this secret engagement, however, the illegitimate counterplot has been erased in
*Emma*—and with it seemingly all references to the sexual dimension of heterosexual
conduct. In order to preserve the dynamics that, in *Evelina*, are provided by the seduction
plot, *Emma*'s seemingly desexualized marriage plot is multiplied into a number of actual
and potential marriage plots—a number of possibilities for matching the novel's
unmarried men and women. Inappropriate heterosexuality is thus projected from the
relationship between male seducers or rapists and their female victims onto the
heterosexual relationships of the 'wrong' or socially inappropriate marriage plots that
would match, for example, Emma and Mr. Elton, or Harriet and Mr. Knightley. The
'wrong' marriage plot is thus a toned-down version of *Evelina*'s seduction plot in *Emma*. 
The 'right' marriage plot in *Emma*, on the other hand, resembles *Evelina*'s only marriage plot proper—not only in its narrative trajectory, but also in its relatively late launching into an active phase toward the end of the novel's third volume.¹⁹

*Evelina*'s central opposition of marriage plot and seduction plot is thus preserved in *Emma* within the dynamics of a narrative of multiple marriages, potential and actual. Just as the seduction plot initially dominates *Evelina*'s story, the series of mismatches that constitutes the wrong marriage plots is at first the main focus of the narrative in *Emma*. This internal multiplication is further complicated by splitting and doubling the protagonist. Whereas *Evelina* undergoes the transformation of the seemingly illegitimate, unacknowledged orphan girl into a wealthy young woman of high rank and status, Austen's novel divides this Cinderella figure into two much less radically transformed female characters. On the one hand, there is the illegitimate, unacknowledged Harriet Smith, who turns out to be "the daughter of a tradesman" so that "the stain of illegitimacy, unbleached by nobility or wealth," cannot ultimately be removed by class elevation (Em 462-3). On the other hand, there is Emma, famously "handsome, clever, and rich" (Em 37), whose social status is stable and secure throughout the novel. Robert Martin and George Knightley provide each of these heroines with a 'right' marriage plot which, like *Evelina*'s relationship with Lord Orville, is introduced early but overshadowed by other events until late in the novel.

As the initial 'positions' of the two women on what Beatrice Marie calls the "chess board on which the unattached characters are free to interchange themselves within a fixed number of positions" (Marie 1-2) indicate, however, that the doubling of
the heroine does not result in two equally prominent protagonists, either in social or in narrative terms. Throughout the novel, the social difference between Emma and Harriet, thoroughly re-established at the end of the novel, is a central aspect of interweaving, but also of establishing the difference between, Emma’s and Harriet’s stories of heterosexual courtship. The social and narrative hierarchy of these stories clearly places Emma in a dominant position. Although Harriet seems to have the making of the traditional disadvantaged ‘ugly ducking’ heroine, is relegated to the role of Emma’s sidekick and object of her manipulations. At the end of the novel, she simply returns to the obscurity from which she had emerged when Emma adopted her as an intimate friend, and preserves rather than elevates her social status by marrying a “respectable, intelligent gentleman-farmer” (Em 88).

It is thus not the right marriage plots which ensure the asymmetrical interweaving of the two heroines that renders the narrative of *Emma* dramatic and dynamic, but the wrong marriage plots that precede them. These wrong marriage plots provide a certain complex symmetry in which the same men appear to be potential suitors for both women from different vantage points. Marie describes the mechanism of this plot as a series of triangulations that involve, among others, Emma and Harriet, and, sequentially, their two ‘wrong’ partners, Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill (Marie, 1-6). Toward the end of the novel, in a last triangle, Harriet’s wrong marriage plot and Emma’s right one actually merge when Mr. Knightley turns out to be the object of both women’s affection. When the novel ends with three consecutive marriages, the total of actual marriages since the onset of the novel adds up to five, and the total of mismatches provides at least five more
possible ‘wrong’ couples. Even compared with Austen’s other novels, many of which feature the doubled heroine in the form of a sister (cf. Sense and Sensibility; Pride and Prejudice) or rival (cf. Northanger Abbey, Mansfield Park), the total number of matches and mismatches is high in Emma, and echoes—within the ‘closed system’ of the Austenian village society—the excesses of Evelina’s seduction plot.

Admittedly, Emma telescopes Evelina’s excessive sequence of assaults into a limited number of wrong plots, and into a very few dramatic encounters to preserve the sexual anxieties that surge up again and again in Evelina. Julia Prewitt Brown is thus right to say that Emma does not support the “impression of social irrationality, overworked variety, and exhaustive socialization” (and, as I would add, of narrative excess) that a mere list of the potential and actual couples creates (Brown in Bloom, Jane Austen 89). Instead, the excessive sequence of the seduction plot gets condensed and streamlined in what seems like a linear male narrative that simply changes its telos or direction several times. Nonetheless, the echoes of Evelina’s excess are most strikingly present in the most intense dramatic and anxiety-producing moment in Emma. Mr. Elton’s proposal.

This moment makes visible the double movement of desexualizing the heterosexual narrative by subsuming it altogether in the marriage plot, and preserving its narrative climax (with all the narrative problems that ensue) by retaining its patently sexual dynamics. On the one hand, the scene is a proposal scene, and not the sexual assault that Evelina is subject to when she is entrapped in a carriage with Sir Clement Willoughby just as Emma is with Mr. Elton. On the other hand, however, the effect of
the scene on Emma evokes Evelina’s sexual anxieties as much as does its overall staging (as an entrapment in a carriage, improperly isolated with a man).

When Emma inadvertently finds herself alone in a carriage with a man, she is somewhat suspicious of his intentions (having been alerted by Mr. John Knightley to Elton’s possible interest in herself that very same day). Although Elton’s intention is not the seduction that Sir Clement seems to have in mind, his behavior resembles Sir Clement’s: Emma finds “her hand seized—her attention demanded, and Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her” (Em 148). Elton speaks of “his ardent attachment and unequalled love and unexampled passion” (Em 148), and is not to be prevented from declaring his love. Elton here launches a simultaneously verbal and physical attack on Emma, which, although weaker than Sir Clement’s (as well as more honorable in its intentions), is just as grossly inappropriate from Emma’s point of view. Emma initially ascribes his behavior to his “drinking too much of Mr. Weston’s good wine” (Em 148), and as simply mistaken in its object, but soon realizes that Elton “had only drunk wine enough to elevate his spirits, not at all to confuse his intellects” (Em 149), and that he really means to propose to her and not to Harriet.

Like Burney’s heroine, Emma is, at least momentarily, “completely overpowered” by her feelings and not “immediately able to reply” (Em 150) until Mr. Elton’s insistence—again, physically manifest in his trying “to take her hand again” (Em 150)—forces her to refuse him explicitly. Because Elton insists that she has known about his feelings all along and has, indeed, given him “encouragement” (Em 151), Emma, like Evelina, is confronted with the idea that she herself may be to blame for this assault—an
idea that causes her numerous “unpleasant sensations” (Em 150), and later troubled reflections in her chamber, when she muses, sleepless like Evelina, about all the “pain and humiliation” the “wretched business” has caused (Em 153).

In its dramatic positioning and its external trappings, then, the climactic anxiety-ridden moment of Mr. Elton’s unwanted proposal still echoes—albeit momentarily and metaphorically—the potential of rape and violation, the anxiety about a possible defloration outside the confines of marriage. Although desexualized and ‘harmless’ in comparison with the corresponding carriage scene in Evelina, it is still a scene in which a man’s unwanted attentions are perceived as an assault and a threat. The unexpected, socially inappropriate proposal evokes the same sense of entrapment and helplessness for Emma that Evelina experiences when she is assaulted by Sir Clement; the carriage as the gothically claustrophobic and dangerously intimate site of the heterosexual encounter still evokes the sexual anxieties that were so central to the seduction plot in Evelina.

Although excess here intrudes into the plot of Emma only momentarily, it seems disproportionately and violently disruptive, all the more disruptive in an overall so ‘tame’ a plot.

At first sight, it seems that the carriage scene in Emma, despite its disruptive, startlingly sexual dynamics, is unlike Evelina’s because it is unique rather than one of a sequence of scenes—the finale of a linear (if ‘wrong’) marriage plot rather than part of an excessive seduction plot. However, although Elton’s suit comes to an end with Emma’s rejection—just as Emma’s plotting involving him and Harriet does—even this plot is, in certain ways, restaged within the familiar repetitive structure of the excessive plot.
Thus, the encounter with the gypsies (Em 329-333) is in some respects Harriet’s symmetrical counterpart to Emma’s carriage ride with Elton. Once more, the scene strongly resembles some scenes from Evelina’s seduction plot—it is a telescoped and desexualized version of Evelina’s traumatic encounters with aggressive men in Vauxhall and Marylebone. In Emma, the threat of robbery replaces the threat of rape, but Harriet is terrified and literally paralyzed quite like Evelina and (again like Evelina) in need of a male protector and rescuer. Thus, Harriet, pursued by a number of gypsy children, tries to escape them, “but her terror and her purse were too tempting, and she was followed, or rather surrounded, by the whole gang, demanding more” (Em 330). The echoes of the ‘gang rape’ scenes at Vauxhall and Marylebone are very strong here.

Frank Churchill figures as the Orvillean benevolent rescuer in this scene—but, importantly, only in Emma’s interpretation of the scene. The gypsy scene is thus less important as a climactic assault scene within Harriet’s own plot than as the crux of Emma’s plot for Harriet and therefore of Emma’s own story. It is Emma who reads it as a romantic “adventure...—a fine young man and a lovely young woman thrown together in such a way” (Em 331). Here as before, when she unsuccessfully tried to make the match between Harriet and Mr. Elton, Emma constructs her friend’s heterosexual narrative for her. That Emma is, in many respects, a creator and author, is, of course, not a new observation—W.J. Harvey’s compared her to a “bad artist” in 1961 (234), and Litvak echoes this description when he says she is “acting like a bad novelist” (127). Litvak’s argument, however, questions that Emma is indeed a bad novelist, or, morally speaking, ‘wrong’ in her assumptions about how to produce stories and subjectivities.
Regardless of the—easily punctured—judgment the novel’s authorial narrator seems to pass on Emma, it remains crucial that Emma stages herself, from the beginning of the novel, as the master narrator of the marriage plot. In the novel’s first chapter, she already claims to have “planned” and “made” (Em 43) the match between her governess and Mr. Weston, and is already resolved to “look about for a wife” for Mr. Elton (Em 44). As part of her self-ordained role as Harriet’s Pygmalion, who will “improve [Harriet], detach her from bad acquaintance, and introduce her to good society;... inform her opinions and her manners” (Em 54), she discourages Harriet from marryng Robert Martin (Em 59) and plans the socially advantageous matches for Harriet with Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill.

Emma’s role as the manipulator of another person’s heterosexual narrative ironically echoes the active plotting of the male seducer from Lovelace to Sir Clement. From an optimistic point of view, like Susan Morgan’s, such a shift in agency might be seen as a manifestation of Austen’s liberation of the genre from constrictions of women’s sexual and narrative passivity. But Austen’s own famous unease about Emma as a “heroine whom no one but myself will much like” (Austen-Leigh, 204) may indicate that she was highly aware of the relative inappropriacy of a heroine whose plotting seems aggressive like a male seducers’ and violates the prescription of female passivity more than a heroine who, as Morgan says of Northanger Abbey’s Catherine Morland, has the “creative power to make herself into something” (Morgan, “Sex” 352, my emphasis). Emma tries to make not herself but other people “into something,” namely, into courting couples, and the authoritative (but importantly not authorial) voice of Mr. Knightley condemns her matchmaking from the outset (Em 43).
The trajectory of the narrative eventually seems to condemn Emma’s female agency in matchmaking as inappropriately unfeminine and redirects her attention to herself and thence to her domestic life in marriage. The disastrous effects of Emma’s attempts at matchmaking, and the fact that none but the Weston-Taylor marriage in the novel are ‘planned’ by Emma, imply that Emma cannot and more importantly should not take the active role of the schemer and plotter of heterosexual unions. Ironically, however, Emma’s active scheming, although condemned by the novel’s ending, is also necessary to the narrative dynamics of the novel. Like the seducer, she is, in effect, the agent who brings about most of the novel’s events, and thus causes the narrative to progress—albeit in directions she does not anticipate. The novel’s narrative progress is dependent on her initiative to launch the wrong marriage plots which, in turn, lead to the further development of the right courtships and to what critics conventionally perceive as Emma’s education sentimentale or psychosexual Bildung—her increasing realization that her matchmaking is misguided and that she can neither fathom other characters’ feelings and desires nor her own.

From her first misguided plot on, Emma’s interpretations are flawed because she is so intent on creating her own narrative. Thus, Mr. Elton’s excessive admiration for Emma’s portrait of Harriet turns out to be admiration for the artist, not her object, and his charade is directed at Emma, not at Harriet. Emma’s interpretation of the gypsy scene is, of course, another misreading, since she assumes that Harriet has fallen in love with Frank because he came to her rescue (cf. Em 338). Harriet herself does not perceive her oddly un-Austenian adventure with the gypsies as central to her own story. The
heterosexual narrative she constructs for herself—a narrative as false and as fully based on misreadings as Emma’s—centers around yet another revision of Evelina’s assault scenes, namely the dance at the Crown Inn that evokes the balls and dances which find Evelina repeatedly mortified and anxious. Just as they had been in Evelina, dances in Austen’s novels are carefully choreographed to parallel heterosexual relationships, and, as Timothy Dow Adams argues, often reflect on the courtship of the protagonists the storyline and outcome of the marriage plot. Adams focuses altogether on the choreography of Knightley’s and Emma’s dancing (or not dancing) together in Emma (cf. Adams 60-1). the dance at the Crown Inn is as central to Harriet’s as it is to Emma’s story.

For Harriet, her rescue by Knightley from Elton’s almost direct refusal to dance with far outweighs in its importance the rescue by Frank from a potential assault and robbery. Given the importance of dance etiquette, in Evelina and Jane Austen’s novels alike, Elton’s rudeness in not dancing with Harriet when she is “the only young lady sitting down” (Em 323)23 is, indeed, an assault on good manners that is perceived as an outrage by all concerned. Knightley himself, in the conversation with Emma that leads up to their dancing together, is described “as warm in his reprobation of Mr Elton’s conduct” and speaks of the Elton’s intention of literally “wounding” both Harriet and Emma (Em 327). Harriet clearly perceives Elton’s insult, which matches Evelina’s experiences on the dance floor in rudeness, though not in direction (Evelina is of course, pressured to dance, while Harriet is overlooked; Evelina commits her own fauxpas while Harriet is the victim of a man’s). When, in the famously ambiguous conversation with
Emma, Harriet excitedly describes her own emotional state at the dance as "wretchedness" and Knightly's dancing with her as "an inexpressible obligation" (Em 338), she seems to echo Evelina's hyperbolic diction in the description of her embarrassment.

If the dance at the Crown Inn provides a (re)version of the anxiety-ridden heterosocial rescue scene for Harriet, it is also the occasion which is often seen as the beginning of the more active, openly heterosexual courtship between Knightley and Emma. It is thus a scene that, very importantly, prepares for the launching of the 'right' marriage plot in ways that still vaguely resemble the numerous early scenes in Evelina that make Orville her temporary partner in dance or conversation. Emma watches Knightley early on in this scene, before his dance with Harriet, and takes stock of his physical features in an almost Orville-like observer mode.

His tall, firm, upright figure, among the bulky forms and stooping shoulders of the elderly men, was such as Emma felt must draw every body's eyes; and excepting her own partner [Frank Churchill], there was not one among the whole row of young men who could be compared with him. (Em 323)

Importantly, the environment in which Knightley thus stands out so very phallically is not "the row of young men" that seem lined up here not only for the dance but for Emma's pleasure of choosing one of them, but that of the "the standers-by" who consist of "the husbands, and fathers" (EM. 323). And it is of course the roles of the "stander-by" and the "father" that Knightley has thus far primarily occupied. Like Orville
a suitor in the tradition of the Grandisonian mentor-lover (cf. Hunt, 21; Fergus, 75).

Knightley is here even more emphatically Emma’s metaphorical kinsman than Orville is Evelina’s. Below, I will discuss the dynamics that organize the now familiar equation of the familial and the heterosexual relationship in *Emma*. In the context of the progress of the ‘right’ marriage plot, what is crucial about this scene (and about Emma’s later reference to him and her as “brother and sister” Em 328) is that it marks Emma’s awareness of Knightley’s physical presence, of his existence as a potential heterosexual partner. Not in itself a climactic moment, the dance in which the Crown Inn chapter culminates thus provides a choreographic prelude for the marriage plot that will eventually emerge as the narrative of Emma the character and *Emma* the novel.

Importantly, it takes Emma’s desire for Knightley to launch the courtship plot in the scene at the Crown Inn—Knightley’s own desire for her is already in place, as the reader finds out later when Knightley confesses to Emma that he has “been in love with you ever you were thirteen at least” (Em 445). Indeed, Emma’s agency in her own courtship plot (and not only in those she fabricates for Harriet) is very much implicit in her unconventionally active role in bringing about the dance with Mr. Knightley at the end of the scene. “In effect, Emma asks Mr. Knightley to dance” (Adams 61), as Adams puts it—against a ballroom etiquette that, as Evelina had to learn, does not even allow the limited control of refusing to dance with someone without the excuse of a pre-engagement.

While Emma registers Knightley’s physicality at the Crown Inn ball, it is, of course. Emma’s realization that she is in love with him that is usually perceived as the
pivotal moment of both her emotional *Bildung* and her marriage plot. This realization, which parallels Evelina’s shock at her discovery of Orville’s seeming involvement in the seduction plot, is as much a displacement—internalized and psychologized—of the defloration as is the later proposal scene between Knightley and Emma. The realization that she herself desires Knightley is a moment of penetration. Emma’s mind becomes the virginal body invaded by a truth figured as a male lover.25 Indeed, the imagery employed throughout this scene constantly minglesthe abstract with the emphatically physical.

Thus, Emma’s mind, “opening to suspicion,” is seen moving toward the truth with “rapid progress”: “She touched—she admitted—she acknowledged the whole truth” which then penetrates her. “It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr Knightley must marry no one but herself!” (Em 398).26 This climactic moment of self-knowledge is the ultimate internalizing and psychologizing of the moment of defloration. Despite such internalization, however, it is consistently troped in physical terms; Emma is inwardly “struck...with dreadful force” by the reevaluation of her own past behavior(Em 398); she needs to conceal her “tremblings” caused by “such a confusion of sudden and perplexing emotions” (Em 399).

As a pivotal scene the dynamics of which closely resemble those of the defloration scene, Emma’s moment of self-discovery also brings about the rewriting of her own heterosexual narrative, a rewriting troped as an attempt to “thoroughly understand her own heart” (Em 401). Just like a scene of literal defloration, the revelation of Emma’s feelings radically changes the trajectory of her life and her narrative. Thus. her earlier feelings for Frank now appear as a “delusion”—“she had
never really cared for Frank Churchill,” and only “her affection for Mr Knightley” seems valid (Em 402). But not only her feelings for Frank, but also her earlier reaction to Mrs. Weston’s suggestion that Knightley might be interested in marrying Jane needs to be reinterpreted. Her indignant rejection was then couched in terms of social inequality and of the protection of family interests; Emma had argued “Mr Knightley must not marry!—You would not have little Henry cut out from Donwell?.... I cannot at all consent to Mr. Knightley’s marrying” (Em 232), and cited the “imprudence” of the match as an argument against it (Em 233).

After Emma has discovered that she is in love with Knightley and that Knightley reciprocates her feelings, she finds “amusement in detecting the real cause of that violent dislike of Mr. Knightley’s marrying Jane Fairfax, or any body else, which at the time she had wholly imputed to the amiable solicitude of the sister and aunt” (Em 434). Emma herself thus attributes her vehemence to sexual jealousy, rather than kinship, inheritance lines or the concern for preserving family property. The possibility of simply shifting the interpretation of her reaction from a familial to a heterosexual one again points to the problematic proximity and possible collapse of the two categories.

Emma’s rewriting of her heterosexual narrative is one prerequisite for the final culmination of the marriage plot between Knightley and Emma in the proposal scene. The other prerequisite is that Knightley become aware of Emma’s revision. When he rushes to Emma’s side to offer brotherly and fatherly consolation after hearing about Frank Churchill’s secret engagement and finds out that Emma has “never been at all attached” to Frank Churchill (Em 414), he can make his own marriage plot in what is
figured as a spontaneous act, "the work of the moment, the immediate effect of what he heard" (Em 419). While this proposal scene externalizes, as an actual interaction between a man and a woman, the deflorative moment that is so completely internalized in Emma’s moment of self-discovery, it is, ironically, also a more desexualized and less emphatically physical scene than the self-realization scene that precedes and prepares it. Absence, in the form of silence and unnarratibility, is thus a prominent feature in the proposal scene that is in striking contrast with the detailed and almost meticulous rendering, in free indirect discourse, of Emma’s discovery of her love for Mr. Knightley.

In comparison with other Austenian proposal scenes, the scene between Knightley and Emma is, of course, rather elaborate. Austen’s novels tend to culminate in absent proposals that are summarized in a distancing report. Thus, Henry Tilney’s proposal to Catherine in Northanger Abbey is famously glossed over in the narrator’s indirections and passive constructions (NA 211), neither of the two sisters’ proposal scenes in Sense and Sensibility are described in detail, and even Pride and Prejudice, with its climactic scene of Darcy’s ill-timed declaration of his love for Elizabeth, does not include a close-up of either Darcy’s or Bingley’s actual proposal. William Magee and Janis Stout sum up the narrative frustration of many readers—Magee when he speaks of the lack of proposals in Sense and Sensibility as "disappointing" (200). and Stout when she describes the reader’s sense that “One follows... a series of lengthy ‘verbatim’ conversations only to arrive at the culminating moment and find nearly a blank” (316). Both Janis Stout and Kathleen Lundeen have attempted to explain this “blank”—the lack of the typically engaging lively narrative and of dramatic dialogue at these climactic points. Stout argues that Austen’s
distancing technique. “thematicall[y] right” but “dramatically disappointing,” is “emotionally subtle” (Stout 317) and ultimately reflects the limitations of language itself to express the “strong emotion” involved in those scenes (320). Lundeen attempts to revise Stout’s reading by arguing that the betrothal scenes are, indeed, only anticlimactic when the true climax of the relationship is located elsewhere.

While both Stout’s and Lundeen’s argument focus on making the unnarrated proposal scene fit into the overall narrative trajectory, I would, of course, argue that it is the very disruptiveness of the narrator’s sudden refusal to give the reader access to the climactic scene that makes these proposal scenes fascinating rather than disappointing. Austen’s seeming insistence that these scenes are ultimately unnarratable has indeed, as Stout argues, to do with “strong emotion”—but in a sense that makes gender a much more crucial element than either Stout or Lundeen would have it. As a displaced deflation scene, the proposal scene is charged with sexual connotations that have become problematic within the framework of the desexualized marriage plot. The question is, again and again, how to narrate such a scene without implicating the heroine. in any active sense. in the sexual initiation that the proposal anticipates. The problem is obviated when, as in Northanger Abbey, there is an unfilled, unspoken gap between Henry’s “purpose... to explain himself” and, immediately following, the fait accompli of the proposal “before they reached Mr. Allen’s grounds” (NA 211). The unnarrated proposal scene excludes and excuses Catherine from having to speak, having to act; any admission for a sexual interest, an emotional response, is avoided by the narrator’s distancing summary. Interestingly, however, the narrator implies that Catherine herself
desires and experiences pleasurable excess where the reader only gets absence—she thinks that the proposal which is so blatantly missing from the narrative, cannot "be repeated too often" (NA 211). It is the desire for excess, censored and curbed by the satirical narrator, that matches much better Catherine's "glowing cheek and brightened eye" in anticipation of the proposal, and her unconventionality, so famously emphasized by the narrator, in falling in love before she is proposed to (cf. NA 27).

Emma, of course, like Catherine, becomes aware of her own desire for her future husband before his love is declared, and, as in Northanger Abbey some fifteen years earlier, Austen makes the proposal scene an instance in which narrative absence recuperates some, but ultimately not all, of the propriety and decorum of a sexually passive, silent heroine. Thus, the scene between her and Knightley famously culminates in the narrator's refusal to answer the question "What did she say?" in response to Knightley's declaration of his love: "Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does."—She said enough to show there need not be despair—and to invite him to say more himself" (Em 418). If Emma's femininely passive "invitation" to Knightley is constructed as the proper, conventional, ladylike response, the narrator's refusal to provide details on the exact answer replicates this feminine silence and represents it in the narrative structure. But the absence of Emma's and the narrator's speech at this moment of the unnarrated response is undercut; the narrative environment works against the effect of reducing Emma to the proper lady, and the relationship between Knightley and Emma as a properly gendered, hierarchical one. This undermining is achieved through the
changing agency not only in speaking, but also in regulating who speaks and who does not in the course of the scene.

The proposal scene begins with Emma speaking, at great length, about another absence—her lack of attachment to Frank—while Knightley “listen[s] in perfect silence” even when Emma “wishes him to speak” (Em 414) and “hope[s] for an answer—for a few words” (Em 415). Then, when Knightley does speak, and attempts to “tell what you will not ask, though I may wish it unsaid the next moment” (EM 416), Emma refuses to hear him, expecting a confession of his love for Harriet (“don’t speak it, don’t speak it,” Em 416). When she changes her mind and Knightley confesses his love, she is in turn silent, “overpowered,” and Knightley becomes the one to regulate speech. First, he asks for “no more” than silence (“You are...absolutely silent! at present I ask no more,” Em 417), and then, eventually, “to hear, once to hear your voice” (Em 417). But while Knightley thus eventually occupies the role of the speaker in the scene (his plea to hear her voice is the last instance of direct speech in the chapter), his own language is consistently hesitant throughout the scene. As Lundeen points out, he speaks in “a series of fragmented non sequiturs” (Lundeen 70) and stops repeatedly in mid-sentence. His speech is thus emphatically not the glib rhetoric of the overexcited Elton in the carriage, whom Emma had “tried to stop... but vainly” (Em 149). Where Elton “would go on, and say it all” (Em 149) against Emma’s vehement resistance, Knightley hesitates and says of himself: “I cannot make speeches.... If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more” (Em 417).
Not being too forward and too overpowering verbally or physically underscores Knightley's gentle and domesticated but authoritative masculinity as the right suitor. Likewise, the partial narration—the ultimate refusal to report what happens after Knightley pleads to hear Emma's voice—indicates that this is, indeed, the proper proposal scene, belonging to the right marriage plot. The wrong proposal, by contrast, can be described in much detail; indeed, the narrative gap in the right proposal scene is juxtaposed with Emma's being practically forced to give an answer to Mr. Elton (Em 151).27 That the Austenian right marriage plot cannot, indeed, be organized in scenes of passionate excitement between heterosexual lovers (displaced though they may be into proposal scenes) is reinforced by yet one more gap in the narrative. If Knightley's declaration of his love does not allow for Emma's answer, his actual proposal of marriage, of a possible wedding, is even more sketchy. It is only indirectly referred to, in the passive voice, as a "subject" that Knightley wishes to address: "The subject followed: it was in plain, unaffected, gentleman-like English, such as Mr Knightley used even to the woman he was in love with" (Em 432).

Interestingly, the question of practical 'implementation,' as it were, of marriage is not, as in Pamela and Evelina alike, an embarrassing one; wishing to postpone the wedding and thus the literal defloration, as both Pamela and Evelina did, is no longer the heroine's main concern in Emma. Rather, the question is one of familial and thus ultimately social feasibility, just as the heterosexual union itself qua marriage is troped as a familial and social bond, not primarily a sexual one. Knightley needs to know "how to be able to ask her to marry him, without attacking the happiness of her father" (Em 432).
The double solution to this problem—Knightley’s offer to join father and daughter at Hartfield in a familial *menage à trois*, and the appearance of the poultry thief that makes Knightley’s protection desirable to Mr. Woodhouse—reinforces the primacy of the social unit of the family as well as the reduplication of the father in the husband. The ending of the novel makes clear that the ‘right’ kind of marriage in *Emma* is the blending of the couple with its society around it, rather than its romantic isolation *qua* couple. The brief description of the wedding—desirable in its very anti-climacticity, it its lack of splendor and exceptionality, in its being “very much like other weddings” (Em 464) establishes narrative equilibrium and a heterosexual harmony that socially excludes (i.e. Mrs. Elton) as much as it includes (“the small band of true friends” Em 465) in “the perfect happiness of the union” (Em 465) of the right marriage plot.

   But if the union of Knightley and Emma includes the “the small band of true friends” who witness the wedding, it also includes, much more permanently and much more problematically so, Emma’s father as a member of the marriage as well as of the wedding. Emma may be said to gain a second father, given Knightley’s fatherly behavior, which in problematic but familiar ways is interwoven in *Emma* with his status as her suitor and lover. In calling Knightley fatherly, I tend to side with those critics who call Knightley a father figure (Magee 205), as opposed to those who describe his relationship to Emma as brotherly or fraternal (cf. Hudson 50-52; Fergus 75). I would argue, once more, however, that the distinction between brother and father is a fragile one that is even less crucial to *Emma* than it had been to *Evelina*. The protective authority of both brother and father is what serves as the model for the new, desexualized, domesticated
lover that Knightley so obviously represents. Knightley’s long-standing friendship with the family, his status as the brother of Isabella’s husband (whom Emma refers to as “brother.” a common shortcut for “brother-in-law.” cf. Hudson 11) make him almost Emma’s relative. Sixteen years older than Emma (cf. Em 21: 41) and thus just about old enough to be her father, he has known her since she was born (Em 122), and functions as a father-figure from the onset of the novel.

Knightley is thus “one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them” (Em 42), while her “most affectionate, indulgent father” (Em 37) can see no wrong in his daughter’s behavior. Knightley displays a fatherly worry about Emma’s being spoilt in his conversation with Mrs. Weston (Em 67-69), often openly disagrees with her, and occasionally criticizes her harshly. He is especially critical when she makes Harriet refuse Robert Martin (Em 87-92) and after she has tactlessly insulted Miss Bates (Em 367-69), and altogether stages himself as her “friend by very faithful counsel” (Em 368). Knightley’s position as fatherly mentor is not, however, unmitigatedly upheld; his jealousy of Frank Churchill shows him to be a partial observer and advisor (Orville’s jealous suspicion of Mr. Macartney may have provided a model here). Furthermore, when Emma comes to agree completely with his position by the end of the novel, this agreement comes, ironically, at a point when he himself has begun to doubt whether his fatherly influence has had any benevolent effect on Emma (Em 444-5).

I argued earlier that Orville’s education of Evelina, and her admiration for him, are a continuation of Villars’ mentoring and Evelina’s admiration for her foster father.
Knightley, by contrast, does not figure as such a continuation, but instead as a corrective to Emma’s father. Knightley is the right father to Mr. Woodhouse’s wrong father. But the wrong father is here no longer the irresponsible rake and possible sexual predator, as was Sir John Belmont. Neither is he the tyrant who forces an advantageous marriage on his daughter, as did Clarissa’s father and his countless predecessors (in Haywood’s novels and novellas, for example). Interestingly, Mr. Woodhouse’s flaws as a father originate precisely in the construction of the sentimental father as gentle, powerless, and marginalized. Mr. Woodhouse thus appears as a grotesque, exaggerated version of Mr. Villars and of his forerunner of sorts, Pamela’s Mr. Andrews. Ironically, Mr. Woodhouse’s very helplessness and dependence turns him into a new type of tyrant. Ronald Blythe, who seems almost indignant in his rejection of the “selfish” Mr. Woodhouse, observes that Emma’s father, “so wrongly and oddly regarded as an old pet by generations of readers, is actually a menace” (Em 15; cf. Castle, “Introduction,” xxv, who speaks of him as a “monster”). The dark side of the sentimental father figure, doting on his daughter as she does on him, gentle and loving, is thus the selfish, possessive father who, not unlike Mr. Harlowe in Clarissa, has the power to entrap Emma at home in what Gloria Gross calls “a kind of ritualized imprisonment” (Gross 22; cf. also Magee 206, who refers to Emma’s “childhood home” as “stultifying”).

Emma’s relationship with her father thus emphasizes more than Evelina’s with Mr. Villars how the daughter’s link to a gentle father can be simultaneously rewarding and extremely constricting. On the one hand, Emma bask in his uncritical admiration of everything she does, causing her to claim that “never, never could I expect to be so truly
beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man’s eyes as I am in my father’s” (Em 109). On the other, he ties her to his own life and his home to such an extreme degree Emma feels that she can never leave him, even at the cost of not marrying during his lifetime. Although his motivation for keeping Emma at his side is not infused with the semi-incestuous sentimental eroticism that had characterized Evelina’s relationship with her foster-father, his sheer possessiveness can be read as extreme sexual jealousy. His wish to have Emma remain single so that she can stay with him is, indeed, extended to her sister, whose “attachment to her husband” (Em 105) causes him discomfort—and generically to all new marriages from Miss Taylor’s on.

As a father who is unwilling to act his part in the homosocial transfer of the daughter to her husband, Mr Woodhouse potentially provides a massive obstacle to his younger daughter’s heterosexual narrative. His very passivity, his absence or marginalized presence during most heterosocial events of the novel, prevents him from acting to prevent marriage, and thus makes him a much less an agent qua tyrant than, say, Northanger Abbey’s General Tilney, or even Mr. Elliot in Persuasion. However, despite his inefficiency and eventual failure to keep Emma altogether to himself, it is crucial that Emma never leaves him. Although she does not remain single partly because of her “fixed determination never to leave her father” (Em 268, cf. 422, 433), the actual marriage to Mr. Knightley can only take place because of his unconventional offer to move to Hartfield instead of having her join him at Donwell Abbey.

Even if the sexual tensions that might be caused by such a permanent arrangement cannot be expressed in the novel, Emma is highly aware of the generosity of Knightley’s
offer to share Emma rather than to take her over from her father: “in quitting Donwell, he
must be sacrificing a great deal of independence of hours and habits... there would be
much, very much to be borne with” (Em .433). In Emma, the husband does thus not.
then, replace the father in the scenario at the end of the novel—he becomes an addition.
Coexistent with the father as a corrective, a positive foil for Mr. Woodhouse’s possessive
and babyfied paternity (cf. Gross. 23, Castle, “Introduction” xxv. and Blythe, Em 15 for
Mr. Woodhouse’s status as a child), Knightley also has to be subordinate to this bad
father(-in-law), “sacrificing... his habits” and adjusting his own life to that of the gentle,
meek tyrant. The marriage between Knightley and Emma thus always includes Mr.
Woodhouse as a third. Evelina’s temporary honeymoon with father and husband, the trip
to Berry Hill and into “the arms of the best of men,” is thus recast in Emma as permanent,
as a living together of father, daughter and husband for her father’s lifetime.

*

Perhaps Jane Austen’s marriage-plot novels are, as so many critics have claimed,
the most desexualized, the most ‘sexless’ stories of heterosexuality in the history of the
novel (Henry James would then come in at a close second). They certainly succeed in
excluding sex as an extramarital, premarital, or postmarital plot in ways that Evelina
never does. despite its grandiose celebration of the marriage plot (and the family
romance) in the final pages of the novel. My reading of Emma shows, however, that even
this most desexualized, seemingly sexless, narrative cannot but integrate the disruptively
sexual in its most climactic scenes. By subsuming even these most disruptive, most
excess- or absence-ridden scenes within the marriage plot. Austen indeed prepares the
ground for the reintroduction of the sexual, and in particular of sexual excess, into an
ostensibly desexualized plot. In Austen, the marriage plot still appears as a restrained and
mercilessly teleological narrative that deletes the ‘wrong’ possibilities of the marriage
plot along the way to a glorious finale that flanks the union of Knightley with Emma with
two other ‘right’ marriages. But even in the most proper and marriage-obsessed Victorian
novels—novels without fallen women, adulterous wives or husbands, or even coquettish
jilts—this marriage plot can suddenly turn into an endless and excessive series of
climactic proposal scenes, never quite to be contained in a teleological structure that ever
truly puts a stop to the heroine’s desire to always get proposed to, get married, and
thereby have a story, at least for a while. It is this plotting of marriage to excess, the
resexualization of the ostensibly tamed and domesticated marriage plot that I see at work
in the novels that I propose to read in my next and final chapter, in Mrs. Oliphant’s Miss
Marjoribanks and Trollope’s Phineas Finn.
Endnotes

1 This excludes, in many ways, the Gothic Novel, which also inevitably features marriage plots. I agree with the numerous feminist critics who have recently argued that the Gothic, especially in its more popular feminocentric variant à la Ann Radcliffe and Charlotte Smith, provides a crucial forum to address women’s anxieties about socio-sexual imprisonment in the domestic sphere by displacing them into exotic and ‘unrealistic’ but therefore expressible fears that revolve around literal entrapment in dungeons, murderers, and supernatural agents. But I would argue that the Gothic, by providing such a forum, is linked to the emphatic un-Gothic domestic marriage-plot novel as an alternative but related sub-genre of the feminocentric novel. Austen’s Northanger Abbey, with its oscillation between satirizing the Gothic and depicting justifiable anxiety about the ostensibly harmless ‘real world’ demonstrates this link more than any other novel.

2 Cf. especially the very meticulous distinctions between proper and improper heterosexual privacy in Austen, which, as Lundeen implies without further analysis, are troped as distinctions between outdoor and indoor encounters.

3 Even Boone, who in his introduction argues with Bakhtin that the novel’s open form gives it the potential to undercut a dominant ideology (4), eventually locates affirmative and subversive variants of the marriage plot in individual novels and authors. His choice of novels implies for the genre, that “countertradition” is predicated on a fully established “tradition” in that “the hegemony of the novelistic marriage tradition” is not disturbed until “the fertile period of discontent extending from approximately 1840 to 1930” (20).

4 In reading these two interacting and competing plots, I have chosen to refer to them as marriage plot and seduction plot with the understanding that seduction, sexual assault and rape narrative collapse into one category of stories about male-identified sexual danger, as they do in Clarissa.

5 Interestingly, it is also possible to see such a collapse in Clarissa, based on a radically different pre-“companionate marriage” and pre-sentimental conception of both the lover and the kinsman. Thus, as rake and libertine, Lovelace replicates the tyranny and physical violence of both Mr. Harlowe and James Harlowe junior.

6 Indeed, Evelina’s social position on the marriage market makes her a much more likely victim of seduction than a candidate for a prosperous marriage. Like the heroines of countless eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, she is inadequately protected against men’s attempts to assault and seduce her because she has no parents to watch over her—her mother died in childbirth, her foster-father in Berry Hill is far away, and her biological father Sir John Belmont does not acknowledge her existence until the end of the novel. Evelina thus appears on the scene as “a girl of obscure birth, whose only dowry is her beauty” (Ev 347). Because her status as the legitimate but unacknowledged
daughter of Sir John Belmont is not known to any but her closest friends. The lower-class origins of her grandmother and the Braghtons merely reinforce potential suitors’ doubts about her. As Lady Howard points out to Mr. Villars, Evelina might have had “splendid offers” in London, “had there not seemed to be some mystery concerning her birth” (Ev 124). Her dubious and mysterious origins make her ineligible for honorable suitors, and instead attract seducers, who see her as easy prey.

Interestingly, those critics who discuss plot, like Martha Brown and, to a certain extent, Patricia Meyer Spacks, are the ones who are most likely to dismiss the subversive elements in Evelina altogether. For Spacks, “rage and aggression” in the novel are “strictly compartmentalized” (Desire and Truth 140), whereas Brown dismisses Burney’s “feminism” altogether with the argument that her novels are archetypal quest romances that follow an essentially gender-neutral pattern.

Cf. Mary Anne Doody’s note on this particular passage in the Penguin edition of Evelina: “This is a sentiment repeated in many conduct books of the period. To Pope and others writing earlier in the century... the brittleness of female chastity is a subject, but the conduct books emphasize the difficulty of even a virtuous woman keeping her reputation for chastity intact” (n. 28, 475). I would argue that the two collapse here before the almost complete displacement of the former by the latter takes place—in Austen, who (as Doody notes) famously but ironically echoes this very passage in Mary’s sanctimonious lecture on female reputation in Pride and Prejudice (184).

As Susan Staves notes, Evelina’s plea is not actually about murder; however, the virginal innocence of Evelina’s “vocabulary can hardly include terms directly descriptive of sexual assault and rape.” (371). Although Staves does not discuss it in terms of a historical shift in the construction of female knowledge about sexuality (a crucial facet of the desexualization and domestication of femininity), she explicitly compares Evelina’s lack of words with the “clearer notions” that the abducted Harriet Byron has of her fate in Sir Charles Grandison. Clarissa and Pamela are, of course, equally aware and expressive of the sexual nature of Lovelace’s and Mr. B’s threats, as I have argued in Chapter 2.

Evelina’s class-consciousness have been most extensively discussed by Lowder Newton and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, who discusses Evelina’s “phobic” reaction to the Braghtons in the visit to the opera in “. Dowling, in his analysis of what he calls the “genealogy of literary shame” from Burney to Austen also touches upon class issues.

My focus on father-daughter relationships marginalizes the link between brother and sister that Glenda Hudson discusses briefly for Burney, and at length for Jane Austen. Both Evelina and Emma construct the link between kinsman and lover via the brother as well as the father. Evelina does so through the convoluted subplot that involves Macartney, his half-sister Evelina, and his apparent sister and later bride who turns out to be the cuckoo in Belmont’s nest. Burney solidifies this link not only by way of Orville’s jealous suspicions of Macartney, but also by Orville’s eagerness to be Evelina’s figurative protective brother (cf. Ev 314, 315, 318). Emma establishes this link
less emphatically, via the figure of the brother-in-law (strictly speaking, John Knightley, and thus indirectly his older brother George), especially in the famous conversation that precedes Emma’s first dance with Knightley (Em 328). However, I would argue that this omission is justified because the father-daughter and the brother-sister link are, in both novels, figured as basically the same familial relationship. Unlike Hudson, I do not see the brother-sister analogies in Evelina (or Emma) as based on the notion of sibling equality that are back-projections from Romantic portrayal of brother-sister erotics. Rather, I would argue that brother and father alike are here figures of gentle authority and power who are equally in charge of their kinswoman’s life—just as their predecessors and anti-figures, Mr. Harlowe and his son in Clarissa, equally usurp and abuse their authority over Clarissa.

12 Orville declares his love on the day when Evelina receives Villars’ letter advising her to confront Sir John; Evelina’s chaperone Mrs Selwyn visits the skeptical Sir John on the very day that Orville officially asks her for Evelina’s hand; and Orville awaits Evelina in the parlor of Sir John’s house after her second and last encounter with her father.

13 Cf. Doody, “Jane Austen’s Reading,” in Gray’s Jane Austen Companion, 357-358, who cites passages in Austen’s letters. Cf. also the references to Burney’s Cecilia and Camilla in Northanger Abbey, 34, or the allusion to Evelina in Mary’s reputation speech in Pride and Prejudice, 184.

14 In an 1843 review of the Diary and Letters of Mme d’Arblay in the Edinburgh Review, Macaulay writers that “we owe to [Burney] no only Evelina, Cecilia and Camilla, but also Mansfield Park…” (570). Among the recent dissertations that directly compare Burney and Austen are, for example, those by Amy Pawl, Audrey Bilger, Judy Olson, Barbara Galvin, and Susan Greenfield. Cf. also the essays by Jerry Beasley (“Fanny Burney and Jane Austen”) and Catherine Parke, specifically on Evelina and Emma.

15 Interestingly, a study of The Woman novelists by R. Brimley Johnson dating back to 1919 includes a chapter on “Parallel Passages” (117-130) between Austen and Burney. The noted plot parallels here concern primarily Cecilia and Pride and Prejudice, almost all noted “passages” concern the recycling of certain characters and character constellations.

16 Austen’s novels feature, arguably, watered-down variants of the rake figure—for example Frank Churchill in Emma, Willoughby (Sir Clement’s namesake) in Sense and Sensibility, Wickham in Pride and Prejudice, or Henry Crawford in Mansfield Park.

17 To provide just one example here: Northanger Abbey is, of course, full of subsequently deflated scenes of gothic anxiety; however, a thoroughly anti-gothic scene that most immediately evokes Evelina’s park scenes is, interestingly, the scene where the Thorpes and James try to prevent Catherine from talking to the Tilneys (NA 89-90).
It seems to me that Nicholas Preus overemphasizes the presence of the literally sexual in his reading of the relationship; he argues that Jane's protracted and repeated illnesses ever since the engagement took place indicate her sexual involvement with Frank (cf. esp. 205-09)

Since I will continue to use the shortcuts of 'right' and 'wrong' for the two types of marriage plots in Emma, it needs to be stressed that these labels are used with reference to the teleology of the novel: the 'right' partners are the ones who do in fact get married by the end of the novel. Although this teleology does, of course, have enormous ideological implications for the 'right' and 'wrong' partners in matrimony, especially concerning class equilibrium in Emma, I do not wish to imply that 'right' and 'wrong' imply any moral evaluation on my part. Such an assessment would always be subject to reversion in terms of narrative and moral causality: the nonproductive matches can, after all, be said to me much more central to Emma's Bildung than her match with Knightley, and are certainly more responsible for the dramatic progress of the novel. On the somewhat correlated reversibility of "right" and "wrong" with respect to Knightley's versus Emma's ideas of subjectivity, see Litvak, "Reading Characters," 121.

Marie argues that this triangulation of "imitative desire," as she calls it (1), eventually serves to destroy "the idea of absolute social hierarchy"(7). I find her analysis of this function of Emma's plot problematic with view to the novel's ending. Eventually, the double right marriage plot serves to divide Emma from her social inferior Harriet at the end of the novel, and re-establishes a social equilibrium that matches every woman but Jane Fairfax with her social equal. (Jane is, in a way, a remnant of the Pamela and Evelina tradition of social elevation through marriage, but thoroughly marginalized by the end of the novel because of the inappropriacy of her secret engagement with Frank.)

Julia Prewitt Brown counts six couples, including the Dixons, it seems; she also lists seven possible couples, including Emma's speculations about Jane and Mr. Dixon as well as Jane and Mr. Knightley ("Civilization," in Bloom, Jane Austen 89).

Although I will not discuss this scene in detail here, Emma's own sexual and social misconduct during the Box Hill episode could also be seen as such a restaging of the assault scene, which would then underscore the gender reversal that renders Emma an aggressive, masculinized seducer or at least co-conspirator (of the flirtatious Frank) and assaulter (of the innocent Miss Bates).

Mary Millard points out that Elton indeed commits a double fauxpas by refusing to dance with Harriet and then suggesting that Mrs. Weston dance with him, because she is seven months pregnant at the time (Millard 14). For the chronology of Mrs. Weston's pregnancy and its importance for the presence of the sexual in the novel, see also Preus 208.

Emma seems highly aware of both their close if figurative kinship and the contradiction, if not inappropriacy, of the combination of such kinship with the explicitly
heterosexual/social activity of dancing when she explicitly states (and Knightley emphatically agrees), in the famous passage at the end of the Crown Inn chapter, that they “are not really so much brother and sister as to make [dancing together] at all improper” (Em 328).

25 As Preus points out, “sex is located at once as the central truth of self and society as well as the truth of the history of Emma” in the novel (Preus 196, cf. also 211); but I would add that his Foucauldian concept of “individual sexuality as the location of the truth of the self” (198) needs to be amended to include gender. In the self-realization scene, the truth of Emma’s desire is figured as male, and signals her acceptance of a construction of heterosexuality that, as I have argued earlier, tropes female sexuality as always measured against, and always receptive and accepting of, legitimate male sexual desire.

26 Interestingly, another rephrasing of this realization echoes Emma’s earlier statement about her father. When Emma reflects, newly, about “how much of her happiness depended on being first with Mr. Knightley, first in interest and affection” (Em 404), the phrase echoes her earlier realization that she can never be “so always first and always right in any man’s eyes as I am in my father’s” (Em 109, my emphasis).

27 Stout notes the difference between the unnarrated and narrated proposal scenes (her examples include Mr. Collins’ proposal and also Darcy’s first declaration to Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice as well as a brief mention of Mr. Elton’s proposal, 324). But while she reads these scenes as narratable because the suitors are subject to satire, and their language hypocritical, Stout does not distinguish what I would term ‘wrong’ proposal scenes from ‘right’ ones, and does not discuss the suitor’s verbal violations on which all of these narrated proposals are predicated.

28 Alex Page collapses the two entirely by describing Knightley as “a father or older brother” (568). See note 11 on my disagreement with Hudson on the distinction between father-daughter and brother-sister incest. By reading Knightley exclusively as “an elder brother or guardian” when she discusses Emma, Hudson omits any discussion of Mr. Woodhouse, except to mention his “ineptitude” in passing (101).

29 Joseph Litvak’s refreshing reversal of the conventional reading of Emma’s and Knightley’s ‘wrong’ and ‘right’ concepts of subjectivity and interiority seems to me to take its starting point here.
Chapter 4:

Excess and Absence Revisited: Marriage, Politics and Family in Phineas

Finn and Miss Marjoribanks

In the preceding chapter, I have argued that the Austenian marriage plot is not quite as sexless, domesticated and ‘streamlined’ as it seems at first sight. However, compared with the variations on the heterosexual narrative presented in Mrs. Oliphant’s Miss Marjoribanks (1866) and Anthony Trollope’s Phineas Finn (1869), the marriage plot of Emma appears extremely desexualized and linear. I pair these two mid-Victorian novels here because they are strikingly similar in their representation of what I perceive as a two-pronged, simultaneously internal and external disintegration of the marriage plot. Internally, this disintegration occurs when the climactic proposal scene is multiplied to excess while simultaneously—in each multiplied instance—becoming a scene marked by absence, interruption, and disruption. Externally, the marriage plot is undermined when its ostensible opposite, a ‘male’ public and political narrative, is constructed as a heterosexual plot.

The aggressive reintroduction of excess and absence into the marriage plot dismantles this plot because their return brings back to the surface the more ‘repressed’ sexual component of the heterosexual narrative by way of the story’s narrative dynamics. But it is perhaps the external reduplication of the heterosexual plot qua political plot that most radically challenges the conventions of sexuality and gender associated with the marriage plot. The construction of a political narrative as heterosexual plot radically
questions the separability of gendered plots, and thus reverses the gender connotations of
certain behaviors and roles within heterosexual and political narrative alike. Thus, *Miss
Marjoribanks* presents a masculinized heroine who rules metaphorically over her
hometown Carlingford and puts herself in charge of a political campaign. Conversely,
the male protagonist of *Phineas Finn* is feminized and, especially in his political
narrative, troped as a fallen woman, a seduced innocent who falls and is then reformed. It
is, of course, the male protagonist’s striking figuration as a woman, in particular through
his ostensibly ‘male’ narrative of a public, political career, that allows me to read *Phineas
Finn* as a feminocentric novel against the hero’s literal gender.

In my reading of the two novels, I will trace how the multiple-proposal, multiple-
suitor marriage plot and the heterosexualized political plot each radically destabilize the
gender conventions of the heterosexual story. But I do not intend merely to add ‘politics’
in the form of the political plot and a discourse of women’s political empowerment to my
exploration of narrative representation of heterosexual relationships. I argue that the
negotiations between the marriage plot and the political plot ultimately result in a new
twist to the family narrative that is so crucially entangled with the marriage plot, as I have
argued in Chapter 3. Each separate reading will thus end with a refocus on the role of the
family narrative, which functions in each novel as a recuperative force through which
closure is achieved. Lucilla Marjoribanks’ marriage to her cousin Tom, and Phineas
Finn’s marriage to Mary Flood Jones, who represents a figurative national family of his
‘fatherland’ Ireland, seem to put a stop to the destabilization of the marriage plot itself
and of the gendered boundaries that separate it from the political plot. However, the
recuperative power of the familial is never firmly in place in either novel. While the incestuous dimension that is still prominent in *Evelina* and *Emma* is aggressively written out of the familial plot here, this plot has also lost the power to provide closure. Lucilla continues to ‘rule’ politically and socially despite her marriage, while the marriage-plot ending of Phineas’ story is fundamentally undercut by the continuation of his political career and his courtship narrative in *Phineas Redux*. Female sexuality—be it constructed as absence or excess—with its gender-destabilizing power is thus never completely contained, not even in the trope of the familial, because that trope itself has now lost most of its power to stabilize (or restabilize, as the case may be) the patriarchal order.

Throughout this chapter—in discussing marriage plot, political plot and familial plot alike—I focus on the disintegration and destabilization of the heterosexual plot. I do so because it seems to me that the Victorian novel is all about the dismantling of the marriage plot. Chapter 3 should have made clear that the desexualized, ‘genteel’ marriage plot never had the unmitigated triumphant moment in which it remains unchallenged. Even Austen never quite manages (or even consistently attempts?) to domesticate altogether the sexual dangers and pleasures that it strives to control. There is perhaps no nineteenth-century novel in which the marriage plot is altogether uncontested or unquestioned, either from within or from without, if such a generalized distinction makes sense. The destabilization of the marriage plot that manifests itself doubly in the excessive sequence of proposals and the heterosexualized political plot in *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Phineas Finn* happens in novel after novel, from the 1840s on. As I will briefly sketch in my conclusion, many Victorian novels present variations on the
marriage plot that deviate from the Austenian master plot, often by returning to the eighteenth-century plots of illicit heterosexuality. Throughout the Victorian era, novels also tend to foreground alternative narratives, invariably interwoven with the marriage plot but emphatically its counterplots. This goes not only for the multi-plot panoramic novels that seek to integrate the heterosexual plot into a larger social narrative, but for the specific political ‘counterplots’ of the industrial novel. In choosing to read Mrs. Oliphant’s Miss Marjoribanks and Trollope’s Phineas Finn against each other, I emphasize the importance of a literally political plot of parliamentary politics and elections as another alternative to the marriage plot—one that is particularly crucial precisely because of its emphatic, deceptively firm association with the ‘male’ public sphere of politics.

1. Gender, Politics and Gender Politics: Oliphant, Trollope and the Early Feminist Movement

When I first contemplated comparing Miss Marjoribanks and Phineas Finn as two novels that reintroduce excess and absence to the heterosexual narrative, I was primarily interested in the respective marriage plots of these two novels. In both novels, narrative excess becomes an integral part of the marriage plot itself in the form of hyperbolically repeated and restaged proposal scenes. The repetitive scenes recapture the multiple-orgasm structure of Fanny Hill, and replicate within the marriage plot the narrative and sexual dynamics of its defloration scenes. At the same time, however, the repeated
climactic moments in the two marriage plots also become moments of absence—
moments in which the marriage plot is figured as a story marked by failure, disruption.
lack of closure or, in other words, as a story that no longer “works.” Again and again,
proposals are interrupted, rejected or remain otherwise incomplete. Excess and absence
are thus linked in both novels in a tight causal relationship. The appearance of absence in
the very moment of climactic excess—a narrative *coitus interruptus*, if you will—causes
more excess, in the form of serial repetition: The failure or interruption of the proposal
triggers its restaging, be it with an identical character cast or with a new constellation.
Thus, the linear progress towards a climax (figured as the male orgasm, the only one that
‘counts’ as interrupted in the logic of the *coitus interruptus*) comes to a dead halt, only for
the tease to begin over again.

The double disturbance of linearity in the marriage plot that results from this
reemergence of absence and excess is startling in itself—a kind of implosion of the
marriage plot that is only tentatively reined in by the familial narrative into which it
eventually merges with Lucilla Marjoribanks’ marriage to her cousin and Phineas Finn’s
marriage to the ‘girl back home.’ But what reinforces and drives home this
destabilization is the reduplication of this excess/absence structure in a plot that is
presented as the very opposite of the marriage plot in terms of gendered spheres,
identities and stories. In *Miss Marjoribanks*, Lucilla’s involvement in the elections
campaign for Mr. Ashburton is clearly patterned on a heterosexual plot which not only
features a proposal scene but is also more aggressively eroticized than any of Lucilla’s
literal courtships. If this heterosexualized political plot can be seen, despite a certain
emphasis on its illicit erotics, as a ‘euphoric’ and legitimate marriage plot. triumphantly ending in the election of Mr. Ashburton, the story of Phineas’ political Bildung and career is by contrast a “dysphoric” seduction plot about the hero’s political seduction and fall into prostitution.

Paradoxically, the construction of the political narrative as a marriage plot both marks it as hegemonic and undermines that very hegemony. On the one hand, the heterosexual narrative here proves so powerful that it can altogether shape the political narrative, making it legible as a plot that can and must involve women, whether literally or figuratively. On the other hand, the reading of the political as the heterosexual plot destroys the very notion at the core of the marriage-plot novel that there is a separate and separable sphere for the domestic and the feminine, with its narrative of courtships and marriages. The boundaries between the spheres and their gendered plots collapse when the political is troped as a domestic and private heterosexual narrative—while the marriage plot itself is in turn politicized.

Two different readings of the relationship between the political and the personal and domestic emerge here: one in which the personal figures, as in the familiar feminist battle cry, as the political—and another one, which I wish to suggest is more prominent, and in which the political is, conversely, the personal. First of all, the ostensibly domestic and apolitical feminine narrative of courtship and marriage can be read as a commentary on the power structures that regulate the relationship between the genders. This is the argument that has so far prevailed in feminist literary criticism of Trollope and Oliphant alike. Critics like McMaster, Morse, and Nardin (for Trollope) or Rubik and Jay (for
Oliphant) have argued that the two authors make their strongest political statements—and those which are most subversive of their own publicly avowed conservatism—by deviating from the conventional patterns, character constellations or protagonists of the marriage plot.

Secondly, however, the political power relationships in plots revolving around elections, parliamentary politics and party conflict are troped as those between courting or seducing men and courted or seduced women. Criticism has yet to address the ways in which the political plot in novels like Phineas Finn and Miss Marjoribanks is modeled on the dynamics of the heterosexual plot, thereby undermining the very gender prescriptions for both plots. When critics do discuss the linkages between politics and gender for these authors (primarily for Trollope), they focus almost always on the direct political influence and interest of female characters. The political investment of ‘Trollope’s women’ is, for the purposes of my argument, the backdrop rather than the central tenet of gender politics in a novel like Phineas Finn. What I foreground, by contrast, is the personalized, feminized, heterosexualized political narrative of Phineas, the male hero.

It is this heterosexualized political narrative that becomes the primary link that Trollope forges between the marriage plot as a discourse on women’s social status vis-à-vis men and the explicitly political debate about women’s political empowerment that begins to emerge from the debates surrounding the 1867 Reform Act. It is precisely this discursive link that I need to explore before turning to each of the two novels’ collapse of marriage plot and political plot of the ‘personal’ and the ‘political.’ Only the context of Trollope’s and Oliphant’s public dismissal of female suffrage and their vehement
insistence on the separation of the spheres makes clear how radically these authors undercut their own foundations by way of the radical gender collapse that occurs when the political plot is read as a marriage plot in Phineas Finn and Miss Marjoribanks.

With their explicitly political plots about parliamentary politics and elections campaigns, Phineas Finn and Miss Marjoribanks are two among many Victorian novels that foreground the political as a kind of thematic alternative and foil to the marriage plot. Among the novels that explicitly foreground political events are, to take just the most famous examples, George Eliot’s Felix Holt (1866) and Middlemarch (1871) and, of course, Trollope’s other ‘political novels,’ especially Phineas Redux, The Prime Minister and The Duke’s Children. These political novels strike me as particularly intriguing because of the way in which they interweave the marriage plot and the political plot as two narratives that often seem to reify, but in fact question, the separation and the separability of the spheres and their concomitant plots. I would argue—and wish to demonstrate specifically for Phineas Finn and Miss Marjoribanks—that the political novel’s tendency to chip away at the boundaries between gendered spheres and narratives is linked to the discourse about the political, social and legal empowerment of women that is associated with the early (or proto-) feminist movement which, to all intents and purposes, began in the 1860s.

The specific discursive ‘event’ that directly connects Phineas Finn and Miss Marjoribanks in particular to the contemporaneous discourse about gender and politics is the political debate about expanding the franchise and in particular about women’s voting rights that preceded the 1867 Reform Act. The two novels are published, respectively,
just before and just after the passing of the Reform Bill. Miss Marjoribanks was serialized in *Blackwood's Magazine* from February 1865 to May 1866 (with a gap in January of 1866), and Phineas Finn was serialized in *St Paul's Magazine* from October 1867 to May 1869 (cf. Jay, *Fictions* 341, PF xxv). The link to the women's movement is not just a chronological one, of course. Both Trollope and Oliphant comment on the suffrage question not only in their respective novels, but also in 'opinion pieces' that were published around the same time as their novels. The two authors' more or less aggressively anti-suffragist comments provide a foil against which the political plots and thus also the marriage plots of *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Phineas Finn* have to be read.

Both Mrs. Oliphant and Trollope were prompt and outspoken in their explicit rejection of the emergent suffrage movement. In August of 1866, only a few months after the publication of the last installment of Mrs. Oliphant’s novel *Miss Marjoribanks*, *Blackwood's Magazine* published Oliphant’s first anti-suffrage article, “The Great Unrepresented,” in direct reaction to John Stuart Mill’s presentation of a petition for the enfranchisement of women householders in Parliament on June 7, 1866. In a letter to her editor John Blackwood, she summarizes her target in “The Great Unrepresented” as J.S. Mill’s “mad notion of the franchise for women” (*Autobiography and Letters* 211: cited in Jay, *Fiction*, 48 and Williams 106). The essay itself is more restrained in its wording, but nonetheless an explicit critique of the call for women suffrage, which Oliphant, along with many others including Trollope, identified directly with Mill, the male and hence publicly accessible figurehead of the early women’s movement. Mill’s June 1866 petition is often represented as a milestone if not the point of origin for the suffrage
movement. It was closely followed by Mill’s attempt to introduce gender-neutral formulations into the impending Reform Bill (a proposal that was defeated on May 20, 1867). Discussing the petition as Mill’s arguments becomes a vehicle for Oliphant to express her own views on women’s rights without attributing the views she opposes to any specific female opponent, but only generally to the “twenty women who thus boldly place themselves into the breach” (“Unrepresented” 368). Oliphant argues that the alleged “class ... Mr Mill proposes to enfranchise” (“Unrepresented” 369), i.e. women householders like herself, are satisfied with their lot and too mature to want the vote. Ultimately, she denies that women have “the slightest desire to be permitted to do as men do” in either the political or the economic arena (“Unrepresented” 379).

Throughout the essay, Oliphant anticipates the contradictory combination of asserting and denying women’s rights that paradoxically characterizes suffragists and anti-suffragists alike. The anti-suffragist stance was most prominently represented in the decades to come by Mrs. Humphry Ward—another prolific conservative novelist—and her supporters. Millicent Fawcett lucidly sums up the implicit paradoxes of this stance when she writes (in 1912) about the anti-suffragist’s inherently contradictory activism against home rule for Ireland: “[H]aving proclaimed the inherent incapacity of women to form a sound judgment on important political affairs, they proceed to formulate a judgment on one of the most important issues of practical politics” (Fawcett 45). Like the anti-suffragists. Oliphant on the one hand clearly rejects women’s suffrage and the implicit demand for gender equality. On the other hand, however, Oliphant argues for professional and political equality when she claims that “a capable woman is just as likely
to make a livelihood for herself is she wants it, and get a good return for her pains, as a
man is” and that the “office of Queen... can be very satisfactorily filled” by women
(“Unrepresented” 367).

Ironically, “the sovereign rights of the Queen’s Majesty... safeguarded by the
statute passed in the first year of the reign of Queen Mary” are, of course, an issue that
loomed large among the early suffragist’s arguments for giving women political rights to
begin with (Blackburn 3). And indeed, in its internal contradictions, Oliphant’s position
does not only resemble that of the later anti-suffragists, who seem her likely allies. The
early feminists of the 1860s and 1870s were also, as many historians of nineteenth-
century feminism point out, deeply conflicted in their political stance. Oliphant shares in
particular the classism of many moderate suffragists, who particularly resented the
enfranchisement of lower-class men before property-owning upper-class women (cf.
Lewis 3, Levine 112). Thus, Oliphant argues with an almost absurdly suffragist
indignation that the female petitioners may, indeed, be more worthy of the vote than “the
tallowchandler and the butterman who have that momentous issue actually in their hands”
(“Unrepresented” 368).

It is not just Oliphant’s classism that links her own contradictory stance to those
of the suffragists, but also their shared insistence on the separation of spheres. The early
women’s rights activists tended to endorse separating the domestic from the political
sphere, although this endorsement led to contradictions. It is, of course, incompatible
with the egalitarian argument for women suffrage, but it also profoundly contradicts the
very attempts to bring domestic matters into the public arena of legal and political debate.
As Susan Kent's and Philippa Levine's studies in particular make clear, the nineteenth-century feminist movement was never exclusively a movement for women's rights to vote and run for office. It was always linked, through individual activists as well an overarching if untheorized discourse on women's rights in the domestic sphere, and specifically in heterosexual relationships. Calls for female suffrage went hand in hand with the increasingly successful calls for the revisions of the property rights of married women (Married Woman's Property Acts 1870, 1874, 1882), the age of consent for women (Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885), divorce law (Matrimonial Causes Act, 1878; Married Women's Act, 1895) and child custody (Custody of Infants Acts, 1839 and 1873; Guardianship of Infants Act, 1886). The effort to legalize and codify these ostensibly domestic concerns pushed them into the public arena, and challenged the very segregation of the gendered spheres that virtually all of the early feminists insisted on maintaining.

The disparity between the conscious, official 'policy' of gender segregation and the actual, destabilizing result of forging a discourse that links politics and gender thus connects rather than divides conservative mainstream authors like Oliphant and Trollope and the politically radical suffragettes of the first generation. This link is, of course, further reinforced when both authors construct the political narrative as a heterosexual plot in Miss Marjoribanks and Phineas Finn. In their novels, Oliphant and Trollope not only question the gendering of the ostensibly male, public terrain of politics, but they also un hinge the marriage plot. In other words, they undercut the very plot that more than any other functions to stabilize or recuperate gender hierarchy and gender segregation in the
name of a “flesh of my flesh” formula that cloaks inequity as unity. Paradoxically, they do so at the same time as they insist, in fiction and commentary alike, on the separation of the gendered spheres.

Thus, when Oliphant rejects women’s rights in “The Great Unrepresented,” she does so on the grounds of the natural, God-given separation of the spheres, on seeing women as a separate social group with different rights:

  ... a woman is a distinct being, with distinct work and aspirations; and

... the other being who inhabits the world [i.e. man] ... is no more her equal than she is his.--why, then, for heaven’s sake, let us give up the impertinences of legislation, and leave God’s creature where she is.

(“Unrepresented,” 378-9)

Unsurprisingly, this essentialist argument is paralleled by Trollope’s emphasis on the separation of the spheres in his statements on women’s political rights—most notoriously in the chapter on “The Rights of Women” in North America (1862), where he famously quips that the “best right a woman has is the right to a husband” (North America ii, 72). Although he cedes in this chapter that the debate of women’s work is at least important qua debate, the “political rights of women” seem to him “to be worthy of no consideration, to be capable of no action, to admit of no grave discussion” (North America ii, 59). He accordingly dismisses the early suffrage debates in the U.S. in a paragraph that is both evasive and hyperbolic. His tongue-in-cheek suggestion of giving women the vote by taking it away from men is ultimately yet another emphatic demand for the absolute separation of the spheres:
A woman is subject to the law; why then should she not help to make the law? .... That I take it is the amount of the argument in favour of the political rights women. The logic of this is so conclusive, that I am prepared to acknowledge that it admits of no answer. I will only say that the mutual good relations between men and women... require that men and women should not take to voting at the same time and on the same result. If it be decided that women shall have political power, let them have it all to themselves for a season. (North America ii, 71)

Six years later, in the 1868 lecture on the "Higher Education of Women," Trollope eschews the suffrage debate altogether, but argues once more for the separation of spheres in education and work, and thereby against the idea that the "improvement in education which women want for themselves is to be obtained by any assimilation on their part to men, either as regards political privileges, social standing, or educational system" ("Higher Education," 76).⁹

As many critics have observed, Trollope's portrayal of politically active women, especially in his Palliser novels, is never quite compatible with this rigid stance on the separation of the spheres. Neither is it an unmitigated sign of Trollope's "inofficial" progressiveness (pace Overton), however, that he introduced such characters and portrayed them, as Jane Nardin and Deborah Denenholz Morse have shown, increasingly sympathetically from the 1860s on. Rather, I would argue that the statements and authorial judgments about the political activities of women like Lady Laura Kennedy and Madame Max Goesler in Phineas Finn reflect the same ambiguous and conflicted attitude
towards women's rights as his speeches and essays. This ambiguous attitude echoes that which is present in Oliphant's essays and in her *Miss Marjoribanks*, both in the portrayal of Lucilla Marjoribanks and the narrator's specific remarks on women's voting rights.

The depiction of the politically active women in *Phineas Finn* thus both underscores and significantly undercuts what Juliet McMaster calls Trollope's "hostile or deflationary" comments concerning women's rights (161). Lady Laura Kennedy née Standish and Madame Max Goesler long for political power, and indirectly exert such power from within the domestic sphere. Trollope renders his female protagonists conscious of the contradictions inherent in their desire to be both appropriately feminine and domestic, and to be empowered. Thus, the narrator says of Lady Laura:

> It was her ambition to be brought as near to political action as was possible for a woman without surrendering any of the privileges of feminine inaction. That women should even wish to have votes at parliamentary elections was to her abominable, and the cause of the Rights of Women generally was odious to her; but, nevertheless, for herself, she delighted in hoping that she too might be useful,—in thinking that she too was perhaps, in some degree, politically powerful. (PF i, 89)

Lady Laura's ambivalent attitude toward women's political empowerment is underscored by her earlier assertion that "a woman's life is only half a life, as she cannot have a seat in parliament" (PF i, 58). She clearly thrives on her political influence on Phineas, her father and the men in her father's circle. Through Phineas, troped as her "political godchild" (PF i. 248) and mentee, Lady Laura finds a way of being politically
represented without representation. Thus, she can be politically influential without openly challenging the legal and social conventions that bar women from voting and from being elected. Importantly, however, Lady Laura is indirectly punished for her ambition, when her marriage with Robert Kennedy breaks down precisely because she wants "to meddle with high politics, to discuss reform bills, to assist in putting up Mr. This and putting down my Lord That" (PF i, 209) against her husband's wishes.

Madame Goesler—as a widow of independent means a member of the group of women that the early suffragist sought to enfranchise—is just ambiguous in her position and just as conscious of its ambiguity as Lady Laura. She playfully claims to support a "strong programme" including support for "ballot, manhood suffrage, womanhood suffrage, unlimited right of striking, tenant right, education of everybody, annual parliaments, and the abolition of at least the bench of bishops" (PF ii, 27). But while her alleged "programme" includes some of the most radical political positions of the 1860s and 1870s, she immediately points out that she can "advocate her views without any danger of seeing them carried out" (PF ii, 27) because she does not have a political voice. She thus reconstructs as an advantage what she has just described as "one great drawback to the life of women," namely, "that they cannot act in politics" (PF ii, 26). The inability to "act in politics," even for women with manifestly expressed political interests, remains a central tenet both for Trollope and Oliphant. But it is this tenet, so aggressively embraced in their non-fictional opinion pieces but also partially preserved in their novels, that is undercut by way of the collapse of the male political plot into the heterosexual plot in Miss Marjoribanks and Phineas Finn alike.
The ensuing destabilization of the gendered spheres renders Oliphant's and Trollope's novels contradictorily and involuntarily ‘progressive,’ just as the insistence on gender separation makes the early feminists vulnerable to the accusation that they have a ‘conservative’ or ‘reactionary’ agenda. It seems to me that the conflicted positions of Oliphant and Trollope in the one political camp and of the suffragists in the other makes clear, once more, how unstable and problematic the labels of ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’ are. And yet, recent critics have predictably found it a necessary exercise to either dismiss Oliphant and Trollope for their conservatism or to rescue them from being condemned as reactionaries by arguing that their fiction ‘subversively’ works against this conservatism. Especially feminist criticism concerned with the construction of women in Trollope’s and Oliphant’s fiction tends to be obsessively focused on separating the conventional chaff from the subversive wheat—to distinguish “affirmation and subversion”, as Deborah Denenholz Morse describes the two conflicting strategies (2). The sparse body of Oliphant criticism is still altogether caught up in this critical ‘move.’ In Trollope criticism, with its long institutional history since Michael Sadleir’s studies in the 1920s, the problematic vacillation between “affirmation” and “subversion” has become a consciously reflected process. Trollope critics attempt more frequently, if not always successfully, to go beyond the need to pin Trollope down either way. Thus, Bill Overton pointed out as early as 1982 that the “unofficial Trollope” (his shortcut for the subversive and unconventional elements in Trollope) “can be understood only in relation to the official” (2).
Once more, I simply wish follow the lead of authors like Overton and also D. A. Miller in simply tracing the interplay between the conventional and its subversion in its narrative manifestations, rather than label Trollope’s or Oliphant’s novels as either ‘subversive’ or ‘co-opted’. If I find the multiple reversals and mutations of gender constellations in the marriage plots and the political plots of both Phineas Finn and Miss Marjoribanks fascinating, this fascination stems from the striking contrast between the radicalism of the gender collapse in these novels and the seemingly utterly conventional plot patterns and gender constellations that appear to frame each novel as the starting point and the end point.

2. Lucilla Marjoribanks Rules

Given that Chapter 3 concluded with a reading of Emma, the stylistic and thematic continuity between Miss Marjoribanks and Emma might be a good starting point for my reading of Oliphant’s novel. The resemblance between the two novels struck Oliphant’s earliest rediscoverers in particular. Thus, the Colbys (who altogether dislike the novel and its heroine) call Lucilla Marjoribanks the “spiritual granddaughter of Jane Austen’s Emma Woodhouse” (Colby, 65). And Q. D. Leavis, who edited Miss Marjoribanks in 1969 for republication, uses Austen to frame her introduction (MM 1-2; 23-4). Certainly, Miss Marjoribanks echoes Emma in its narrator’s condescending irony to the main character, its obsession with marriage plots, with matchmaking and with the institution of marriage as the stabilizing center of social convention. Lucilla Marjoribanks, the heroine,
also has an Emmaesque desire to control her environment and to forge her own story as well as that of other characters. Much more so than *Emma*, Miss Marjoribanks' narrative trajectory tends to reward this desire directly, as well as ridicule it. For all the ironic treatment the heroine receives from Oliphant's omniscient narrator, Lucilla is not chastised in the course of her story as Emma is. She ultimately triumphs in both of her plots—her marriage plot and her political plot—when the two are finally brought together in a defused familial narrative that preserves her political and domestic power alike.

Despite the superficial resemblance to *Emma*, *Miss Marjoribanks* importantly undermines the Austenian paradigm of the marriage plot by reemphasizing excess and absence. First of all, multiple proposal scenes and courtships, disrupted in the very moment of the proposal, both expand and puncture the more tightly controlled Austenian marriage plot. Secondly, the narrow boundaries of the Austenian micro-plot are loosened by the construction of a political plot as a second heterosexual plot in a way that re-eroticizes the narrative and thus simultaneously disrupts and duplicates the marriage plot. And thirdly, the familial plot in which the political plot and the marriage plot are ostensibly contained at the end of the novel, revises and defuses the familial narrative of incestuous erotics. This de-fusion is ultimately so radical as to reinforce rather than take back the destabilization of the gender construction that marriage plot and political plot have already undercut. My discussion of these three interrelated plots will make clear that *Miss Marjoribanks*' resemblance to *Emma* has more to do with the disruptive and disturbing moments in *Emma* than with its main storyline and its ideological thrust.
To a certain, crucial extent, the plot of Miss Marjoribanks is of course still a recognizable, linear marriage plot. Its teleological frame is provided by Tom Marjoribanks’ two proposals to his cousin in the beginning and at the end of the novel, both of which I will discuss towards the end of my reading of the novel. These framing proposals, together with the parallels and interlinkages between the various courtships that take place within this narrative frame, gives the novel a much tighter structure than Vineta and Robert Colby or Margarete Rubik would allow. The Colbys claim that the novel has “properly speaking, no plot” (Colby 65), a claim that Rubik extends to other comic novels by Mrs. Oliphant, which, generically, “have no plot in the narrow sense of the world, but consist of a series of humorous scenes” (Rubik 71). But Miss Marjoribanks has a very tight plot sequence—indeed, as Elisabeth Jay has pointed out, the “carefully controlled” Miss Marjoribanks is somewhat of an exception in Oliphant’s œuvre (Jay 7).

This linear marriage plot is paradoxically both organized and undermined by the double dynamic of excess and disruption. Narrative excess and repetition loom large in a marriage plot replete with proposal scenes. The numerous restagings of the proposal scene undercut the structure of the marriage plot and devalue each climactic proposal itself by inflation, by overkill.\(^10\) But what again and again contrasts sharply and surprisingly with these serial excesses are the moments of rupture and silence that occur almost invariably in every proposal scene. The narrative dynamics of absence here intrude into the plot at the very moment of excess.\(^11\) Proposals are, as the narrator puts it several times, “nipped in the bud”—a phrase that absurdly reverses the implicit flower
imagery of defloration: The premature destruction of the bud prohibits the later ‘taking’ of the actual flower. The proposal scenes that occur within the frame provided by Tom’s two (completed, but as I will argue later, also disrupted and disruptive) proposals are all marred by absence. A courtship may not ever get going, as is the case with General Travers, who, when introduced to Lucilla, is “struck with sudden enthusiasm” for Lucilla’s friend Rose (MM 258). Or it may be altogether marginalized as a “little episode with young Dr. Rider, before he was married to his present wife” in which neither the heroine nor her supposed suitor “had any serious meaning” (341). Most prominent in the novel’s plot, however, are proposal scenes that begin promisingly and almost reach their climax, but then collapse and disintegrate at the very moment of the climactic declaration. Thus, Mr. Cavendish’s numerous proposals, Mr. Beverley’s anticipated proposal and that of Mr. Ashburton never take place, despite dramatic build-ups that lead Lucilla (as well as the reader) to expect a declaration.

The most sustained—and therefore most often disrupted—courtship plot in Miss Marjoribanks exemplifies this narrative pattern. Mr. Cavendish’s courtship is a titilatingly and frustratingly on-again, off-again affair replete with near-proposals. Mr. Cavendish initially appears to Lucilla as a thoroughly suitable marriage candidate—not least because he would be a good candidate for the political position of “M.P. for Carlingford” (MM 102). But before Cavendish ever comes close to fulfilling Lucilla’s and the community’s expectations (cf. MM 101, 133) that he will propose, Mr. Cavendish shifts his attention from the heroine to Barbara Lake, the declassé drawing-master’s daughter, and eventually withdraws rather publicly from Lucilla (MM 133).
When Cavendish returns after an unanticipated three-week absence, his attempt to propose to Lucilla after all is characteristic in its disruption not only for nearly all proposal scenes in the novel, but also for the dynamics of his courtship in toto. He walks unexpectedly into Lucilla’s drawing room with the appearance of “a man about to propose” (MM 180). Lucilla is kept in suspense while Mr. Cavendish makes polite conversation, until she begins “to get a little impatient, and to wonder, if the man had come to propose, as appearances suggested, why he did not do it and get done with it?” (MM 183). But when he finally seems on the brink of proposing, saying, “If I could flatter myself that you had missed me... I might have the courage to ask—” (MM 183), he is suddenly interrupted: “It was at that precise moment of all moments that Mrs Chiley, whom they had not heard coming upstairs, though she was sufficiently audible, suddenly opened the door.” (MM 183). The climactic buildup of the scene suddenly collapses with this disruption, which is refigured in the twice-disrupted syntax of the sentence by two dependent clauses before the main verb phrase.

As the narrator sums it up by way of the characteristically repetitive flower imagery: Mr Cavendish’s “love-making (if he was really going to make love) was thus cut short in the bud” (MM 184). Here again the flower image is used to evoke the premature destruction of a courtship, which precisely prevents the anticipated deflorative climax of the proposal scene. The flower imagery is characteristically repeated and elaborated on when the narrator speculates on Lucilla Marjoribanks’ own sense of disappointment:
For even when a woman has not her answer ready, she has always a certain curiosity about a proposal, and then when such a delicate matter is *crushed in the bud* like this, who can tell if it will ever *blossom* again, and find full expression (MM 185, my emphasis).\(^{12}\)

To Lucilla, the disrupted proposal is thus "vexatious" (MM 186) even though, or more likely because, she might possibly have refused Cavendish. Lucilla sees the proposal scene as an opportunity to exercise her power: "to see a man so near the point and not even to have the satisfaction of refusing him, is naturally aggravating to a woman" (MM 186).

Cavendish himself is likewise vexed, but soon 'pulls out,' to use the crude sexual pun, in keeping with the pattern of approach and retreat, of in and out, that structures his *interruptus* relationship with Lucilla. His attraction to Barbara makes him oscillate between the two women, eventually impressing "upon two interesting and amiable young women on the same day the conviction that he was about to propose, without in either case realising that expectation" (MM 199). His indecision is so pronounced that the narrator sarcastically wishes for the legalization of polygamy, another form of heterosexual excess that evokes the pornographic fantasies of *Fanny Hill*: "If such a thing had been permissible in England as that a man might marry one wife for his liking and another for his interest, the matter might have been compromised by proposing to them both" (MM 199).

Without polygamy as an option, however, Cavendish continues to waiver. Another semi-proposal follows, in which Cavendish's own nervousness and weakness,
juxtaposed with Lucilla's poise, reverses the conventional gender constellation and feminizes him. He is "fluttered and frightened, which was what she, and not he, ought to have been" as the narrator puts it (MM 329), and therefore interrupts himself, rather than being interrupted by Lucilla: "I sometimes have something just on my lips to day, and I do not know whether I dare say it. Miss Marjoribanks—' And here he came to a pause." During this gap in their conversation, Lucilla still toys with the idea of accepting the offer he does not get a chance to make (MM 329). But she now sees this as a fantasy born out of a "momentary weakness" that she overcomes (MM 330). Before Cavendish has a chance to complete his sentence and thereby his proposal, she turns the situation into a proposal for him that is a much blunter and dictatorial attempt at matchmaking than Emma ever undertakes: "Mr Cavendish, you and Barbara are in love" (MM 330), she announces. "I hope you will soon be married, and that you will be very happy" (MM 331).

This advice enrages Cavendish so much that he reinforces the reversed gender implications of the scene—in which he is nervous, hesitant, and weak, while Lucilla, "always prompt and ready" (MM 330), has already made up her mind—by thinking of Lucilla, at least momentarily, as a man: "he would have liked to have knocked Miss Marjoribanks down, though she was a woman" (MM 331). Instead, he leaves "furious" (MM 332)—first Lucilla's house and shortly afterwards the country. When, ten years later, Cavendish tries once more to renew his addresses to Lucilla, he himself is aware that to propose to her "still remained to him in his life one supereminently wise thing that he could do" (MM 441). Lucilla seems to agree when she wonders, silently addressing
him. "You foolish soul, why didn’t you marry me somehow, and make a man of
yourself?" (MM 385). Although Cavendish’s last-ditch attempt at courting Lucilla makes
her Aunt Jemima, witness to the scene, think that “he might propose to Lucilla on the
spot” (MM 385), the anticipation of a proposal remains unfulfilled once more, both at this
moment and ultimately for good, when Cavendish ultimately proposes to Barbara Lake.
But Cavendish’s ‘right’ marriage plot is not granted a triumphant moment of closure by
the narrator. Cavendish’s feet carry him to Barbara’s door, “ere he was aware, with some
kind of independent volition of their own.” His presumed proposal occurs off-stage,
absent in a scene where even the narrator’s comment only comes in the passive voice that
cloaks all agency in a truly Austenian vein: “it may be here said, once for all, that this
visit was decisive of Mr Cavendish’s fate” (both MM 464).

Cavendish’s protracted and consistently anticlimactic wooing of Lucilla is merely
the most elaborate of the novel’s failing marriage plots. Not only his attempted
proposals, but also those of archdeacon Beverley and of Mr. Ashburton, are structured by
the push-and-pull dynamics of excess disrupted by absence. These disrupted proposals
are all microcosmic representations the general oscillation of the plot, and of Lucilla
Marjoribanks’ own conflicted position between single and married life. Miss
Marjoribanks here brings to the surface the paradox that is implicit in the traditional
marriage plot: it presents the premarital period in a young woman’s life as the “climax of
existence,” as one of the novel’s characters puts it (MM 113), but only by virtue of the
fact that she ends it with marriage. Thus, the premarital period can only be such a
“climax” if it constantly moves towards marriage; in Miss Marjoribanks, this movement
takes the form of excessive proposals, whose presence in a woman’s life is necessary to her identity. As the narrator states with heavy irony and hyperbolic emphasis:

there can be little doubt that the chief way in which society is supposed to signify its approval and admiration and enthusiasm for a lady, is by making dozens of proposals to her. ... the ordinary idea is that that the floating men of society, in number less or more according to the lady’s merits, propose to her, though she may not accept any of them. In proportion as her qualities rise towards the sublime, these victims are supposed to increase; and perhaps. to tell the truth, no woman feels herself set at her true value until some poor man, or set of men, have put, as people say, their happiness into her hands. (MM 339)

The proposal—importantly, the completed proposal—is here troped as a moment of supreme empowerment for the woman who is free to either accept or reject a suitor. Paradoxically, however, the propositioned woman is empowered only until she accepts a suitor. Once she surrenders she loses her power in a marriage that—in nineteenth-century legal terms if not in actual practice—puts her and her possessions altogether in the power of her husband. Loss of authority and sexual initiation are thus inseparable; both symbolically occur when the heroine accepts a suitor—when she is metaphorically deflowered.

Lucilla is highly aware of the script that makes the proposal scene both ostensibly a scene of female empowerment and the turning point which forces her to submit to male power, and strips her of her own authority and independence. Her strategies—and the
narrative’s strategies—of again and again postponing this moment of initiation can thus be read as attempts to keep her in a position of power. The disrupted proposals, as the figurative replacements of unconsummated acts of defloration, enable Lucilla to maintain a position of power that is troped both as male (as I will show momentarily) and as virginal. Paradoxically, though, while defloration and marriage are constantly postponed, they need to remain the telos of Lucilla’s narrative. In keeping with the secular construction of virginity as valuable only when it is temporal that I sketched in Chapter 1, Miss Marjoribanks is very much aware that her singleness is only acceptable as long as it is temporary: she cannot expand her independence permanently but has to give it a limit—in her case, precisely ten years. Without being constantly proposed to, without being put into the exalted, empowered position of deciding whether to reject or accept a suitor, singleness is no longer a socially acceptable and desirable temporary state.

Thus, the repeated disintegration and disruption of anticipated proposals eventually renders Lucilla’s situation profoundly unsatisfying, as the narrator points out:

the truth is, that this well-known and thoroughly established reward of female excellence had not fallen to Miss Marjoribanks’ lot. There was Tom, to be sure, but Tom did not count. And as for the other men who had been presented to Lucilla as eligible candidates for her regard, none of them had given her this proof of their admiration. (MM 339)

This observation comes at the end of the second volume, when the double intrusion of repetitious excess and disruptive absence detracts from the marriage plot’s movement towards its teleology with such force that it seems all but abandoned. The narrative as a
whole has come to a halt, causing the narrator to skip an uneventful period of almost ten years in which Lucilla’s marriage plot does not progress: “There were other marriages going on around her, and other preliminaries of marriage, but nobody had proposed to Lucilla” (MM 340).

During the ten-year hiatus, Lucilla lives in a narrative void that the narrator describes, with sexual undertones, as the “entire absence of all that was calculated to stimulate and exhilarate” (MM 341). The trajectory of Lucilla’s marriage plot is thus conflicted: on the one hand, the proposal can never quite come off without compromising Lucilla’s position of power; on the other hand, the sequence of disrupted and abandoned courtships eventually threaten the teleology of her narrative, making it less and less likely that she will eventually marry.

When the narrative resumes with the third volume, Lucilla’s marriage plot has thus come to a standstill. The narrative is given new momentum by a new narrative that is, to use the narrator’s words, “calculated to stimulate and exhilarate” both Lucilla and the reader. This new narrative is the political plot, which eventually becomes a vehicle to reactivate and re-eroticize the marriage plot. But this political plot proper—the story of Lucilla’s involvement in the elections campaign for Mr. Ashburton—is not introduced abruptly qua new plot. Rather, the political plot emerges directly from the political imagery and thematics that the narrative develops from the beginning. The story of Ashburton’s campaigns is prefigured in the political and military metaphors used to describe Lucilla’s position of power in the domestic sphere, and secondly, in Lucilla’s interest in Mr. Cavendish as a potential M.P.
From the beginning, Lucilla Marjoribanks’ seemingly conventional narrative of courtship, matchmaking and marriage is troped as a story of political ‘power moves.’ Lucilla’s activities in Carlingford are consistently described in terms of military and political images that emphasizes Lucilla’s masculine position in the plot. Some of the terminology of rulership that is used in the novel is ostensibly gender-neutral: thus, Miss Marjoribanks wants to be “a leader of society” (MM 37), her “instinct of government was of the true despotic order” (MM 36), she is a “young sovereign” (MM 49) who “possessed by nature some of the finest qualities of a ruler” (MM 39). But even in these formulations, Lucilla’s “reign” (MM 33 passim) is troped as male—the ruler and the sovereign are implicitly male, and Lucilla is much less a queen (as Margaret Homans has argued) than she is a king. Her masculinity is often rendered explicit, as when Lucilla is described as having “come into her kingdom” (MM 47, 133) and as feeling “like a young king” (MM 48/49). Lucilla’s actions are also frequently figured as military strategies of an invading “conqueror” (MM 51): she looks at Carlingford as a “country she had come to conquer” in which her house is a “strategic position” (MM 53), from which she goes out “to make a little reconnaissance” (MM 53) on her first day at home. In accordance with these implicitly male images, the atmosphere in Carlingford just before her arrival is compared to the “preparations and presentiments” that occur “when a man destined to put his mark on his generation... is about to appear” (MM 44, my emphasis).

When Lucilla loses her fortune after her father’s unexpected death, the people of Carlingford are ironically described as her subjects, and Lucilla herself as the ruling
monarch, in a long passage that hyperbolically inflates the political metaphors by repetition:

Nobody doubted that Lucilla would abdicate at once, and a certain uneasy, yet delicious, sense of freedom had already stolen into the hearts of some of the ladies in Grange Lane.... Lucilla’s subjects contemplated their emancipation with a certain guilty delight.... As long as she remained in Grange Lane, even though retired and in crape, the constitutional monarch was still present among her subjects; and nobody could usurp her place or show that utter indifference to her regulations which some revolutionaries had dreamed of. Such an idea would have gone direct in the face of the British Constitution. (MM 420-21)

Lucilla is thus all along associated with the public, masculine sphere of political agency through the novel’s mock-heroic imagery. Ostensibly, this imagery serves to ironize Miss Marjoribanks’ construction of her own position in the world, and thus also her masculinity. By figuring her limited social and domestic pursuits as political and military actions, the narrator ridicules Lucilla’s assumption of her own importance. But the mock-heroic is a double-edged weapon in this novel. As Peterson has pointed out, it is also used to ridicule the male characters who are ostensibly in positions of true political and social power and thus has “the effect of diminishing, too, the ‘careers’ of men in the ‘real’ world” (Peterson 73).

Even more importantly, the mock-heroic constantly undermines the very distinction between a public world, troped as masculine, and the domestic, feminized
private sphere. Events in the domestic sphere become political or military events in *Miss Marjoribanks*: Lucilla’s plan “to revolutionise society in Carlingford” (MM 36) begins with her redecoration of her father’s drawing room, and even the central image of her political campaign for Mr. Ashburton is choosing the right colors for the candidate and making cockades for his supporters to wear (MM 349-51, 362). Home economics and “political economy” (which Lucilla studies at her boarding school, cf. MM 33, 36) become the same; the domestic and the political collapse when the domestic is read through the discourse of the male, public world of politics and war. This disintegration of the boundaries between the allegedly separate spheres contributes massively to a destabilization of gendered categories.

The collapse of the two spheres is also a collapse of the two ostensibly gendered plots—the feminocentric marriage plot and the masculinocentric plot of public, political action. In *Miss Marjoribanks*, the disintegration of the boundaries between these two plots begins with a simple narrative link. Lucilla wants to marry a member of parliament, and Mr. Cavendish is a potential suitor because he is “the most likely man to represent the borough” after Mr. Chiltern’s anticipated death (MM 101). In line with Lucilla’s desire for power, marriage to a politically powerful man appears here a vehicle for her own empowerment. Lucilla here reverts the power transfer implicit in the legal definitions of marriage before the Married Woman’s Property Act of 1870—the marriage as the act by which a woman yields her legal rights and property as an individual to her husband, is for the masculinized Lucilla the acquisition of power from her husband.
At first, this empowerment seems conventional enough: marriage to a (future) Member of Parliament would “constitute Lucilla a kind of queen in Carlingford” (MM 102). The image of the queen her still implies a king by Lucilla’s side who bestows her powerful position on her, and with whom she shares her political and social rule. This troping of the queen as the king’s wife is, of course, in direct opposition to Oliphant’s argument about the queen as sovereign in “Unrepresented” (see above). Not much later, however, Lucilla herself appears as the M.P.:

there was something in the very idea of being M.P. for Carlingford which moved the mind of Lucilla. It was a perfectly ideal position for a woman of her views, and seemed to offer the very field that was necessary for her ambition. (MM 114, emphasis mine)

Although the “ideal position” described here is presumably that of the member’s wife, the ambiguity of the construction allows for the view that Lucilla sees herself as the member (with all the phallic connotations of the word activated).

But if Lucilla’s position has shifted from that of the king’s companion to that of king, it shifts further to that of kingmaker—to a reversal of gender roles in which she is the one who bestows power onto a man. At the end of Cavendish’s disastrous courtship, the exercise of Lucilla’s own powers for the political candidate is still directly linked to marriage. Accordingly, Lucilla toys briefly with the idea of marrying Mr. Cavendish, even after he has already fallen into disgrace, because she could “make a great deal of Mr. Cavendish. Nobody had ever crossed her path of whom so much could be made.... She
might yet accept him and have him elected member for Carlingford, and carry him triumphantly through all his difficulties” (MM 329-30).

It is not until after her relationship to Mr. Cavendish has collapsed, however, that she is troped as a true kingmaker—in the novel’s political plot proper. What happens at this crucial moment at the beginning of the third volume of Miss Marjoribanks is that the novel’s focus shifts from the metaphorically to the literally political, from the troping of the personal as the political that underlies Lucilla’s attempts to attain power via the marriage plot, to the political as the personal. In the context of this shift, it is crucial that Lucilla’s new narrative is emphatically not a marriage plot. In her relationship to Mr. Cavendish, Lucilla’s masculinized position of king and kingmaker was still a position within the heterosexual constellation of the marriage plot. But when Lucilla’s involvement in the election campaign for the seat of the M.P. begins in third volume of the novel, Lucilla’s political influence is no longer directly linked to being a wife. Instead, the political plot now directly replaces the marriage plot that Lucilla has temporarily abandoned. As she points out to her Aunt Jemima: “I don’t mean to be any man’s wife just now.... I am too busy electioneering” (MM 353). Lucilla, still single and without “the natural resource of a nursery and a husband to manage” (395), needs a more fulfilling (read: more empowering) task than organizing social ‘evenings’. As the narrator observes in a passage that startlingly prefigures a central motif in George Eliot’s Middlemarch:

   when a woman has an active mind, and still does not care for parish work, it is a little hard for her to find a ‘sphere.’... Lucilla had become conscious
that her capacities were greater than her work. She was a Power in Carlingford... but still there is little good in the existence of a Power unless it can be made use of for some worthy end. (MM 395)

The immediate ‘worthy end’ that Lucilla chooses is the limited political activism of supporting and campaigning for Mr. Ashburton when the position of the M.P. becomes vacant.

This political activism, albeit limited to seemingly domestic activities, has as its implicit context the suffragist discourse of the 1860s. The narrator positively harps on the fact that “ladies are not eligible for election” (MM 127) and that they cannot vote either (cf. MM 350, 364, 369, 373). The narrator also pointedly remarks that Lucilla’s political campaign for Ashburton comes at an age “at which she might have gone into Parliament herself had there been no disqualification of sex” (MM 394). While Lucilla never demands active or passive voting rights, the campaign for Ashburton allows her to wield political power nonetheless. Canvassing, as Pat Jalland points out, was limited but crucial “electoral work” often performed by women, especially the upper- and upper-middle class wives of candidates, even before “women’s auxiliary organizations” were formed in the 1880s (Jalland 205).

Oliphant can thus seemingly have it both ways—portray a politically active woman and be against suffrage—because she restricts Lucilla’s political activism to a domestic, appropriately feminine “influence,” specifically on the men who need to be convinced to be members of the candidate’s election committee. As one of Lucilla’s friends says to her: “You have influence, which is a great deal better than a vote.... and
they all say there is nobody like a lady for electioneering” (MM 373). Lucilla is thus both empowered and remains in the feminine sphere. She uses her alleged feminine ignorance and powerlessness to reach her political goals (cf. MM 369: 373) and get her chosen candidate, Ashburton, elected as the representative of the Carlingford borough.

Lucilla’s indirect political empowerment thus seems at first sight, to underscore Oliphant’s anti-suffrage stance, and to celebrate a conservative model of female empowerment within and via the domestic sphere. But Lucilla’s political activism goes beyond this “gentle” subversion, as Trela would call it; it brings to its full extent the collapse of the separation of the spheres that is already implicit in the novel’s mock-heroic imagery. This further disintegration of the gendered spheres is brought about by the conflation of the political plot with the narrative dynamics of the heterosexual plot.

The emphasis here is on ‘narrative dynamics’—in other words, on the structure—of the heterosexual plot. As I have already pointed out, Lucilla’s political interest in Ashburton is explicitly and emphatically seen as outside the marriage plot. Before the two embark on their political campaign together, Mr. Ashburton has only “paid a little attention to Lucilla, though nothing very marked and noticeable” (MM 343), and to Lucilla. “[n]othing could have made Mr. Ashburton socially attractive” (MM 380). Her decision to support him is not predicated on any expectation of courtship or marriage. Even when Ashburton grasps Lucilla’s hand when she suggests his candidacy has, she feels that his reaction has “nothing whatever to do with love-making” (MM 345). Indeed, the relationship between Mr. Ashburton and Lucilla Marjoribanks promptly fails when it becomes a courtship.
Although heterosexual interest thus does not motivate the political narrative of Lucilla and Mr. Ashburton, this narrative is legible only through the dynamics of the heterosexual narrative. Thus, the scene which marks the beginning of the political plot—that is, the scene in which Miss Marjoribanks suggests that Mr. Ashburton become the candidate for Carlingford—is figured as a climactic proposal scene. Indeed, it is a scene that seems much more patently erotic than earlier literal proposal scenes. The political plot here activates the erotic potential of the heterosexual plot that seems subdued, if not altogether lacking, in the novel’s marriage plot proper. Although I would not argue for *Miss Marjoribanks* as I will for *Phineas Finn* that the heterosexual plot that organizes the political narrative is a plot of emphatically illicit sexuality, a seduction plot rather than a marriage plot, Lucilla is described ambiguously as a much more emphatically erotic figure, almost a seducer, in the context of the political plot.

The political proposal to Ashburton is accordingly a strikingly physical scene, laced with sexual imagery that is almost parodically obvious. Lucilla’s idea that Mr. Ashburton should run as the candidate comes is a sudden quasi-orgasmic intuition that strikes her “like a flash of lightning.” In a state of extreme excitement, she literally walks “straight into her hero’s arms” and, doing so, utters “a little scream” that becomes the prelude to an exchange that is characterized by highly physical reactions (MM 344). Lucilla, whose earlier exclamation “My mind was quite full of you” (MM 344) already implies penetration, reinforces the penetrative act at the core of the scene when she reiterates, addressing Ashburton, “You came into my mind like a flash of lightning” (MM 345).
This erotically charged political proposal scene plays more ambiguously with the
gendered script of the proposal scene than any of the literal proposal scenes in the novel.
It thus reinforces the doubts about gender that Lucilla’s empowerment within the
domestic sphere has already raised. This gender ambiguity is produced by casting
Ashburton both as the male penetrator and as the passive, female receptacle of Lucilla’s
ideas. While the remarks about lightning and Lucilla’s dramatic announcement “it is you
who must be the man” emphasizes Ashburton’s masculinity, Ashburton’s reaction to the
proposal tropes him as feminine—embarrassed, hesitant to speak, almost demure: “his
face flushed deeper and deeper;” he stands “quite still in the excitement of the moment”
and finally speaks to Lucilla “in a trembling voice” (all MM 345). Ashburton, once
proposed to, is for the first time able admit to his own desires for the candidacy in this
scene (MM 345), just as the heroine in the conventional marriage is only expected to
confess and even discover her affection for her suitor after he has proposed marriage.15

After this initial gender reversal, however, Ashburton’s masculinity is,
temporarily at least, reestablished. At the end of the proposal scene, Lucilla states, with
emphasis, that he is “a good man,” “the best man,” “the right man,” “the man for
Carlingford” (MM 347). Ashburton is then, within the political plot read as marriage
plot, immediately rendered the novel’s political ‘Mr. Right,’ in direct rivalry with
Cavendish. Lucilla advises Ashburton to steer clear of expressing his specific political
opinions and run instead, as “the man for Carlingford”—on the platform of his own
masculinity, as it were (MM 346). Indeed, Carlingford chooses Ashburton as Mr. Right,
with Lucilla the kingmaker as the matchmaker. Mr. Cavendish, who reappears after a
ten-year absence to run against Ashburton, is the wrong man to Mr. Ashburton’s “right man.” The heterosexual dynamics of the political plot are thus reinforced by equating political rivalry with sexual rivalry.\(^{16}\)

The two men’s political rivalry is triangulated through its focus on Miss Marjoribanks when the two political opponents first face each other in the domestic space of Lucilla’s drawing room (MM 384). Refusing to shake hands, “they both stood bolt upright and stared at Miss Marjoribanks” (MM 382), who strives to retain a distinctly physical balance between the two, giving “one rival her hand while she held the arm of the other” (MM 384). Within the plot of political rivalry, Lucilla is thus troped as the pivot of a popular marriage-plot constellation: She has the choice between two men. In casting her ballot, as it were, for Ashburton as “the only man for Carlingford” (MM 365), Lucilla rejects her former suitor Cavendish, as the politically as well as the heterosexually wrong choice. (The only scene between the rivals reinforces the doubling of the political and heterosexual narrative with Cavendish’s last-ditch attempt at a proposal, in the course of which he directly questions Ashburton’s masculinity by attacking his political strategy as “that milk-and-water sort of thing,” MM 385.)

The dynamics of the political plot are thus patterned after those of the marriage plot—specifically, the proposal scene and in the teleology of the quest for Mr. Right as well as the triangulated rivalry between two suitors. In the excitement about the campaign, he “hold[s] Lucilla’s hand, and clasp[s] it almost tenderly,” aware that the moment is “a climax” (MM 438). Indeed, the whole town of Carlingford reacts indeed orgasmically to Ashburton’s eventual victory. Carlingford becomes “excited as the
decisive moment drew nigh” (MM 439) and eventually turns into “a volcano” (MM 455) on election day. The election itself is figured as a narrative climax to which Lucilla’s reacts with transparently physical excitement: “When the next report [of the election results] came, Lucilla’s fingers trembled as she opened it, so great was her emotion. but after that she recovered herself as if by magic. She grew pale, and then gave a kind of sob, and then a kind of laugh” (MM 460).

But when Ashburton attempts to re-literalize this plot, and to turn his political teamwork with Lucilla into a courtship, he fails. Ashburton, who is initially clearly “not thinking of anything sentimental, but was quite occupied about his election” (380) when he praises Lucilla to her aunt earlier, soon projects his political excitement and ambition onto a heterosexual attraction to Lucilla. But once the political plot has triumphantly ended with Ashburton’s election, the heterosexual dynamics of the narrative collapse immediately. Partly, this collapse is due to the attempts, especially on Ashburton’s side, to cast Lucilla as a feminine and politically naïve figure against the evidence of her obvious political investment and empowerment. Even immediately after the political proposal scene. Ashburton mentally tries to put Lucilla in her place, by telling himself that it is her femininity which makes her proposal so flattering:

She was a woman, and young (comparatively speaking), and was by no means without admirers, and unquestionable took the lead in society; and to be divined by such a person was perhaps, on the whole, sweeter to the heart of the aspirant than if [one of the male characters] had found out his secret. (MM 345)
With this reflection, Ashburton ostensibly re-establishes the traditional gender constellation of the proposal—but is gently ridiculed by the narrator for his dismissal of her political interest and her strategy of focusing on his "colours" rather than his opinions (MM 348). Ashburton’s sense of Lucilla as feminine never remains absolutely uncontested by the narrator. Although he sees Lucilla as "a fool" and women as "unintelligible creatures" here (MM 348, 349), Ashburton nevertheless follows her advice on the cockade colors and on running without a specific political platform. And when he later describes Lucilla as the "sacred maiden" (MM 348), "to inspire and lead him on" "like another Joan of Arc" (MM 351, cf. 347), Ashburton deliberately overlooks the ambiguously gendered image of a woman who fighting battles cross-dressed in male armor. 17

Ashburton cannot quite relegate Lucilla to a feminized position in a marriage plot anymore than he was able to do so in the political plot. Their relationship cannot sustain the triumphant double closure of a political victory and a completed proposal that leads to marriage. Most importantly, the explosive erotics of the political plot fizzle once it has triumphantly ended with Ashburton’s election, because the erotic connection between the two characters is derived, precisely, from the shared desire for political power that is now fulfilled. The fulfillment of this desire, however, redraws the boundaries between the male Ashburton, who wins the seat, and the female Lucilla, who is exiled once more from direct access to power. The erotics of power disappear with the ambiguity about gender that allowed Lucilla to exert political power over Ashburton and over Carlingford. The collapse of gendered roles and gendered spheres is thus directly linked to the annihilation
of a sexual thrill figured, in a very Foucauldian sense, as emphatically and essentially part of a discourse of power.

In the place of this thrill, there is now social status: Ashburton reconfigures his attraction to Lucilla into the desire for a proper wife, and tells himself that "if ever a woman was made for a certain position, Lucilla was made to be the wife of the Member for Carlingford" (MM 461). This impersonal passive construction makes clear that his heterosexual interest in Lucilla is always linked back to his newly gained status, couched between his career and his social standing: "A new career, a wife, a new position... it was not much wonder if Mr. Ashburton felt a little excited" (MM 462). Likewise, Lucilla sees a possible marriage to Ashburton as a fulfillment of abstract concepts of status and "merit," inextricably linked to his political position:

it was in her power by a word to reap all the advantages of the election.
and to step at once into the only position which she had ever felt might be superior to her own in Carlingford. At last this great testimonial of female merit was to be laid at her feet. A man thoroughly eligible in every way—moderately rich, well connected, able to restore to her all, and more than all, the advantages which she had lost at her father's death—a man. above all, who was Member for Carlingford (MM 465).

Lucilla, again with a characteristic ambiguity as to whether it is she herself or Ashburton will "step into" a higher position, here attempts to construct Mr. Ashburton's impending proposal as the climactic crescendo of her narrative, and to return to the fantasy of being the member's wife, which stood at the beginning of her quest of political
empowerment via the marriage plot. Indeed, she sees him as the last in a series of suitors whose attachment to her is always entangled with social status:

after all the Cavendishes, Beverleys, and Riders who had once had it in their power to distinguish themselves by making her an offer, and who had not done it—here at last, in all good faith, honesty, and promptitude, had appeared a man superior to them all... a man sensible like herself, public-spirited like herself—a man whose pursuits she could enter into fully, who had a perfectly ideal position to offer her (MM 468).

But Ashburton does not turn out to be “the best man” “[w]ith her as with Carlingford” (MM 462)—perhaps precisely because, as the ambiguous syntax of “a man sensible like herself” implies, both Ashburton and Lucilla are figured as men. Heterosexual attraction is replaced here by a homosocial bond that prevents the literal return to the marriage plot. Ashburton accordingly joins the ranks of Lucilla’s interrupted, unsuccessful suitors. Instead, Tom Marjoribanks, Lucilla’s cousin and her forgotten suitor from the very beginning of the novel, returns and reintroduces the third narrative and thematic strand that gets itself entangled in the interaction of the heterosexual and the political plot: the family plot.

Tom’s position in the novel is, paradoxically, both central and marginalized, and replicates the position of the family narrative that he, as Lucilla’s cousin, represents for the novel. After he leaves for India (MM 96-7) for what turns out to be a ten-year absence, Tom is exiled from the narrative for most of its duration. He is psychologically as well as physically absent through most of the novel. He only fleetingly appears in
Lucilla's thoughts (e.g. MM 259. 266-7, 339), often unnamed: "there came into Lucilla's mind a name, a humble name, which has been often pronounced in the pages of this history, and it gave her once more a certain consolation" (MM 332). Only when Tom's mother comes to visit the Marjoribanks', Tom is gradually foregrounded again (cf. MM 352-3, 396). After the end of Lucilla's political plot with Ashburton's election, however, Tom begins to preoccupy Lucilla's thoughts as the potential alternative to Mr Ashburton.

Despite Tom's physical absence and his marginal role in Lucilla's story throughout most of the narrative, his framing presence at the beginning and at the end of the novel also renders him the most important of Lucilla's suitors. His two proposals are the most intricate and dramatic juxtapositions of excess and absence of all of the novel's proposal scenes. The two scenes mirror each other as two proposal scenes in which the push-and-pull dynamics of climactic declaration and disruption are multiplied by rapid-fire internal repetition. While Tom's final proposal eventually finally provides the (albeit mitigated) closure to the marriage plot, the first proposal introduces the coitus interruptus pattern that organizes all proposal scenes and courtship narratives in Miss Marjoribanks up to the final proposal scene. Importantly (and I will return to this point), Tom's paradoxical position as both marginal and central to the marriage plot derives from the fact that he represents, in a transmuted version, the family narrative. As Lucilla's cousin, he is the closest relative (whether blood relative or in-law) that Lucilla can legally marry. He can thus always be read as either suitor or family member, always oscillating between the stranger and the brother. Tom is thus always both inside and outside the
family romance, and by reverse implication both outside and inside the legally and
socially permissible exogamous marriage plot.

Indeed, when Lucilla tries to defuse Tom’s first ‘on-stage’ proposal—indeed, the
very first shown, rather than told, proposal in the novel—she draws on his status as a
cousin in order to deflect his declaration of heterosexual feelings for her. When he
proposes, she thus insists on casting their relationship as familial—an insistence that is
prefigured in her account of Tom’s earlier attempt at proposing: “a cousin of my own!” is
simply unacceptable—especially one without money, status, or even age to recommend
him (MM 38). Lucilla reemphasizes the familial to deflate the climactic moment: “We
have always been the very best friends in the world.... I always said at school I liked you
best of all my cousins; and I am very fond of all my cousins” (MM 95). Even when he
bluntly says, “I love you, Lucilla,” she turns his declaration into one of family feeling—a
strategy that is based on the sentimental equation of the familial and the heterosexual
relationship that allows Emma and Evelina to love their lovers as metaphorical kinsmen
and as husbands: “Of course we all love each other. What is the good of being relations
otherwise?” (MM 95).

Throughout Tom’s attempt at a proposal, which Lucilla predicts from the “all the
signs of desperate resolution in his countenance” (MM 91), Lucilla wishes to avoid rather
than promote the proposal, and accordingly makes repeated efforts “to emancipate herself
before it was too late” (MM 91). One strategy to distract and disrupt Tom is to relegate
his love to the realm of familial affection, as I have described above. Importantly,
though, another strategy is to figure Tom and his proposal as obstacles in her ‘true’
domestic plot. The proposal is read as a disruption of a true climactic moment of her own, literally domestic narrative—namely, the triumphant conclusion of her redecoration project for the drawing room. This redecoration is the central preparation for Lucilla’s control of Carlingford society via her ‘Evenings.’ so that the new drawing-room—a feminine, domestic space that Lucilla characteristically turns into a public forum—comes to represent Lucilla’s social power and influence.

The drawing room looms figures prominent throughout the proposal scene, although it takes place in the library (normally Dr. Marjoribanks’ retreat and troped as a place of male refuge from the domestic which Lucilla invades only occasionally—cf. MM 91, 29). Lucilla’s attention is devoted to the sounds that emanate from the drawing room—audible signs of the wrapping up of the redecoration (MM 90-91). Thus, Lucilla is “aware that things must be approaching a crisis upstairs, and ... listen[ed] intently to the movements overhead” (MM 91). Throughout the proposal scene, Lucilla interrupts Tom to insist that she has to go upstairs to inspect the redecorated room (91, 92, 94), and when he leaves abruptly after having been turned down, her first action is to “run up to the drawing-room without losing a minute” (MM 96). An anticlimactic moment of massive failure for Tom, the proposal thus appears to Lucilla as a temporary interruption of the true narrative climax—the grand finale of the redecoration. In keeping with Lucilla’s view of Tom as an obstacle, Tom is consistently troped as a “hindrance” (MM 53) in Lucilla’s life. “much in her way” (MM 72), indeed “always in the way” (MM 82).

Despite these diversionary tactics, Tom nevertheless insists on getting closure, on proposing and thus forcing Lucilla to give him an answer. Lucilla does not succeed in
preventing him from "as she herself described it, 'saying the very words'" (MM 93). Making himself an obstacle to her domestic narrative, he "set[s] himself directly in her way." (MM 95), rejects her focus on the family and redirects his declaration to the heterosexual marriage plot: "It isn't because I am your cousin. I wish to Heaven I was not your cousin, but some one you had never seen before. I mean I want you to consent to—to—to—marry me, Lucilla" (MM 95). Lucilla is finally forced to give him an answer—although she manages to trope it as a general principle rather than an individualized rejection, a strategy that hyperbolically expands the earlier generalization of his position as that of all of her family members: "As for marrying me, you know it is ridiculous. I have not the least intention of marrying anybody" (MM 96, my emphasis).

This moment of rejecting Tom is, more than any other in the novel, the point at which Lucilla can simultaneously relish the sense of having accomplished closure in the marriage plot and feel "that delightful sense of power and abundant resources with which she was mastering the present difficulty" (MM 94). She thus inspects the new drawing-room, the spatial center of her domestic power as a single woman, "well pleased, with a heart which kept beating very steadily in her bosom" (MM 96). For Tom, of course, the proposal is a moment of seemingly irreversible failure—Lucilla's rejection triggers his departure to India and is thus the cause of his absence from the narrative until the very end of the novel.

When Tom re-emerges at the conclusion of Lucilla's political plot to propose again—this time successfully—the dynamics of his first proposal are echoed, but also significantly reversed. He again disrupts the narrative Lucilla has envisioned for herself
(namely, marrying Mr. Ashburton), but this time, his arrival is troped—like the completion of the drawing-room decoration earlier—as a desirable disruption. As in Tom’s first proposal scene, the sounds that intrude from off-stage distract Lucilla’s attention and disrupt a proposal, but it is now Tom who produces these sounds, while a rival’s marriage plot is brutally disrupted by them. As in Tom’s earlier proposal scene, Lucilla reacts not to the physically present suitor Ashburton, but to the narrative of Tom’s arrival, conjectured based on a sequence of sounds—the arriving cab, the night bell, the door bell and eventually the crash of an overturned table (MM 472). Ashburton, unable to interpret Lucilla’s startling reactions which seem excessive since he reads them as reactions to his own hesitant proposal ("I think we could get on together." MM 469), leaves the room, and eventually the house, “much annoyed at bottom, as was only natural, at such an interruption” and without knowing "whether he was accepted or rejected" (MM 471). But while thus yet another proposal is radically disrupted here, it is disrupted by a proposal—a strategy of combining excess and absence that surpasses all earlier attempts to collapse the two narrative strategies of excess and absence in Miss Marjoribanks. The climacticity of the entire scene is underscored by the tremendous erotic energy that exudes from the interaction between Lucilla and Tom. The literally erotic is here—albeit momentarily—reinserted into the marriage plot from which it had been lacking throughout the novel.

Lucilla’s preoccupation with Tom proposal is troped as extremely physical. Even shortly before his arrival, the mere abstraction of him as “other people” who might love her causes “to rush forth a crowd of quickcoming and fantastic suggestions which took
away Lucilla’s breath, and made her heart beat loud” (MM 468). Her bodily reactions intensify when Tom, during Ashburton’s hesitant proposal, is approaching the house. When Lucilla hears the cab arriving, she is described as having “all at once changed colour and given a great start, and put her hand to her breast, where her heart had taken such a leap that she felt it in her throat” (MM 469). Her body is even more foregrounded (and fragmented) when her heart is described as leaving “its mistress altogether, and rush[ing] downstairs bodily to see who was coming” (MM 470). It is the violent ringing of the night bell that triggers this reaction and causes her to get up “trembling, and then drop[.] upon her seat again, and in her agitated state burst into tears” (MM 470).

After Ashburton’s departure, Lucilla’s physical agitation intensifies; she is “in a perfect frenzy of suspense, listening with her whole heart and soul” (MM 471), in “a state of overstimulation and absorption” (481). But when Tom, unmistakable in his physical clumsiness, upsets the card table on his way up to the living-room, her “composure came back to her... she unclasped her hands... and she gave a long sigh of unutterable relief” (MM 472). This sexualized, orgasmic description of Lucilla’s increasing agitation and subsequent release and physical relaxation is completed by Tom’s embrace and kiss (MM 472). At this postcoital point, if you will, Lucilla tries to regain control—she attempts to take “the reins at once into her hand” once she has “come to herself” (MM 472). But Tom’s physical presence, so blatantly prefigured in his noisy arrival, and his insistence on manifestly erotic physical contact—kisses, embraces, holding her hands—prevent her from immediately reshaping the erotic dimension of the scene and of their relationship into a ‘family thing’. She tries, as in the first scene, to redirect her own and Tom’s
attention towards their kinship—attempting to convince herself when he takes her hands that “he had a kind of right, being a cousin, and newly returned after so long an absence” (MM 473). But there is still a sexual, as it were post-orgasmic, dimension to her crying, ostensibly for her father, “with honest abandonment,” not taking “much notice what her cousin was doing to comfort her, though indeed he applied himself to that benevolent office in the most anxious way” (MM 473).

The eroticization of the proposal scene in this finale to the ‘right’ courtship plot importantly goes along with a reemphasis of the sexualized gender hierarchies of intercourse. Tom appears, first and foremost, as aggressively masculine in this scene: “he had such a beard, and was twice as big and strong as he used to be” (MM 476), while Lucilla is weak and powerless: after the earlier orgasmic agitation, she is in a “softened state,” not feeling “her own mistress at that moment” (MM 475). She thus “relinquishe[s] her superior position for the time being and was so weak as to cry” (MM 476). Finally, she acquiesces to his proposal—significantly, without saying a word:

she did not even take the trouble to answer any question, or to think who it was she was leaning on. It was to be Tom after all—aft er all the archdeacons, doctors, generals, members of Parliament.... it was not even necessary to say anything about it. The fact was so clear that it did not require stating. It was to be Tom after all. (MM 476-7)

Lucilla, just like Emma before her, is thus properly and femininely silent during the ‘right’ proposal scene. Her acquiescence puts her in a position of feminine submission vis-à-vis Tom, who in turn is troped as the conventional masculine conqueror.
Significantly, then, the erotic is here refigured—in contrast to the thrill of gender transgression that had characterized the erotics of the political plot—as based on stable gender hierarchies. Lucilla’s orgasmic experience is one of passive weakness, abandonment, loss of power: Tom’s triumph over Lucilla is cast as taking possession, as a defloration that follows the paradoxical script of erotically thrilling, desirable rape. Although Lucilla’s submission to Tom does not reach the physical extreme of a masochistic desire for pain, Miss Marjoribanks thus recasts the problematic construction of the erotic in Fanny Hill. Sexuality qua heterosexuality once more is unthinkable without the (patently physical) submission of women to male authority. In this respect, Lucilla’s marriage to Tom is a cooptation, through which her subversive masculinity is curbed at a point when it has become truly threatening—i.e. when Lucilla might, in fact, stay independent as well as single, as head of her deceased father’s household, despite the loss of her fortune.

But if Tom’s proposal is troped as a conquest, a victory over Lucilla that puts Lucilla into the conventional submissive position, it is indeed merely “for the time being” (MM 476) that he overcomes her. Tom’s masculine position is never altogether without ambiguity—as with Lucilla’s crying, the emotional upheaval of the proposal scene is manifest in “big tears in the great fellow’s eyes,” which may in fact be one of the factors contributing to Lucilla’s submission (MM 476). And once she has agreed that “it is to be him,” he does not assert his masculinity and makes “no offensive demonstrations of triumph” (MM 477). Lucilla, then, quickly reasserts her position of power once she has agreed to marry him, and regains control over the situation (and, indeed, over Tom).
The entire climactic scene appears as a short-lived failure to overturn an
established ruler once the sexual excitement generated by the encounter has abated.

Lucilla’s

self-possession gradually came back to her when the crisis was over, and
she felt that her involuntary abdication had lasted long enough, and that it
was full time to take the management of affairs back into her own hands.

(MM 477).

The language here shifts back to the familiar political metaphors, and Lucilla’s
masculinized position of power is once more established. Tom is “master of the situation
no more”: “The moment of his supremacy [is] over” (MM 478) once Lucilla has agreed
to marry him.

Importantly, Tom’s victorious moment is short-lived precisely because he is
Lucilla’s cousin—because he does not only participate in an eroticized heterosexual
marriage plot, but also in a family narrative. Although cousinhood cannot function as an
obstacle to marriage, as Lucilla had constructed it to be in the first proposal scene with
Tom, it does, eventually, defuse the potential erotics (along with the threat they present to
Lucilla’s empowered, masculinized position) of the relationship with Tom. Even during
the proposal scene itself, Tom has trouble making any distinction between the
heterosexual and familial as he had tried to earlier (MM 95), and the conversation moves
seamlessly from his own affection for Lucilla to that of her father for him (MM 474).

But if the collapse of the familial with the heterosexual relationship was a two-
 edged sword in *Emma* and *Evelina*, always potentially eroticizing the family relationship,
this potential danger is completely removed in *Miss Marjoribanks*. Family feeling in Oliphant’s novel no longer means the hyperbolically expressed sentimental bond between father and daughter or brother and sister. In *Miss Marjoribanks*, cousin marriage is thus emphatically not “a convenient and fitting displacement of love toward a nuclear family member” and “a psychologically safe outlet for incestuous feelings,” as Nancy Anderson claims for Victorian marriage (286). Instead, family feeling in Oliphant’s novel comes to mean a homosocial bond from which the erotic side is radically excised in favor of a family politics that puts Lucilla in charge as the figurative first-born son.

Ironically, this anti-erotic configuration of the family narrative is in place despite the fact that Tom is, very literally, a father replacement when he returns upon the death of Dr. Marjoribanks. Indeed, as cousin, father stand-in and husband, he renders the collapse of the familial and the heterosexual even more complete than Mr. Knightley did, as father-figure *cum* brother-in-law, in *Emma*. But he replaces a father whose disempowered position in the family narrative he replicates rather than amends. *Emma’s* rewriting of the father-daughter relationship in the husband-wife constellation via the weak, ‘wrong’ father is here radicalized. The familial marriage plot that unites Lucilla with Tom ultimately preserves the gender inversion and the absence of the erotic that characterize the relationship between Dr. Marjoribanks and his ambiguously gendered child.

The lack of the erotic, even the lack of the prescribed sentimental discourse, in the relationship between Dr. Marjoribanks and his daughter is highly visible in the novel. Dr. Marjoribanks is physically distant from his daughter, “very little given to embracing... a
hasty kiss on her forehead was the warmest caress he had ever given his daughter” (MM 27). But Lucilla herself is equally detached—she merely follows “a programme of filial devotion” (MM 31), of sentimental conventions that regulate what she and her father should feel, when she is ready to “fall into her father’s arms” (MM 27) after her mother’s death. The sentimental father-daughter bond has become utterly conventionalized here, and is thereby emptied of its erotic potential.

The lack of a heterosexual erotics in the relationship between father and daughter in Miss Marjoribanks is the result of a radical reconstruction of that relationship as a homosocial one. Lucilla is not only the masculinized ruler of Carlingford society; she also succeeds her father as male ruler in the household—rather than replacing her dead mother in a heterosexual constellation. Thus, her relationship with her father is troped as a direct struggle for power from which she eventually emerges victorious. In the battle between father and daughter, Dr. Marjoribanks “withd[aws] in calm possession of the field” (MM 32) upon Lucilla’s first attempt to take “what she called the charge of the establishment” (MM 33) immediately after her mother’s death. But when Lucilla returns after her grand tour, her “coming into her kingdom” (MM 47) is signaled, most importantly, by her father’s yielding his own position to her. Lucilla takes his seat at the breakfast table, and when he sits down next to her, he realizes that “he had abdicated... and that the reins of state had been smingly withdrawn from his unconscious hands” (MM 51). Lucilla’s male role in the family dynamics are reinforced by Dr. Marjoribanks’ desire for a male child. He emphasizes twice that it would have been preferable that Tom was his son and Lucilla Aunt Jemima’s daughter (cf. MM 62) and says, shortly before his
death, "If you had been a boy like that stupid fellow Tom, you might have carried on my practice, Lucilla" (MM 396). Accordingly, Lucilla behaves like a male heir when she decides to maintain the household after her father's sudden death, rather than becoming a subordinate in one of the various female households that (like her aunt Jemima's) could provide her a home.

The disempowering heterosexual erotics of Tom's final proposal scene are thus highly temporary because they are incompatible with Lucilla's retaining her empowered position in a family narrative as her father's successor. The re-suppression of the erotic, so tightly associated with feminine submission, is necessary because it is inseparable from the inversion of gender roles that allows Lucilla to remain in charge even though she gets married. The erotic participates in establishing the patriarchal order and thence vanishes altogether when that order finally and totally breaks down when Lucilla re-establishes her rule with Tom as one of the "auxiliaries" needed by "a skilful leader" (MM 148). It is Tom's role as her cousin and thus Lucilla's positioning in the familial plot which enables her to maintain and even strengthen her position of power. This is particularly apparent in that the marriage to Tom does not require Lucilla to change her name. As Lucilla herself points out, she shall "never be anything but Lucilla Marjoribanks!" (MM 498). If Lucilla's identity is here constructed as one that remains unchanged and untouched by the heterosexual initiation represented by the proposal scene, the novel reinforces this stable masculine identity characteristically through repetition. By purchasing the Marchbank estate as a future home, she becomes a hyperbolic "Marjoribanks of Marchbank" (MM 486) and reinforces her status as her
father's successor by fulfilling his patriarchal fantasy of living on the estate that bears his name.

Lucilla here quickly resumes her masculinized position of a ruler, and accordingly includes in her plans for her (and Tom's) future life a continuation of her political plot—as she says to herself, “there are members for counties” as well as for towns like Carlingford (MM 497). In searching for a sphere for herself and Tom, who “had left his profession behind him at Calcutta” (MM 481), she thus quickly comes up with a social and political task that goes beyond the domestic intimacy of married life, even though it characteristically starts with the domestic sphere—literally, with a house. In buying the Marchbank estate, Lucilla wants to do more than establish her future home. She has a social and political vision

of a parish saved, a village reformed, a county reorganised, and a triumphant election a: the end, the recompense and crown of all, which should put the government of the country itself, to a certain extent, into competent hands. (MM 497)

Those hands are, of course, not Tom's, but those of Miss Marjoribanks, who still has “the practical glance of a statesman” (MM 496). Her masculinized position enables her to see her marriage not as an ending, but as a beginning, a “new world of ambition and progress” (MM 493) that lies ahead of her at the end of the novel. Thus, the conclusion of her marriage plot—and, by definition, of the novel—is not the ending of Lucilla Marjoribanks' narrative. Her vision of future activities undermines the teleology of a marriage plot which is explicitly troped as a deviation from the expected and
conventional. Marrying Tom is, as the narrator says in a self-referential moment at the end of the novel, not the “commonplace conclusion” that her marriage to Ashburton would have been, but instead “an altogether original and unlooked-for ending” (MM 495). It is original—and undermines the traditional marriage-plot ending—precisely because it does not relegate Lucilla Marjoribanks to the subordinate, marginalized position of a wife. She still rules!

3. Phineas Finn: The Hero as Fallen Woman

If the seemingly conventional ending of Miss Marjoribanks eventually celebrates the heroine’s masculinized position as statesman, Trollope’s Phineas Finn features a feminized hero whose narrative is ultimately a “dysphoric” narrative of disempowerment, to use Nancy Miller’s term once more. Both Oliphant’s and Trollope’s novels politicize the marriage plot, and heterosexualize the political narrative. But whereas Lucilla Marjoribanks occupied a powerful position in both marriage plot and political plot in Miss Marjoribanks, Phineas Finn participates in both narratives as a feminized, disempowered, passive, and even victimized figure. Approaching the disintegrating boundary between gendered spheres and narrative from the male side, Phineas Finn undercuts this boundary more radically, and more threateningly. The novel ultimately disempowers the hero and ultimately annihilates him qua protagonist both in the marriage plot and in the political plot. This dysphoric trajectory is only seemingly reversed in its direction when a figurative family narrative about Phineas’ return to his native Ireland
tentatively recuperates his role as hero. As in *Miss Marjoribanks*, this recuperative
ending is undercut, with the effect that the dysphoria of *Phineas Finn* lingers on, *dehors
du texte*, as much as *Miss Marjoribanks'* euphoria does. *Phineas Finn*, then, is a very
fitting novel to conclude my series of readings of feminocentric narrative of defloration.
That a male protagonist is here cast as the heroine of a heterosexual narrative is an
extreme but logical consequence of the destabilization of gendered spheres and narratives
that begins with Fanny Hill and Clarissa Harlowe as ‘cross-dressed’ female narrators
invented by male authors.

I will argue that Phineas Finn occupies a feminized role in both of his interwoven
*Bildungsromane*—both in terms of his political *Lehrjahre* (to say it with Goethe) and in
terms of his *éducation sentimentale* via the marriage plot (to say it with Flaubert). These
two narrative strands are interwoven in *Phineas Finn* just as they were in *Miss
Marjoribanks*. Importantly, however, Trollope himself sees these two story lines as
separate in his *Autobiography*, in keeping with and in analogy to his insistence on
separate spheres:

> In writing *Phineas Finn*, and also some other novels which followed it, I
> was conscious that I could not make a tale pleasing chiefly, or perhaps in
> any part, by politics. If I write politics for my own sake, I must put in love
> and intrigue, social incidents, with perhaps a dash of sport, for the benefit
> of my readers. In this way I think I made my political hero interesting.

(Trollope, *Autobiography*, 274)
Trollope’s own assessment of his work is here, as elsewhere in his *Autobiography*, deeply problematic. As McMaster (who among many others quotes this famous passage), points out, the novel does not support this predominance of “a matrix of politics,” but constantly intermingles “the professional and the personal life” (McMaster 38, cf. also Polhemus, “Love,” 384). But it seems to me that the interweaving of the two plots—especially via the political interest of the two women who are also Phineas’ most prominent love interests—is merely the most obvious and superficial facet of the blending of the spheres and their plots. The political investment of Lady Laura Standish and Madame Max Goesler and even Violet Effingham’s remarks on Mill certainly make clear that Trollope acknowledged the contemporary debate on women’s suffrage even if he never wholeheartedly (or even half-heartedly) embraced the idea of women’s political rights. But this manifest discourse on women and politics in Trollope’s later fiction tends to loom so large in the critical discourse that it obscures the undermation of the political sphere from *within*—by way of figuring the political itself as a heterosexual plot which feminizes Phineas as a fallen woman. Randall Craig implies such a heterosexualizing of the political plot when he says, for all Palliser novels, that they “exhibit a pervasive interest in the rhetoric of courtship and seduction, both of *voters* and of lovers” (Craig, 218, my emphasis). But if voters are courted and seduced like women in the marriage plot, they are also thereby feminized, relegated to a passive position that certainly characterizes Phineas. (Significantly, he appears more often as a member of parliament whose vote is courted by a certain faction than as a candidate courting the voters.)
That Phineas himself is feminized by his narrative—via the political plot especially, but also via the marriage plot—is thus a peculiar blind spot in recent, usually highly gender-sensitive Trollope criticism. Indeed, the critical discourse on gender has so far focused almost exclusively on Trollope’s treatment of women. As many critics in the wake of McMaster’s earlier study of the Palliser novels have pointed out, the Palliser series features some of the most striking female characters in Trollope’s œuvre—unconventional women with sometimes manifest political interests who are, nevertheless, sympathetically portrayed (cf. the studies of McMaster, Morse, Nardin and to a degree Walton). Like Lucilla Marjoribanks, women like Lady Laura and Madame Max Goesler are masculinized without being condemned by the narrator as unfeminine bluestockings.

For Madame Goesler in particular, it has become a standard observation that she is a strikingly masculine figure since Shirley Letwine pointed out, almost in passing, that she is “the most perfect gentleman in Trollope’s novels” (Letwine 74). But although Nardin, Morse and Walton all observe that Madame Goesler appears as the male suitor in her courtship with Phineas (cf. Nardin 193, Morse 42, Walton 58), they do not discuss the implicit feminization of Phineas that goes hand in hand with this gender reversal.

Instead, Nardin and Morse both see the relationship between Phineas and Madame Goesler as one of equals, presumably both masculine. And while Walton and McMaster note that Phineas’ positioning in the story often parallels that of conventional female characters (Walton 50, McMaster 48), they do not elaborate on the gender implications of this parallel, either.
Interestingly, the same critics who do not question or probe the ostensibly conventional gendering of Phineas in *Phineas Finn*, point to his feminization in *Phineas Redux*. For the second of the Phineas novels, Nardin thus argues that Phineas “begins to identify with the feminine perspective” (Nardin 199) and Walton speaks of him as “placed in a feminine position” (Walton 97). So ingrained is the conventional association of the political plot with masculinity that both critics locate this feminization precisely in the moment when Phineas is forced to retire from the political life. It is only the utterly disempowered position of Phineas as a murder suspect in prison that figures as feminization in the argument of these critics. I would hold, however, that Phineas’ incarceration in *Phineas Redux* is merely a more literal and indeed almost overstated restaging, via the sensation narrative, of what the political *Bildungsroman* in *Phineas Finn* already established. Phineas is feminized from the very beginning of his story in *Phineas Finn*, and it is this feminization that renders Trollope’s gender construction in many respects more radical than his unconventional women figures.

The radicalism of Phineas’ gender transgression has to do with the direction it takes—with the almost banal fact that feminization disempowers rather than empowers. Although masculinization has its downsides—after all, the narrator in *Miss Marjoribanks* consistently ridicules the heroine’s authority through the mock-heroic imagery—it means an increase in power. Feminization, by contrast, is culturally constructed as disempowering—when Phineas crosses gender boundaries, he stands to lose the very social, political and narrative authority that Lucilla Marjoribanks gains. Feminization is troped negatively, as an absence of masculine traits—as effereminacy or emasculation. It is
this lack of masculinity—again, a manifest gap or absence—that is associated with
Phineas’ passivity, malleability, and willingness to be guided. Once Phineas has lost his
most unmitigatedly positive feminine trait—namely, his virginal naïveté and innocence—
his tendency to wish to please others becomes a negative feature. His “flexibility” and
“adaptability,” as McMaster calls them without discussing the gender implications of his
caracter traits (McMaster 48), are constructed as whorish, inappropriately feminine,
inappropriately sexual, and thus excessive.

Admittedly, Phineas resists his feminization, both in the political and the marriage
plot, through a certain residual maleness that has led critics like Robert Polhemus to
argue that he is a Don Juan figure—rather than a Fanny Hill figure as I would argue (cf.
“Love” 384-5). It is this residual masculinity that saves Phineas from being altogether
condemned for his political and heterosexual promiscuity, and eventually redeems him at
the end of the novel. But ironically, Phineas’ final insistence on a masculine ethics of
doing right—of standing by his political convictions and marital commitments that
effectively annihilates Phineas as political actor, as participant in a dynamic narrative of
courtship. and. ultimately. as protagonist. His femininity, on the other hand, provides his
narrative with its dramatic impulse—his very passivity and malleability paradoxically
advance his plot because they induce in more powerful and influential characters the
desire to act through him and upon him.

Interestingly, Phineas’ residual masculinity is perhaps less crucial to the
seemingly all-male political narrative than to his multiple marriage plots. The marriage
plot of Phineas Finn is the plot that at first sight feminizes Phineas a priori by making
him the protagonist of a domestic, heterosexual narrative conventionally told about a woman. But initially, this plot relies heavily on this residue of manliness. During his time in England (and I will treat his Irish courtship with Mary Flood Jones separately later on), Phineas courts three women more or less consecutively: Lady Laura Standish, Violet Effingham, and Madame Max Goesler. Although he is positioned in a somewhat disempowered, feminized position vis-à-vis all of them because of his inferior social and financial status, Phineas starts out as a relatively active, occasionally aggressive male suitor who is much less restricted in his physical and psychological movements than a stereotypical heroine would be. He is the agent in his own courtship narrative, and is not forced into a passive position of waiting for someone else to make a first step. But with each woman he courts, the excesses and erasures that characterize his courtships as much as they had Lucilla Marjoribanks’ render him more feminine. I will trace this process briefly through the three courtships.

Phineas’ first courtship with Lady Laura Standish is the most traditionally gendered of his three English courtship stories. Even in courting Lady Laura, however, Phineas has to assert his masculinity as an active suitor in the courtship plot against a position that disempowers and feminizes him. Not only does Lady Laura’s social status put Phineas in the position of the social climber who hopes to rise in society through marriage (a typically ‘feminine’ strategy since Pamela and, for that matter, Fielding’s Shamela); Lady Laura is also the wise mentor and political advisor to Phineas’ willing student (PF i, 74). Echoing Ashburton’s strategies to reassert his masculinity vis-à-vis Lucilla Marjoribanks, Phineas early on translates his political affiliation with Lady Laura
into a heterosexual relationship when he begins to "tell himself that he was in love with her" (PF i, 37). His sense of having a homosocial rival in Robert Kennedy prompts him, after much hesitation, to propose to her while both are Kennedy's guests at Loughlinter. Phineas here attempts to shape the moment of his proposal as a conventionally climactic highpoint in his male, linear plot. Although he fails, however, he manages to rescue enough of its climacticity to gain a sense of closure that seals the affair with Lady Laura and allows him to move on to woo Violet Effingham.

Phineas' attempt at a carefully choreographed climax is underscored by the geography of the setting he has chosen for his proposal. During a scheduled walk together on Mr. Kennedy's land, Lady Laura and Phineas go to "the open mountain at the top" (PF i, 136), since "Phineas had resolved that he would not speak out his mind till he found himself on that spot" (PF i, 136). But the scripted climactic moment of his declaration never comes; even the conventional posture is disrupted when Lady Laura responds, to Phineas' announcement that "I have something that I desire to say to you, and to say it here" by taking the wind out of his sails, not unlike Lucilla Marjoribanks telling Cavendish to marry Barbara Lake: "I also have something to tell you, and will say it while I am yet standing. Yesterday I accepted an offer of marriage from Mr. Kennedy" (PF i, 136-7, my emphasis).

Thus, Phineas' proposal is brutally cut short; his relationship with Lady Laura is never consummated in a proposal he never gets to make. But, unlike Tom Marjoribanks when he first proposes, Phineas cannot simply abandon his narrative without a climactic conclusion. Although he has already been turned down, Phineas insists on letting Lady
Laura know that he came “to ask you to be my wife” (PF i, 138) and thereby forces her to admit that she “could have loved” Phineas “had not circumstances showed me so plainly that it would be unwise.” (PF i, 139). The moment of the disrupted proposal, then, contains a—however muted and mitigated—declaration of love. This declaration enables Phineas to refigure the disrupted proposal into an erotic climax that is sealed by “one kiss, that I may think of it [the proposal] and treasure it in my memory” (PF i, 141). The kiss here becomes a stand-in for the proposal-cum-sexual initiation that Phineas could not complete. It is “an eternal fact,” a deflorative, ecstatic moment the memory of which produces “a flavour of exquisite joy in the midst of his agony” (PF i, 143). The proposal scene thus brings a certain erotic fulfillment for Phineas, because the kiss consummates his relationship with Lady Laura. Phineas thus produces closure for his narrative, even if the narrative does not permit it to be unmitigated triumph of an accepted proposal. The finality of the kiss allows him to put an end to his courtship and to turn to another object for his affection and ambition. 23

The final result of the proposal scene clearly establishes Phineas in a traditionally gendered role that allows him to shift his affection to another woman without being punished—as women invariably are in Trollope for wavering in their affection. 24 While women are constructed as faithful to their first love (like Mary Flood Jones to Phineas, or Violet Effingham to Lord Chiltern), men can love serially and repeatedly, and are readily forgiven and even glorified for their flirtation by the women who ‘truly’ love them. The narrator insists on this double standard that allows numerous partners for men, but prescribes faithful monogamy for women:
A man desires to win a virgin heart, and is happy to know—or at least to believe—that he has won it. With a woman every former rival is an added victim to the wheels of the triumphant chariot in which she is sitting. “All these has he known and loved, culling sweets from each of them. But now he has come to me, and I am the sweetest of them all.” (PF ii, 352; cf. PF ii, 267)

Phineas fits the ideal of such legitimately promiscuous masculinity here and is thus expected to exhibit a kind of serial promiscuity, as Violet Effingham casually observes to Lady Laura: “He [Phineas] tried his ‘prentice hand on you; and then he came to me. Let us watch him, and see who’ll be the third” (PF ii, 67). Lady Laura similarly predicts, addressing Phineas, that “your heart is one in which love can have no durable hold.... there may be a dozen Violets after [Violet Effingham], and you will be none the worse” (PF ii, 166, cf. also PR i, 105). Phineas’ residual masculinity legitimizes the excessive repetitions of Phineas’ proposals to several women; it saves him from being troped as a whore in the framework of the marriage plot (but importantly not of the political plot, as I will shortly argue).

When Phineas thus rather effortlessly “transfer[s] his affection to Violet Effingham” (PF i, 159), he seems simply to restage his courtship with Lady Laura. Once more, he courts a woman who is socially his superior, and, just as his rivalry with Robert Kennedy had prompted him to propose to Lady Laura, his interest in Violet is motivated by his rivalry with Chiltern. Indeed, the dynamics of his first proposal to Violet are strikingly similar to the proposal at Loughlinter. Like Lady Laura, Violet interrupts him
before he can state his purpose explicitly (PF i. 326). But whereas Phineas was able to reach a point of closure with Lady Laura, Violet’s protracted singleness causes him to return and propose again. He thus repeats the pattern of the unsuccessful proposal twice, only to be rejected twice (PF ii, 70, ii. 248f.). Only Violet’s final union with Chiltern, after Phineas’ own engagement to Mary, puts an end to his persistent but consistently rejected proposals.

While Phineas first courtship had yielded a relatively linear narrative with one climactic—if interrupted—narrative climax, his repeated proposals to Violet undermine such linearity. Violet’s own story, which serves as a counterexample to Phineas’ marriage plot, reinforces the subversion of the linear through excess multiplication of disrupted and incomplete proposals and courtships. As the most proposal-prone of the novel’s female characters, Violet is proposed to (or almost proposed to) three times by Phineas and four times by his rival, Lord Chiltern, while two other men, Mr. Appledon and Lord Fawn, court her concurrently with these two more serious contenders. At the same time, however, Violet’s own exclusive interest in Chiltern contrasts with Phineas’ serial involvements.

Phineas’ courtship of Violet does not only undermine the ‘male’ linearity of the marriage plot by way of repeated proposals; it also undermines the masculinity that Phineas had been able to assert in his proposal to Lady Laura. This underminination does not, however, occur in the relationship between Phineas and Violet (a rather traditionally passive Trollopian heroine when it comes to the marriage plot), but in the relationship between Phineas and his friend and rival Chiltern. This relationship is characterized by
an increasingly erotic and heterosexualizing dynamic that renders very literal the narrator’s early observation that “there had sprung up a sort of intimacy between [Phineas] and Chiltern” (PF i, 109).

Phineas’ homosocial rivalry with Chiltern is initially manifest as a rather abstract possessiveness that parallels Phineas’ feelings of jealousy when he becomes aware of Lady Laura’s rival suitors (cf. PF i, 80). Thus, Phineas first shows a tentative interest in Violet when Lady Laura tells him that Chiltern is “violently in love” with Violet (PF i, 156):

Phineas, though not conscious of anything akin to jealousy, was annoyed at the revelation made to him.... He himself had simply admired Miss Effingham, and had taken pleasure in her society; but, though this had been all, he did not like to hear of another man wanting to marry her. (PF i, 157)

Afterwards, Phineas’ growing interest in Violet is consistently linked to his awareness that Chiltern is courting her (cf. e.g. PF i, 160, 190, 206), and their two courtship narratives begin to track each other. Phineas’ three proposals are framed by and predicated upon the progression of Chiltern’s courtship (or the lack thereof). Thus, Phineas’ first two proposals come after Violet has rejected Chiltern three times, and his last attempt at proposing follows after Violet has broken the engagement with Chiltern, before she reunites herself (predictably and for good) with her first and only object of affection.
But it is Chiltern’s direct relationship with Phineas, only tentatively triangulated through both men’s relationship to Violet, that heterosexualizes their relationship directly and positions Phineas as the feminine counterpart to Chiltern’s hyperbolic masculinity. Chiltern is described throughout the novel as masculine to excess. As Walton puts it, he is an “overtly sexual character” (52), but this overt sexuality is, importantly, explicitly troped as masculine, associated with stereotypically male activities—hunting, drinking, gambling, fighting, and even potential wife-battery and manslaughter. Chiltern is known to have killed a man in anger (PF i, 99), has “a certain look of ferocity” (PF i, 98), and is consistently identified as a potentially dangerous husband (cf. PF i, 98; ii. 152). But while he is described as wild, savage, and rough, he is also, in the same tradition of manliness, “honest” and “chivalric” (PF i, 99).

Chiltern’s absolute masculinity reduces Phineas’ gentler, domesticated maleness to femininity. Throughout the novel, Phineas, although always ready for conventional masculine pursuits—from hunting to fighting duels—never takes the initiative, but always needs external prompting. Unlike Chiltern, he is perfectly well behaved in the feminized domestic setting of salons and drawing rooms. When contrasted with Chiltern’s untamed masculinity, Phineas is thus always positioned as less masculine, as passive and reactive—but also, importantly, as the more likeable, more gentlemanly and certainly, to women, more attractive character. Phineas’ lack of aggressive masculinity often appears as charming and endearing. Violet herself praises his mitigated masculinity repeatedly to Lady Laura. She says “There is just enough of him, but not too much” when she compares him with other men (PF i, 201), and again states that “he is a man of spirit.
And then he has not too much spirit... His manners are perfect,—not Chesterfieldian, and yet never offensive” (PF i. 253). And yet, Violet eventually clearly chooses the emphatically masculine Chiltern over the softer, domesticated, feminine Phineas.

If Phineas is a priori a representative of the more gentle, domesticated, but not necessarily more sexually attractive masculinity that might still be seen in the Sir Charles Grandison or George Knightley tradition, he is altogether feminized in the duel scene with Chiltern. Phineas’ letter to Chiltern, in which he announces his intention to propose to Violet, is still in line with his construction as mitigatedly but emphatically masculine. He does not ask or wish to fight Chiltern, but is willing to do so (PF i, 323). Chiltern, however, interprets Phineas’ having written the letter as a cowardly and by implication feminine act, “unworthy of the lowest man” (PF i, 351, my emphasis), and demands a fight. With ambiguous overtones that position Phineas not just as his rival, but also as his unfaithful lover, Chiltern states that “my complaint is that you have been false to me.—damnably false; not that you have fallen in love with this young lady or with that” (PF i. 353, my emphasis). In the subsequent duel scene, Phineas is clearly feminized. In the climactic moment of homosocial rivalry, the duel scene, male-on-male violence becomes the stand-in for heterosexual sex—even the illegitimacy of premarital sex is here replicated in the illegality of the duel, clandestine like the love affair it displaces. When the men shoot at each other, Lord Chiltern wounds Phineas, penetrating Phineas’ body in the shoulder (PF ii, 5). Phineas, by contrast, remains passive and does not penetrate Chiltern’s body—indeed, deliberately avoids aiming at Chiltern
(PF ii, 2). The feminized Phineas is here deflowered by the wound he receives, while Chiltern’s male body remains intact.

The duel, then, can be read as yet another displacement of the defloration. Like other displaced sex scenes in the novel, it has a protracted dramatic build-up, but is ultimately rendered anticlimactic, partly by its absence from the narrative. The duel takes place off-stage, geographically removed to a solitary beach in Flanders, and is only reported indirectly by the narrator. Even more importantly, it takes place in secrecy and seclusion, with “Not a living soul, except the five concerned,... aware that a duel had been fought among the sand-hills” (PF ii, 5). It furthermore remains hushed up and thus does not have any of the dramatic consequences Phineas had anticipated—it becomes an absence. “a thing of nothing” (PF ii, 7). The homosocial conflict itself is more than amicably resolved when Chiltern suggests, after this “nothing” of a duel, that they should simply both try their luck with Violet since they “can’t always be fighting duels” (PF ii, 93).

Phineas’ courtship of Violet Effingham thus feminizes Phineas indirectly, via the juxtaposition and homosocial relationship with another male suitor whose ‘true’ masculinity chips away at Phineas’ already mitigated maleness. In Phineas’ last courtship on English territory. Phineas’ feminization is even more radical, since it is directly lodged within the literally heterosexual relationship. It is Madame Max Goesler who takes the initiative in this relationship and eventually proposes to Phineas—a startling gender reversal in the marriage plot that, although noted by critics (cf. Morse 42, Nardin 195), has not received the critical attention it deserves. As with Lady Laura and Violet
Effingham, Phineas initially tries to script a conventional courtship with Madame Goesler. His own interest in her begins, predictably, with homosocial rivalry when he develops the “sudden ambition” of “cut[ting] out’ the Duke of Omnium in the estimation of Madame Max Goesler” (PF ii, 86). But despite his attraction to Madame Goesler (not least to her wealth, which would enable him to continue his political career) Phineas remains passive in his encounters with her, even when his friends eventually advise him to “Pop the question to Madame Max” (PF ii, 272), or to “Try her.” as Lady Laura puts it (PF ii, 291). He remains passive even when he himself realizes that “were he to offer himself to Madame Goesler he would not in truth be rejected” (PF ii, 292).

His passivity is partly accounted for by the fact that he is still actively courting Violet Effingham when he first meets Madame Goesler, and that when the pressure to court Madame Max intensifies he is actually already engaged to Mary Flood Jones. But this passivity is also in keeping with his increasingly feminized role in his courtship narratives. This feminization reaches its peak with Madame Max’s courting of Phineas in a striking reversal of conventional gender roles in the marriage plot. Madame Max is first explicitly troped as masculine and emphatically phallic in terms of her gaze when the narrator says about her eyes that “she employed them to conquer you, looking as a knight may have looked in olden days who entered a chamber with his sword drawn from the scabbard and in his hand” (PF ii, 25). Walton, who quotes this passage, points out that Madame Goesler is figured as masculine because “she is attempting to forge a subject position” like the men in the novel (58), but then does not link Madame Goesler’s masculinization to Phineas’ concomitant feminization. And Epperly, who discusses
Madame Goesler’s role in both *Phineas Finn* and *Phineas Redux*, never draws attention to the masculinizing connotations of what she herself calls Madame Goesler’s “assaults” “invasions” and “thrusts” (“Borderlands” 26, 27) concerning either the Duke or Phineas.

The overabundant images of phallic penetration in Trollope’s (not to mention Epperly’s) descriptions of Madame Goesler, including the image of her as a knight “with his sword drawn,” prefigure the gender inversion in the proposal scene between Phineas and Madame Goesler. This prefiguration is underscored by the masculinizing effect of the name by which she is usually identified. She is very rarely referred to by her first name as “Marie,” sometimes as Madame Goesler, but most frequently as Madame Max and Madame Max Goesler. As an independent widow, Madame Max Goesler seems to own this male name rather than be owned by it. As a widow, she is of course in a much more empowered position than either a wife like Lady Laura Kennedy or an unmarried woman like Violet; especially in her behavior towards men. She can thus invite Phineas to her house (PF ii. 35, 55) not only when she has company, but can receive him and the Duke alone (cf. PF ii. 144; 171; 204 ).

In her courtship with Phineas, but also in her attempts to ensnare the Duke of Omnium in a less explicitly masculine manner, Madame Goesler’s heterosexual ambitions are masculinized. Like Lucilla Marjoribanks’ social strategies. Madame Goesler’s seductive tactics are troped as part of a male public sphere of political and military activity. Thus, Phineas observes Madame Max’s war-like “operations,—the triumphantly successful operations” to attract the Duke (PF ii, 85). and her marital ambitions are explicitly troped as political in the heading of Chapter LX. “Madame
Goesler’s Politics.” However, her position in the marriage plot that connects her to the
Duke is still conventional: he proposes to her and she rejects him. Her relationship to
Phineas, by contrast, reverses this conventional gendering altogether.

From the beginning of their friendship, Madame Max is Phineas’ superior in
financial and social status, and, like Lady Laura at the beginning of the novel, interested
in furthering his political career. Unlike Lady Laura, however, she does not only take on
the role of Phineas’ political advisor and mentor (PF ii. 161), but is also willing to
support him financially in his political endeavors. Mme Goesler’s first offer of financial
support signals the beginning of the open gender reversal in the (so far, highly tentative)
courtship with Phineas. The scene in which she takes the initiative and offers him money
for his political campaign is very clearly troped as a heterosexual proposal scene. It takes
place in a highly intimate setting “in a little book-room inside the library at Matching”
with “the door... nearly closed” and “nobody near them” (PF ii. 98).

In this intimate environment, Madame Goesler’s offer of money collapses
altogether with an offer of herself. Thus, Phineas thinks while she hesitates that she is
going to declare his love for him, and rejects the idea as impossible: “No; she could not
mean to give him any outward plain-spoken sign that she was attached to him” (PF ii.
98). The narrator’s account of her suggestion leaves unclear what precisely she offers,
troping her offer in terms of a heterosexual union:

[S]he told him that accident had made her rich, full of money.... Money
she knew was wanted, even for householders [i.e. eligible voters to be
courted]. Would he not understand her, and come to her, and learn from her how faithful a woman could be? (PF ii, 98)

Phineas in turn reacts, as it were, heterosexually, and kisses her hand, which he is already holding. Both are aware of the unconventional, transgressive character of her proposal. Madame Goesler prefaces her proposal by saying that "there are things one may not say here,—that are tabooed by a sort of consent," and, when she makes her suggestion, she hesitates, "almost stammering" and has to say what is unacceptable in England in significantly unreported "French, blushing and laughing." Phineas is similarly aware of the transgressive gender inversion that takes place with the offer. He describes it in terms of emphatically masculine epithets as "highminded... generous, and ... honourable." But while Madame Goesler's repositioning is here troped as a positive, elevating move, Phineas rejects her offer because accepting it would be "mean-spirited, vile, and ignoble"—indeed, it would put him in the inferior feminized position of a profit-seeking prostitute (all PF ii, 98).

The sense of the inappropriacy of the gender inversion recurs, reinforced, when Madame Goesler literally proposes marriage to Phineas and is again rejected. Madame Goesler's second proposal takes place in her own house, in a drawing room that resembles a paradisiacal and intimate "bower in a garden" (PF ii, 314), in which she is appropriately, "a bird of paradise" (PF ii, 315). The conversation that precedes her proposal underscores the unconventional character of his visit, on a Sunday morning, and prepares the proposal as an act that takes place "on the borders of that delightful region in
which there is none of the constraint of custom,—where men and women say what they like, and do what they like;” as Madame Goesler describes it (PF ii. 315).

But when Madame Goesler does what she likes, she is ultimately rejected because she transgresses these “borders” of gender, and, more importantly, because she forces Phineas to transgress them as well. When she repeats first of all the earlier offer of her money, Phineas makes explicit that gender is in the way of his accepting it: “It is because you are a woman, and young, and beautiful, that no man may take wealth from your hands” (PF ii, 319). When she responds, “Take the hand then first” (PF ii. 319) and stretches her right hand out to him in a melodramatic gesture, she literally offers her body to him, and Phineas understands that she has proposed marriage—“invited him to join his lot to hers” (PF ii, 319). Having fantasized about such a union, especially about its financial advantages, as recently as a few minutes earlier (PF ii, 314), he is tempted, and indeed takes her hand (PF ii, 320), but when he says “It cannot be,” the hand is “withdrawn” (PF ii. 320) and Madame Goesler, surprised and, as she later admits in her letter to Phineas, “angry, not with you, but with myself” (PF ii, 349), leaves the room.

The abrupt and anticlimactic ending of this reversed proposal scene with Phineas’ rejection puts a halt to the ongoing process of Phineas’ feminization—but the ostensible re-establishing of conventional gender boundaries is deeply problematic. Phineas resists the gender position that Madame Goesler’s proposal assigns him. He cannot but reject the offer because he is “a man with a heart within his breast” (PF ii. 321, my italics); in refusing it, he reasserts his masculinity. But he finds no “comfort” or stability in this regained masculinity: instead, he feels “pure and unmixed disappointment” (PF ii, 321).
Phineas’ three unsuccessful English courtships demonstrate the process of his feminization until it comes to a halt with his rejection of Madame Goesler and with his simultaneous re-construction as Mary Flood Jones’ manly, heroic fiancé. It is this return to his Irish origins—to which I will return as well—that will also figure as the moment of his refashioning a masculine role for himself in the political sphere. It is, perhaps, the most striking facet of gender destabilization in Phineas Finn that it is this political plot that renders the protagonist much less ambiguously feminine from the beginning than Phineas’ multiple marriage plots ever do.

The feminizing of Phineas via the political plot is particularly apparent within the all-male sphere of the parliament and the political clubs—much more so than in Phineas’ encounters with the politically ambitious women he courts. Given his feminized position vis-à-vis Lady Laura and Madame Max Goesler, it is unsurprising that these masculinized, socially powerful women see Phineas as their political dependent and even as their creation. Politically interested but barred from direct access to political power, they empower Phineas, who becomes, as it were, their ‘representative’ in Parliament—as it were, a phallic power tool they hope to wield. But, importantly, Phineas’ male political colleagues also treat him like a woman—indeed, they are the ones who are primarily troped as Phineas’ seducers. The rereading of the homosocial as the heterosexual that characterized the relationship between Phineas and Chiltern is radically reinforced here—in a plot that is, even more emphatically than the narrative of the secret Flanders duel, a plot of illegitimate heterosexuality, of Phineas’ political seduction and fall.
The political plot of *Phineas Finn* is thus predicated on heterosexualizing the homosocial plot just as *Miss Marjoribanks*’ political plot was—once more with the effect of destabilizing the boundary between gendered spheres. In certain respects, the collapse is more radical in Trollope’s novel because it takes place within the most exclusively male vestiges of political life—the all-male clubs and the parliament, to neither of which even politically active women have access. It is thus not only the pronounced political interest of women that undermines the construction of the political world as a male domain, as in *Miss Marjoribanks*’ election plot. In addition to the rendering political discourse in the domesticated social sphere prominent in *Phineas Finn*, Trollope depicts an all-male world of parliamentary and party politics that is figured throughout the novel as a heterosexual world which is as domestic as the ostensibly domestic female sphere is public. If the drawing room and the parlor are sites where politics are discussed and political matches are made, and where, by inversion, heterosexual relationships are troped as “affairs… of the nation” (PF i, 103), parliament is also troped as a domestic sphere structured by heterosexual interactions between its members.

The intrusion of the domestic and the feminine into the public sphere is partly manifest in the traditional political metaphors which are re-literalized in *Phineas Finn*. Thus, Lady Laura’s assertion that it is “a man’s duty to make his way into the House” (PF i, 34) is always a domestic as well as a public and political dictum. The ‘House,’ the ‘chamber’ and the ‘cabinet’ denote a domestic intimacy and secrecy in politics that matches that of drawing rooms and even bedchambers. The House is the site of highly personal friendships and enmities: like the domestic sphere, it protects and shields its
inhabitants, as it protects Phineas from Mr. Clarkson, the bill collector (PF i, 197. 263-267). But the House, like the domestic sphere, is also a treacherous place associated with the temptations of an idle life of luxury and illicit sexuality. As in Clarissa, the seemingly proper (H)ouse can be a brothel in disguise, and even a cabinet meeting can be a secret tryst whose very unnarratability (PF i, 268) links it to illicit sexual encounters.

In this eroticized and sexually threatening atmosphere, Phineas’ political career is troped as the ingenue’s loss of political innocence. He is corrupted by the introduction to the temptations of political power. Thus, in what might be called the novel’s first proposal scene, Barrington Erle proposes to the young lawyer-to-be that he should become his party’s M.P. for the Irish borough Loughshane. Phineas’ reaction is orgasmic—the proposal is “a beautiful dream, a grand idea, lifting Phineas almost off the earth by its glory”—but it is also that of a virgin: he “blushe[s] like a girl” (PF i, 5). Like a bride, he is expected to be guided by and to submit to the future husband—i.e. by the party, which is explicitly identified as masculine, since for Barrington Erle party means “the great man in whose service he himself had become a politician” (PF i, 6).

But the party turns out to be less Phineas’ legitimate bridegroom than his seducer, and Barrington Erle is the procurer to whom the virginal Phineas falls prey. Phineas’ involvement in politics means an opportunism that undermines his honor. He is expected, as Barrington Erle makes clear, to vote with the party under all circumstances. Phineas thus soon abandons his proudly announced political independence, his plan to enter Parliament “as a sound liberal,—not to support a party, but to do the best I can for the country” (PF i, 14). Thus, Phineas yields to the “temptation” that, as his former
mentor Mr Low puts it, “has come in the shape of this accursed seat in Parliament” (PF i. 45), and becomes, as it were, the kept mistress of a series of politically powerful men. empowered only through their political influence.

The troping of Phineas as kept mistress and whore occurs primarily through the aggressive emphasis on feminine traits within his political plot. Even more so than in the marriage plot (cf. note 26). Phineas’ objectified, eroticized, feminized body is central to political plot. He is “a man who was pleasant to other men” (PF ii. 22) and whose pleasing manners perennially endears him to his colleagues. Phineas’ body and his willingness to please are invariably linked, as when the narrator observes about Phineas’ political specifically that “Nature had been very good to him, making him comely inside and out,—and with this comeliness he had crept into popularity” (PF ii. 22). Mr. Bunce, Phineas’ landlord, later echoes this statement when he links Phineas’ political rise to the fact that “You has winning ways, and a good physognomy [sic] of your own, and are as big as a lifeguardsman” (PF ii. 50). Phineas’ willingness and ability to please fellow politicians feminine traits to which he owes his career but that easily become negatively judged. His tendency to fall “into an easy pleasant way with these men” (PF i. 127) and his “peculiar power of making himself agreeable” (PF i. 118) bespeak a political opportunism that is troped as a promiscuous changing of partners depending on where most political profit can be made.

Phineas thus loses his innocence and becomes a political harlot. He prostitutes himself when he accepts political positions from influential friends, increasingly against his own convictions—especially when he becomes the member for Lord Brentford’s
borough Loughton and again when he becomes a member of the government through Lord Brentford’s influence. He sells out—and sells himself—by going against his convictions as an “ardent reformer” when he accepts one of the last “close borough nominations” (PF i, 292) before the second Reform Act. Although he later votes with his party for the reform act that eliminates Loughton, he does so because he feels he has to as a member of the government, against his own desire to save the borough (PF ii, 47). Phineas’ subsequent position in the government, as a member of the Treasury Board, puts Phineas altogether in a feminized position of complete dependence on the party, and particular on Lord Brentford, who is once more behind the offer (PF ii, 44).

Phineas whorish acceptance of positions from his friends against his convictions is accompanied by his equally fickle shifts of political allegiance, each of which further his political career. He soon feels that he has risen above his initial political friends and masters “in that politico-social success which goes so far towards downright political success” (PF i, 143), and is soon disliked by Barrington Erle and his cronies, Mr. Bonteen and Mr. Ratler (PF i, 152; ii, 101), until they become his “bitter foes” (PF ii, 162). His shifts in allegiance to the more powerful politicians recommended by Lady Laura, is again not predicated on convictions, but rather on political advantage. Thus, Phineas’ choice of Mr. Monk as his new friend and mentor appears arbitrary. After Lady Laura has advised him to become a follower of the Cabinet minister, he asks himself “Why not of Mr. Monk as well as of anyone else?” (PF i, 128).

Although Phineas tends to follow Mr. Monk in his political opinion (PF i, 152, cf. 347), his government post eventually separates his from Mr. Monk, and he becomes
allied to yet another “set of men... who were very friendly to him” (PF ii. 163). Just as he
moves sequentially from one woman to the next in the marriage plot, his political plot is
thus marked by his moving from one political master to the next. To this last “set of
men” he is even more of a kept mistress, completely dependent, than ever before. He
feels

constrained to adopt the views of others, let them be what they might.

Men spoke to him, as though his parliamentary career were wholly at the
disposal of the Government,—as though he were like a proxy in Mr.
Gresham’s pocket,—with this difference, that when directed to get up and
speak on a subject he was bound to do so. (PF ii. 163).

Phineas’ utter dependence is here figured as an almost literally being shackled, “bound”
to speak for the government when asked.

The often eroticized physicality of Phineas’ political acts (or rather, his being
acted upon) that is apparent here is nowhere as blatantly foregrounded as in the story of
his maiden speech that intermittently surfaces throughout Phineas’ political narrative.
The term itself does, of course, trope Phineas as the maiden, whose first speech marks her
defloration. The numerous, again and again disrupted restagings of his maiden speech are
direct equivalents not only of the proposal scene, but quite directly of the defloration
scene that the latter displaces. Speaking in public is, of course, conventionally troped as
the prerogative of men, whereas the same act marks a woman as improperly public, as
flirtatious and, through the metaphorical link between mouth and vagina, as sexually too
open, too available.29 In line with his insistence on the separation of spheres, Trollope
predictably disapproved of women speakers. In a 1877 letter to Kate Field, Trollope lists as objections to female lecturers “that oratory is connected chiefly with forensic, parliamentary and pulpit pursuits for which women are unfitted because they are wanted elsewhere—... because [they are] wanted at home.” (Trollope, Letters, 363). Phineas’ own first speech (when it finally comes) ostensibly renders him more masculine because he does succeed in speaking in public. More immediately, however, this deflorative moment, along with its repetitions and disruptions, underscores his role as fallen woman.

Throughout his first parliamentary session, Phineas is silent in the House, and his silence is associated with proper virginal modesty. Again and again, he postpones his maiden speech, despite the fact that it is described as the most crucial step in his political career. When indeed tempted to speak, he is “deterred from getting upon his legs by a certain tremor of blood round his heart when the moment for rising had come” (PF i. 107). This physical manifestation of his inhibitions is troped as femininely “modest” by the narrator (PF i.107), but the allusion to sexual impotence (the inability to ‘rise’) makes his femininity appear as emasculation: Phineas here lacks the masculinity, the phallic power that enables him to speak publicly in a political forum. After his failure, he does not even wish to speak of his anxiety “to any man” but instead confides in Lady Laura (PF i. 107). When Phineas returns for his second session, he is resolved finally to make his “maiden speech” (PF I.167).30 but fails again. His anxiety is again described in extremely physical terms: he cannot rise “to his maiden legs” because of “a present quaking fear that made him feel the pulsations of his own heart” (PF i. 180). Again, he is described as lacking manly attributes, namely a man’s “full courage, perfect confidence,
... contempt for listening opponents, and nothing of fear” (PF i, 184). He is emphatically not “a cock in his own farmyard, master of all the circumstances around him” (PF i, 184).

But if his failure to speak is troped as a lack of manliness, it also signals—and perhaps more emphatically—that Phineas has preserved his virginity, so to speak. His own silence is thus positively juxtaposed with Mr. Bonteen’s oratory, which is “trite and common” while Mr. Bonteen, who has already prostituted himself, is “glib of tongue, and possessed that familiarity with the place which poor Phineas had lacked so sorely” (PF i, 185). Again, Phineas’ hesitation is troped with sexual overtones as “modesty” (PF i, 187), this time by Lady Laura, who again becomes Phineas’ confidante because “Sympathy from any man would have been distasteful to him” (PF i, 186, my emphasis).

When Phineas is eventually truly initiated into the house with “The first speech,” as the heading for chapter XXVI has it, he thus does not primarily assert his masculinity. When he finally delivers his maiden speech in front of a large, public audience (PF i, 245), the moment of his political initiation is not the climactic and triumphant moment that he had envisioned. If the attempt to deliver the maiden speech that has so far been marred by absence—hesitation, postponement, self-disruption—its actual delivery is characterized by an excess that again feminizes Phineas more than it establishes his masculinity. The speech is thus caused by an excessive desire “to speak, and to speak on this evening” (PF i, 244): Phineas is intent on making the Speaker notice him, jumping up several times while another member speaks (PF i, 245). It is this very excess that makes the speech a failure—Phineas is “repeating his own words,” speaking “very much too fast” and has “nothing to say for the bill except what hundreds had said before, and
hundreds would say again” (PF i, 246). When he abruptly gives up and sits down “in the middle of it” (PF i, 247), he considers his speech bad enough that—although cheered as a matter of course because he has delivered his first speech—“he would have blown out his brains had there been a pistol there ready for such an operation” (PF i, 247). The political defloration here triggers the desire for violent death, and Phineas’ sense of shame and embarrassment—like that of the seduced maiden—is extreme. Although Mr Monk tries to reassure him that his speech was “on a par with other maiden speeches in the House of Commons” (PF I, 247), he feels like a failure, “an impostor,” and “a cheat” (an expression repeated six times in one paragraph; cf. PF i, 255).

Later, when Phineas has already ‘sold out’ and become the member for Lord Brentford’s borough, Phineas later makes a more successful “attempt at a first speech” (PF i, 347). This restaging of his maiden speech—reminiscent of Fanny Hill’s multiple deflorations—is thus directly linked with his political opportunism. This negative association of the speech with his corruption thus mitigates the “triumphant” event that earns Phineas interestingly the praise of his ‘procurer,’ Barrington Erle, who sees the speech as an orgasmic moment: “I always thought that it would come. I never for a moment believed but that it would come sooner or later” (PF i, 347).

By the beginning of the novel’s second volume, Phineas is an accomplished speaker: no longer physically affected by “that dimness of eye, ... that tendency of things to go round. ... that obtrusive palpitation of heart, which had afflicted him so seriously for so long a time” (PF ii. 22). The political sphere has become his home, so that “The House now was no more to him than any other chamber, and the members no more than
other men" (ibid.). But the lack of anxiety, of physical reaction also render his speeches less erotically charged, less exciting moments for him. Like Fanny Hill’s sexual encounters in the latter half of Memoirs. Phineas’ speeches have become commonplace, no longer climactic events; like Mr. Bonteen, he has become glib: “words were very easy to him” (PF ii. 22), and he begins to speak as matter of course (e.g. PF ii. 76-7). The very lack of anxiety, of physical excitement about speaking, suggests Phineas’ whore-like weariness of the very act that demonstrates his expertise and professionalism.

Even Phineas’ very last speech in parliament, in which he announces his resignation—his reform as a fallen woman, as it were—is characterized by this weariness. He knows “that words would come readily enough to him” (PF ii, 339), and sees himself as far removed from his prelapsarian, pre-MP innocence, from “his own feelings on a certain night on which he had intended to get up and address the House [and] found himself unable to stand upon his legs” (PF ii, 339). In a passage that echoes all his earlier physical reactions, Phineas thinks back to his first failure and regrets the loss of the physical excitement: “There was no violent beating at his heart now, no dimness of the eyes, no feeling that the ground was turning round under his feet.” (PF ii, 339-340).

Phineas’ resignation speech—which marks his last appearance as a public figure in Phineas Finn—ostensibly signals the end of his promiscuous wavering between different political positions for the sake of political advancement. But again, the speech is rendered ambiguous in its function. By resigning rather than voting against his own opinion, he manages to extricate himself from the feminized position of “a slave” who has “no right even to think of independence” (PF ii, 163). But this liberation—with its
presumably masculine associations—is, on another level, preserving his feminine position, merely shifting the emphasis back from excess to absence, from the whorish promiscuity to proper femininity. The reform of the fallen woman of which Phineas' resignation is here analogy thus spells his dissolution as a protagonist, his disappearance from the story into the marginalized and unnarratable private married life in Ireland. Phineas' reform is thus reminiscent in its problematic ambiguity of Fanny Hill's rejection of prostitution for a life of married virtue at the end of her narrative.

By ceasing to speak in public, by retiring from a political career, Phineas thus (re)turns to properly feminine silence and to the domestic private sphere of married life. That this retirement signals his annihilation as much as it does the triumph of his manly convictions becomes clear when the alleged moral triumph of what is politically (and also heterosexually) 'right' is figured as the beginning of his anticlimactic descent into nothingness toward the end of the novel:

He, like Icarus, had flown up towards the sun, hoping that his wings of wax would be him steadily aloft among the gods.... But the celestial lights had been too strong for them, and now, having lived for five years with lords and countesses, with Ministers and orators, with beautiful women and men of fashion, he must start again in a little lodging in Dublin (PF ii. 350).

The resignation and departure from England renders Phineas a “nobody” (PF ii, 347). The “whole world is vanishing away from him” as Violet puts it (PF ii, 345)—a world that is strictly identified with England and thus cannot encompass Phineas' new start in "a
little lodging in Dublin.” This world includes, in the novel’s characteristic equation of the spheres, not only the political sphere, but also the heterosexual world of “lords and countesses….beautiful women and men of fashion” (PF ii, 350).

In a direct parallel to his political resignation, Phineas’ marriage to Mary Flood Jones is also troped as a moment of dissolution: “Then had come Mr. Monk and Mary Flood Jones,—and everything around him had collapsed” (PF ii, 331). Although on one level a re-masculinizing move that directly counteracts the gender reversal in the courtship of Phineas and Madame Max, Phineas marriage to Mary can thus not unambiguously redirect the progress of Phineas’ feminization which occurs simultaneously in his serial courtships and in his political narrative.

Importantly, these two plots merge at the conclusion of the novel in the locus and the narrative of Ireland. Both Phineas’ final courtship and his political resignation reconnect Phineas to Ireland. Just as he returns to the girl back home who is introduced in the very beginning of the novel (PF i, 17), he comes full circle politically, returning to his initial position as “Irish member” (cf. PF ii, 105) after Lord Brentford’s British borough is abolished (PF ii, 80). Even more importantly, it is a question of Irish politics (not prominent in the novel until Phineas travels in Ireland with Mr. Monk) that eventually prompts his resignation and thence his return to his home country. It is Phineas’ “Irish birth and Irish connection” which have “brought this misfortune of his country so closely home to him” (PF ii, 340) that he is willing to sacrifice his political career over “that terribly unintelligible subject, a tenant-right proposed for Irish farmers” (PF ii, 341).
Although Trollope later famously claimed that it was a “blunder” to make Phineas an Irishman and that “There was nothing to be gained by the peculiarity” of his Irishness (Autobiography 274-5), Ireland is central here for the conclusion of both plots. The status of Ireland replicates precisely the ambiguities and fluctuations concerning Phineas’ gendering at the end of his story. On the one hand, Ireland is troped as fatherland, the place where Phineas regains his masculinity. He returns from the destabilizing, threatening, gender-bending England of politically active women and weak corrupt male politicians (like himself) to a place where he is a manly suitor, even a patriotic hero—admired by his adoring mother and sisters, by Mary, by the people of Killaloe and by the Irish audience that listens to his impassioned speeches. On the other hand, Phineas returns to an Ireland that is troped as unmitigatedly marginalized in Phineas Finn, always playing second fiddle in Phineas’ own as well as in the English national narrative. Indeed, in the locus classicus of the “Irish question” in the novel, Ireland is explicitly feminized and its relationship to England heterosexualized: Trollope describes the union of the two countries as a forced marriage, with Ireland as “the bride thus bound in compulsory wedlock” even though, as the narrator makes clear, her status is preferable over that of “a kept mistress” (PF ii, 180). The question then remains open whether Phineas, when he returns to the land of his fathers, returns as the English male conqueror and bridegroom that he ostensibly is to Mary Flood Jones, or whether he merges with Ireland and is thus himself feminized, marginalized, ruled and, if no longer the “kept mistress” he was while an Irishman in England, still disempowered along with Mary and all of Ireland. The dysphoric trajectory of Phineas’ narrative, culminating in his political
and heterosexual annihilation suggest the latter and makes clear that the Irish plot can never altogether redirect the gender destabilization.

Phineas’ Irish plot is a variant of the family narrative that I have identified as the crucial continuation of and counterpoint to the marriage plot in *Miss Marjoribanks*, and (albeit in a different form) in *Evelina* and *Emma*. As in *Miss Marjoribanks*, gender ambiguities riddle Phineas’ family narrative, but of course with reverse implications for the protagonist’s gendering. Phineas reasserts his masculinity by returning to the family home, but is also feminized, marginalized and ultimately stripped of his identity in the process—buried in the family plot, so to speak. An importance difference between Oliphant’s and Trollope’s use of the familial narrative is, however, that the literal family is expanded into nationality as family in *Phineas Finn*. Mary Flood Jones in particular is transformed into a family member in this context—despite the fact that she is not literally her future husband’s cousin, like Lucilla Marjoribanks, or like Emily Wharton in Trollope’s own *Prime Minister*. From the beginning of the novel, Mary is depicted as the close family friend (a role that echoes, despite the gender reversal, Mr. Knightley’s familial role in *Emma*). But she also metaphorically becomes Phineas’ kinswoman because she is Irish and furthermore Catholic like both Phineas and his father. Her friendship with Phineas’ sisters (cf. e.g. PF I, 17-19) constantly underscores the equation of family and nationality. Mary, then, is to Phineas what Tom Marjoribanks is to Lucilla: the always-already available partner who is consistently marginalized, geographically as well as psychologically removed from the main thrust of the narrative, but then constructed as the right choice in marriage.
Familiar as well as familial, Mary and Tom are endogamous choices. Both are good matches because they guarantee sameness and stability—they are constant in their affection throughout the narrative, but also troped as reassuringly similar to their partner in their origins, be they troped as national, regional or biological. As Phineas’ endogamous choice, Mary is directly contrasted to Phineas exogamous choices—to the three women he courts in England, from whom he separates Mary so strictly, and often so much to her disadvantage. As women who are not Irish, not Catholic, but also distinctly different from Phineas in terms of their class affiliation, they are troped as Other in comparison to Mary.\(^31\) Importantly, their Otherness is associated with masculinity and thus with Phineas’ feminization—especially in Madame Goesler’s but also in Lady Laura’s case. Thus, Mary with her cloying femininity is perhaps as much as a hyperbolic double of Phineas as she is, more conventionally read, his appropriately feminine counterpart in a properly gendered heterosexual relationship.

It is thus only on the surface that Phineas’ courting of Mary reestablishes Phineas’ masculinity, just as Tom’s proposal to Lucilla Marjoribanks only temporarily indicates her return to a traditionally feminine, subordinate and disempowered role. The gender constellation of Phineas’ Irish courtship is the most traditional in the novel, but it is also a courtship itself is defined by absence—by Phineas’ absence from Ireland, the absence of proposals, the absence of any progress toward marriage until the very end of the novel. Indeed, the very femininity that characterizes Mary seems to be altogether in the way of Phineas’ interest in her as a partner in marriage. Mary is “so pre-eminently the most charming of her sex” by virtue of her “sweet, clinging, feminine softness” (PF ii, 282),
she is “so trusting, so sweet, so well beloved” (PF ii, 288): “of all women whom he had ever seen ... the sweetest and the dearest and the best” (PF ii, 296) that she is scarcely worth courting. Indeed, such hyper-femininity seems to trigger a desire to seduce or to rape, rather than to honorably marry Mary. Thus, in one of the earliest descriptions of Mary, her femininity is almost startlingly described as provoking the very kind of erotic seduction that Phineas himself is prey to when it comes to his political plot.

Significantly, Mary’s seducibility is troped not only as feminine, but also as Irish when she is described as

one of those girls, *so common in Ireland*, whom men... feel inclined to take up and devour on the spur of the moment; and when she liked her lion, she had a look about her which seemed to ask to be devoured.... girls to abstain from whom is, to man of any warmth of temperament, quite impossible

(PF i, 19, my emphasis)

In his dealings with Mary, Phineas can thus, for a while, become the manly “man of any warmth of temperament.” He figuratively seduces her, at the beginning of the novel, by kissing her and taking a lock of her hair “before she was ready with her resistance” (PF i, 22). A proposal is, however, not forthcoming—not at this moment and not later during Phineas’ visits in Ireland. The closest Phineas comes to proposing is making Mary hope, by saying “as he pressed her hand...,‘things will get themselves settled at last, I suppose’” (PF ii, 107). Mary is thus altogether relegated to a passive
position of waiting for the return of her absent lover. "true to Phineas for ever and ever" (PF i, 146).

When Phineas finally proposes to Mary during his fourth visit to Ireland, she gets him, as it were, on the rebound, after he has been rejected once more by Violet Effingham (PF ii, 260). Interestingly, however, even this ostensibly very conventionally gendered proposal scene, with Mary as the passive, silent female, unable to answer Phineas for half an hour after he proposes (PF ii, 267), is predicated on Mary's departure from her excessive passivity and pliability. When she avoids him and keeps "aloof from him". Phineas is, as "a natural consequence of this... more in love with her than ever" (PF ii 261). During the actual proposal scene (PF ii, 267), all gender instabilities seem removed, and Phineas appears as Mary's hero, who can do no wrong, and whose having courted another woman only contributes to his manliness. But Mary, although she refers to herself as Phineas' "own one" also wants to reassure herself that he is her "own" and, when he affirms it, speaks of herself as "victorious at last" (PF ii 268). Who is possessed by whom and who conquers whom in a chapter significantly titled "Victrix" (PF ii, 260) remains somewhat questionable.

More importantly, Phineas' position of manly strength during this visit to Ireland (during which he promises not only marriage but also his resignation if need be) is immediately mitigated. Predictably, Phineas' engagement to Mary is immediately marginalized again when Phineas returns once more to England. He conceals it from all his friends in London "as a thing quite separate and apart from his life in England" (PF ii, 269; cf. PF i, 330). At the same time, all of Phineas' former courtships are restaged
during this last sojourn in England. Violet Effingham's final union with Lord Chiltern brings her once more into the foreground; Lady Laura appears as a "Temptress" (cf. chapter heading, PF ii, 286) when she alludes to her own affection for him and to his possible union with Madame Goesler, and Madame Goesler's own proposal comes at this time. While Phineas is ultimately "true to Mary Flood Jones" just as he is "strong in his resolution of constancy and endurance" in sticking with his position on Irish tenant-right (PF ii, 269), he is not happy in his steadfastness. As in the political plot, having "done right" (PF ii, 321) is not troped as an action rewarded by the outcome of the narrative: Phineas has "many regrets" (PF ii, 331) that undermine the alleged happiness of his union with Mary. Her prized femininity is, ultimately, negatively compared to "the spirit of Lady Laura, or the bright wit of Violet Effingham, or the beauty of Madame Goesler" (PF ii, 331). Indeed, if Mary is "the sweetest girl in the world," Madame Goesler is "the handsomest woman in London" (PF ii, 297). Not only has he consistently been more attracted to the "handsome" masculinity of Madame Max, it is London, after all, that occupies the most important geographical position in Phineas' narrative, and not "the world," even less Mary's Ireland.

Paralleled by his misgivings about his resignation from politics, the fact that the "vision of his own Mary did not comfort" Phineas (PF ii, 321) when he is rejected by Madame Goesler undermines the casting of the marriage to Mary as final and as a triumphant "right" conclusion of his marriage plot. This undermining of narrative closure, of the stability of heterosexual gender dynamics, and of the dictum of the "right" marriage plot is reinforced by the larger narrative framework of the novel within the
Palliser series. *Phineas Redux* altogether invalidates the sense that Phineas’ story comes to an end with his return to Ireland, his political resignation, and his marriage to Mary. When Phineas’ narrative resumes in *Phineas Redux* no more than a year later, her very role as the feminine object of patriarchal male desires (for an heir as well as for sexual gratification and possession) that made Mary so attractive has killed her, so to speak. She dies “of her first baby before it was born” (PR, i, 6), and thus vanishes from Phineas’ narrative forever. Phineas’ short-lived Irish marriage and domestic home life with Mary accordingly disappear in the interim of narrative silence while the Palliser series continues with *The Eustace Diamonds* and thus with Lizzie Eustace, a female protagonist who is emphatically unlike Mary. Indeed, the *Eustace Diamonds* is, as Walton points out without connecting these two observations, an important intrusion between the *Finn* and *Redux* because it both interrupts the “linear sequence of the story” and “points to a different... feminine sexual economy” from that of the two Phineas novels (Walton 88).

Mary’s death and the erasure of Phineas’ Irish marriage opens the doors for yet another restaging of both his political and his marriage plot. As McMaster points out, *Phineas Redux* is basically a darker, more pessimistic repetition of *Phineas Finn* in terms of character, theme and plot (McMaster 64-5). But the rewriting of *Phineas Finn* in the sequel—to which I cannot do any justice here—importantly erases the Irish plot altogether. Phineas returns to the English center stage, and he does so once more as an ambiguously gendered protagonist. On the one hand, he embarks on an ultimately successful political career in England, and makes Madame Goesler his second wife with a proper proposal that undercuts the masculinity she had displayed in *Phineas Finn*. On the
other hand, Phineas' masculinity is often directly compromised in both the political plot and the courtship plot. Indeed, Walton points out that the breakdown that Phineas experiences after having been accused of murdering Robert Kennedy renders him explicitly feminine: "I am womanly," he says himself (PR ii, 250), allowing the narrator to reflect on manliness (cf. Walton, 97). In Phineas Redux, the teleology of the two plots of Phineas Finn, and the destabilization of traditional gender dynamics that occurs in both, is thus once more renegotiated in yet another large-scale repetition of Phineas' double narrative.

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In both Oliphant's Miss Marjoribanks and Trollope's Phineas Finn, the heterosexual dynamics of the defloration narrative are almost ubiquitously present—in the multiple-couple, multiple-proposal courtship plot as well as in the eroticized, heterosexualized political plot. Ironically, it is this ubiquitous presence of the heterosexual dynamics that ultimately undermines the marriage plot itself most radically. The gender inversions that affect the protagonists (and their plots) in both novels are the most extreme and most striking aspect of this undermining. The feminization of Phineas Finn in particular is a radical reversal of conventionally gendered narratives.

If the aggressive reinsertion of excess and absence into the marriage plot and its new double, the political plot, undercuts gender conventions in these plots, it also concomitantly attacks the tropes of closure that go along with these gender conventions.
The disruptions of the marriage plot work not only against the closure of a specific marriage plot—say, that between Mr. Cavendish and Lucilla Marjoribanks, or Madame Goesler and Phineas Finn. The constant resistance against closure altogether questions the sense of an ending (pace Frank Kermode). The sheer number of potential marital alternatives cast some doubt on the distinction between the abandoned narratives and the one that is carried all the way through to the happy ending. But not only is there is no certainty that the protagonist has found the “right” match at the end (any character might revise his or her marriage plot from hindsight just as Lady Laura does when her marriage with Robert Kennedy crumbles). There is likewise no sense in either Miss Marjoribanks or in Phineas Finn that the closure of the protagonist’s own ‘right’ marriage plot is final.

The undermiming of closure is reinforced by the status of both novels as parts of a series (and by extension, by both novelists’ dedication to writing not only in series but also in serialized form, with all its potential for altering plots midway through the serialized publication). Admittedly, for Miss Marjoribanks, this additional ‘serial’ resistance against narrative closure is not very pronounced. Although Miss Marjoribanks is part of the Chronicles of Carlingford, the novels of the series are only loosely linked to each other, and Miss Marjoribanks does not feature prominently in any of the other Carlingford novels and stories, originally modeled after Trollope’s Barsetshire Chronicles. For Phineas Finn, however, the embeddedness of the novel into the Palliser series, and in particular the direct continuation (and repetition) of Phineas’ narrative in Phineas Redux completely undermines the sense of closure that is tenuous at best at the end of Phineas Finn. Although I was only able to hint at it for the Palliser Series, the
existence of a sequel and a surrounding series for *Phineas Finn* reinforces the fundamental resistance of both novels against the marriage-plot ending, and against all closure.
Endnotes

1 Throughout this chapter, I have abbreviated these novels as 'MM' and 'PF' respectively in my page references. Phineas Redux is abbreviated as 'PR'.

2 As McMaster points out, for Trollope Mill is "the standard source of advanced view on women's rights" (162). Mill is only implied in his lecture on the "Higher Education on Women," where Trollope speaks about the "men around us in the world who are demanding women's rights" (76). In Phineas Finn, Violet Effingham famously mentions Mill twice, once with direct reference to the demand for passive voting rights. She jokes that she will "knock under to Mr. Mill, and go in for women's rights, and look forward to stand for some female borough" (PF i, 117). Just as Mrs. Oliphant represents the idea that women might soon demand "the privilege, not of being represented, but of representing" as a threatening specter of the excessive consequences of women's suffrage ("Unrepresented" 378), Trollope here ridicules the idea of a female M.P..


4 For the beginning of the women's suffrage movement of the 1860s and 1870s, see Blackburn, 44-100; Fawcett, 15-25; Caine, Victorian Feminists, 18-52. Kent, 184-95, and the early documents in Lewis' collection.

5 Oliphant misrepresents the petition, signed by almost 1500 women, as "signed by, we should imagine, at least twenty names... names which we have been used to see on title-pages of books and in the new magazines" ("Unrepresented" 368; cf. Fawcett 20; Blackburn 53-54). Among the prominent signers of the petition, so pronouncedly left unidentified by Oliphant, were Harriet Martineau, Josephine Butler and of course, the authors of the petition themselves, including Barbara Leigh Bodichon and Emily Davies.

6 On the anti-suffragist movement, cf. Fawcett, 44-57; see also Harrison's study Separate Spheres, and Thesing on Mrs. Humphry Ward.

7 Cf. Blackburn 271-272. One of the earliest retrospective account of the movement, Helen Blackburn's study (originally published in 1902) renders explicit the links between the political activism and the campaigns concerning what she calls women's "Civil Status, as Wives and Mothers" in a "Table of Statutes passed in the Reign of Queen Victorian which have direct bearing on the Interests of Women" (Blackburn, 268-273). Interestingly, though, Blackburn omits the movement to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1862 and 1864, under the leadership of Josephine Butler. As Kent points out, many early feminists "felt it necessary—for strategic reasons—to divorce Butler's crusade from other feminist reform movement" (Kent 10) because of the explicit emphasis on sexual issues; Blackburn here follows her predecessor's footsteps. On Josephine Butler and the CD Acts, see also Caine, Victorian Feminists, Chapter 5, and Walkowitz, esp. 113-147.
Even when it comes to women’s voting rights, which Oliphant in her review of Mill’s *Subjection of Women* dismisses especially for married women, for Oliphant “there is no social justice in giving to two people so closely bound... as to be, to all intents and purposes one, two voices in the commonwealth” (“Review” 588).

Both Juliet McMaster (161-79) and Victoria Glendenning (321-29, 450-53) discuss *North America* and the “Lecture on the Education of Women” as the major sources for his most notorious antifeminist comments outside his novels (most notably in *He Knew He Was Right, Is He Popinjay?*, and the Palliser novels).

Repetition in the plot is underscored by stylistic repetition that is often linked directly to the marriage plot. Thus, Miss Marjoribanks announces again and again that her object in life is to be “a comfort to poor papa” (MM 28; cf. e.g. 29, 31, 37, 61, 64, 339, 342), and that her intention is to postpone marriage for ten years from her return home, when, as she invariably points out, she “shall be going off a little” (MM 69; cf. 82, 382ff.). Her “principles” and “objects,” repeated almost like mantras, conveniently enable her to be single and independent without closing the doors on a later marriage, as I will later argue.

The instances of sudden disruption, sudden silences which replace the expected proposal, are echoed and paralleled by other moments and motifs in the novel that associated with absence. Thus, Mr. Cavendish’s sudden disappearances have a very direct impact on his attempts to court Lucilla; Tom’s decade-long absence is, of course, central to the framing function of his courtship. Dr. Marjoribanks’ sudden death also makes absence a suddenly dominant theme, since it does not only mark the abrupt end of Lucilla’s open social and political activities, but also the sudden loss of Lucilla’s fortune—all of which influence the marriage plot.

The flower imagery occurs again, when the narrator describes Lucilla’s “natural womanly vexation to see a proposal nipped in the bud” and says “It was like preventing a rose from putting forth its flower, a cruelty equally prejudicial to the plant and to the world.” (MM 203). Barbara is likewise described as feeling “that for her too the flower of her hero’s love had been nipped in the bud” (MM 204).

Cf. Margaret Homans, who has argued that Lucilla Marjoribanks is figured as a queen, resembling Queen Victoria, in a lecture at Rice University on “Victorian Queens” (March 24, 1995).

For speculations on the possible influence of *Miss Marjoribanks* on *Middlemarch*, see Q. D. Leavis’ introduction, MM 11.

Cf. Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, 27 and n. 223, for the *locus classicus* of this convention, attributed by Austen herself to Richardson. The dictum that “no young lady can be justified in falling in love before the gentleman’s love is declared” is, of course, parodied in *Northanger Abbey*.

The doubling of political rivals as heterosexual rivals and vice versa is a popular trope of mid-Victorian fiction—e.g. not only in Phineas Finn and Robert
Kennedy in *Phineas Finn*, but also in Archibald Carlyle and Sir Francis Levison in Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861), Felix Holt and Harold Transome in George Eliot’s *Felix Holt* (1866), or Arthur Fletcher and Ferdinand Lopez in Trollope’s *The Prime Minister* (1876).

17 The reference to Joan of Arc is the most poignant moment of the merging of Lucilla the male hero with Lucilla the virgin, whose dress is a virginal “white frock, high”, and whose “maidenly bosom” (MM 215) and “virginal thoughts” (MM 287) are described side by side with her masculine height—she is “a tall girl... large in all particulars” (MM, 26)—and her masculine military and political strategies.

18 Since Henry VIII instigated crucial changes in the “Prohibited Degrees of Consanguinity and Affinity,” first cousins have been permitted to marry in England (cf. Wolfram, 21-30). Apart from Wolfram and Anderson, see Ch. 4 in Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* on cousins and cousin marriage.

19 This first on-stage proposal is prefigured by Tom’s unsuccessful attempt to bring “things to an explanation,” indirectly reported by Lucilla to her friend Fanny (MM 38).

20 Indeed, the aggressive absence of the erotic from the relationship between Dr Marjoribanks and his daughter is directly modeled on the distance between Dr. Marjoribanks and his wife, “the faded helpless woman, who had notwithstanding been his love and his bride in other days” but who is so “small an actual loss” when she dies (MM 28).

21 Garrett Stewart has pointed out that, in Austen’s *Persuasion*, the idea of Anne Elliot keeping her name by marrying her cousin Walter Elliot is a “threat” (Stewart 103) and, in my own terms, signals a wrong marriage plot. Stewart perceptively argues that it reduces her identity, by way of a pun, to ‘an Elliot’ (cf. 104), evokes the father-daughter “incest bind” (105) and leaves her “bound up with the patrilinear name” (104). It should be clear from my argument about Lucilla’s masculinization and about the defusing of the familial plot’s incestuous potential that Lucilla’s retention of her father’s name is a triumph rather than a threat.

22 Lucilla Marjoribanks’ name change here resembles Mrs. Oliphant’s own. Born as Margaret Oliphant Wilson and like her mother especially proud of the name Oliphant, married her cousin and became Margaret Oliphant Wilson Oliphant (Cf. Williams, xv, 1; Jay, *Fiction* 1).

23 For Lady Laura, by contrast, having disrupted Phineas’ proposal means that the scene remains open to rereadings and reinterpretations. With the breakdown of her own marriage, Phineas’ incomplete declaration begins to stand for the contingent marriage plot, for what could have been. Lady Laura rewrites her contingent marriage plot as the right marriage plot once she begins to construct her union with Robert Kennedy as a mistake. She therefore returns obsessively to the disrupted proposal in her conversations with Phineas and with Violet, and constructs what is first trooped as no more than a
fleeting affection (cf. PF i, 158) as her true and only love. In *Phineas Finn* her gradual rewriting of the relationship culminates in her confession to him (PF ii, 291 ff.); in *Phineas Redux*, the confession is reinforced by its repetition at a mountaintop location, Königstein, that evokes the site of the proposal scene (PR i, 103-107). Against her own insistence that “nothing of this shall ever be repeated” (PF i, 139), Lady Laura restages the first proposal scene again and again in her mind, while Phineas is quite ready to leave the event behind and “never speak of it again,” as he promises (PF i, 139).

24 Cf. Lady Laura, who is punished by an unhappy marriage, and, although she is ‘forgiven’ by lover and reader alike, the “unfortunate jilt” Alice Vavasor, in *Can You Forgive Her?*.

25 One might argue further that Phineas’ position vis-à-vis two women who are both of equally higher social standing feminizes him. Often an object of their observations and conversations, Phineas is placed into a passive, objectified position underscored by the fact that both women are physically attracted to him and objectify him in their remarks about his physical beauty. Phineas frequently occupies a feminine position as the object of heterosexual desire. His looks are consistently noticed first by the women that surround him, from his landladies (PF i, 56, ii, 48) to the women he courts. Violet observes that Phineas is “uncommonly handsome” (PF i, 108), and when he proposes to Lady Laura, he seems to her “as handsome as a god” (PF i, 136)—a Trollopian phrase that, as McMaster points out, is consistently used as a euphemism that cloaks female sexual desire for a man’s body (McMaster 171).

26 Violet is sexually attracted to Chiltern’s violent masculinity from the beginning, although she initially sees it as a “risk” and says that, as her husband, Chiltern might “do fearful things” to her (PF i, 98). Thus, she tells Lady Laura: “I prefer men who are improper, and all that sort of thing. If I were a man myself I should go in for everything I ought to leave alone.... But you see,—I’m not a man, and I must take care of myself.... I like a fast man, but I know that I must not dare to marry the sort of man that I like” (PF i, 96). Chiltern’s proposals are, accordingly, dominated by his masculine, violent sexuality, and by Violet’s conflicted reaction to his almost physical advances. When Chiltern first proposes, she refuses him, but her physical reaction to his “abrupt,” “sudden” and “loud” proposal is orgasmic—*it almost take[s] away her breath* (PF i, 105). Here as well as later, Chiltern’s friends argue that it is his aggressive, sudden manner that makes Violet refuse, and he is advised to be gentler—in other words, more feminine like Phineas. Thus, his sister tells him to propose to Violet again and to “Speak to her softly” (PF i, 106), while Phineas also admonishes him for being “too sudden” and “impetuous,” for wanting to “conquer her by a single blow” (PF i, 217). But Chiltern admits that he does not have Phineas’ “skill in pleasing” and doubts whether he will propose again, since even such repetition seems feminine to him, as he had argued after Violet had rejected him the second time: “There is something to me unmanly in a man’s persecuting a girl” (PF i, 177). When Violet does not answer his question “Will you be my wife?” (PF ii, 122), he physically takes possession of her, and breaks her resistance:
he rushed at her, and seizing her in his arms, kissed her all over,—her forehead, her lips, her cheeks, the both her hands, and then her lips again. “By G----, she is my own!” he said.... She had no negative to produce now in answer to the violent assertion which he had pronounced as to his own success. (PF ii, 122)

Indeed, Violet is more attracted by his “violent assertion” than she is when he afterwards kneels at her feet. She dislikes the emasculating disempowerment that goes with his kneeling and says “It is not natural that you should kneel. You are like Samson with his locks shorn, or Hercules with a distaff” (PF ii, 123). When Violet accepts Chiltern’s proposal, she is metaphorically deflowered—she is no longer restrained in her affection for him, and happy to spend time with him in activities—like riding with him—whose sexual connotations are almost made explicit: “Now that she had succumbed, she did not scruple to be as generous as a maiden should be who has acknowledged herself to be conquered, and has rendered herself to the conqueror” (PF ii, 155).

27 Of course, the illegitimacy of the duel can also be directly read as a reference to illicit homosexual sex; the relationship between Chiltern and Phineas can be read as an interesting case of the slippage between the homosocial and the homosexual bond between men in nineteenth-century fiction. My argument is, of course, not predicated on the idiotic notion that homosexual sex automatically replicates heterosexual dynamics with a “male” and a “female” partner. What I am arguing is that this particular relationship, particularly in the dynamics of the duel scene, replicates these heterosexual dynamics via the unidirectional penetration and the juxtaposition of Chiltern’s hyper-masculinity with Phineas feminine passivity.

28 She is, however, also aware of the social strictures that require her to invite women to her dinner parties although she “cared but little for women’s society,” because otherwise “all prospect of general society would for her be closed” (PF ii, 136).

29 Cf. Stallybrass, 127.

30 Significantly, the topic is the secret ballot, an issue that once more blends the public sphere of politics and political oratory and the privacy, even secrecy of the domestic sphere. Phineas’ opposition to the secret ballot, modeled on Mr. Monk’s stance, rejects the intrusion of the clandestine into the political sphere as too domestic and too feminine—as “unmanly, ineffective, and enervating” (PF i, 152). His endorsement of aggressively public forms of expressing political opinions clashes ironically with his feminine shyness about his initiatory speech.

31 Madame Max, who has a slight foreign accent and is supposed to be “a Jewess” (PF ii, 216) by Lady Glencora Palliser, is, of course, especially marked as Other (cf. Walton, 57: Epperly. “Borderlands” 25) and therefore as an emphatically exogamous choice.

32 This familiar paradox of the properly feminine as profoundly uninteresting is of course most self-consciously prefigured in Thackeray’s Vanity Fair. when George
Osborne loses interest in the hyper-feminine Amelia (cf. esp. VF 157-9), and when even the narrator constantly has to defend his interest in advancing the ‘insipid’ Amelia’s story against the hypothetical reader’s boredom (cf. VF 146).
Conclusion? No Sense of an Ending

If the conventional happy ending of the marriage-plot novel never conveys more than a precarious sense of closure, it is only fitting that the end-point of my story of the marriage plot is also tentative rather than conclusive, and can easily be questioned as the ‘proper’ moment for closure. To conclude this study with two novels of the 1860s indeed merely begs the question of what comes after the mid-Victorian marriage plot—especially if its gendered foundation is already so profoundly undermined in the 1860s, by the very authors that seem to promote it most aggressively. My point throughout has been that the marriage-plot novel is riddled by instabilities throughout its history and prehistory—and *Phineas Finn* and *Miss Marjoribanks* are neither the last nor the most radical manifestations of such instabilities. Neither are these novels the last bastion of the marriage plot as a posited hegemonic narrative of heterosexuality. Indeed, I would claims that this plot continues to occupy a culturally central position, and that heterosexual narratives in general are still virtually uncontested in their position as *the* narratives of sexuality *per se*.

In fact, in analogy to the double positioning of defloration itself as both beginning and ending, one might see the implosion of the marriage plot and its external duplication that occurs in Trollope’s and Oliphant’s novels as the beginning of an increasingly radical questioning of marriage as a social, legal and literary institution in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Just as Richardson’s *Clarissa* and Cleland’s *Fanny Hill* had looked back to the earlier manifestations of the heterosexual plot, *Miss
Marjoribanks and Phineas Finn point forward to the almost anarchically multidirectional rewriting and dismantling of the marriage plot that characterizes much of the fiction in the last third of the nineteenth century. At the same time, however, it is crucial to these rewritings that late-nineteenth-century novelists still have to contend with the continuing hegemony of the marriage plot as the novel plot per se that is still so visibly in place in Oliphant’s and Trollope’s fiction. Especially when—indeed precisely because—they are written explicitly against the marriage plot, novels like Tess, Jude the Obscure, or the New Woman novels convey their authors’ extreme awareness of the hegemonic narrative that they are now more or less explicitly contesting.

Examples for the often conflicted ways in which the plots of the late Victorian novel negotiates the marriage plot include narratives of seduction, adultery, the breakdown of marriage, and about alternatives to marriage like ‘free love’. Thomas Hardy is probably the most prominent of the novelists who write aggressively against the marriage plot and against marriage as an institution. But he is merely the most canonical of the many novelists who did so at the end of the nineteenth century. If I use him as a prominent example here, it is not with the idea that he is necessarily either more aggressive or more original in his revision of the heterosexual narrative than other novelists of his time. Indeed, he shares a certain nostalgia especially for the traditional heroine with other male authors like George Gissing and George Moore.

It is of course Hardy, especially with Jude the Obscure, who becomes the figurehead of what Mrs. Oliphant called the “Anti-Marriage League” in a notorious 1896 article in Blackwood’s Magazine. But Jude, with its emphatically dysphoric plot, is an
example among others, rather than a unique specimen of a novel that explicitly attacks marriage as an institution and questions the strictures on divorce radically. The impossibility of divorce is implicitly just as problematic in novels that—at least from the 1860s on—portray married life as wretchedly unhappy, even if divorce is not explicitly mentioned as an option. Prominent among these novels are Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right* (1869), *The Prime Minister* (1876) and Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (also 1876). All three have in common that they can only solve the posited problem of the unhappy marriage, usually complete with physical and emotional abuse, by having the husband die. The death of the wife is, of course, another alternative that shifts remarkably in its valence from the deaths of Bertha in *Jane Eyre* in 1848 and Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House* in 1853 to that of Monica Widdowson in Gissing’s *The Odd Women* in 1893. In some of these novels, unhappy marriage is directly attributed or linked to the emergent adultery narrative. Thus, the story of the Widdowsons’ unhappy marriage in *The Odd Women* revolves around the idea of unhappiness in marriage as a causal factor in female adultery. But even Gwendolen’s relationship with Daniel Deronda in Eliot’s last novel and Emily Wharton’s eventual second marriage to Arthur Fletcher in *The Prime Minister* imply this possibility of adultery, which becomes a reality in novels like Mary Cholmondeley’s *Red Pottage* (1899) and, just after the turn of the century, in Galsworthy’s *Man of Property* (1906).

As implied in my argument about prenuptial plots, adultery as the *result* of unhappy marriage, has of course to be read as distinct from the prenuptial seduction that is, conversely, often construed as the *root* of marital unhappiness. At mid-century, *Bleak*
*House* already integrates the fallen-woman plot surrounding Lady Dedlock into a (still somewhat marginalized) narrative of unhappy marriage. But it is only with the late Victorian novel that the fallen woman becomes a figure that once more resembles the eighteenth-century seduced maiden in her prominent heroine status. Again, Hardy’s work provides a good example. In *Tess*, he returns to a patently Richardsonian rape narrative and thus recreates some of its paradoxes in the very process of trying to overcome them—notably that of the fallen or fallible “Pure Woman.”

*Tess* (1891), like the roughly contemporary *Esther Waters* by George Moore (1894), is furthermore a novel that, by way of the seduction plot, also changes the valence of class in the construction of the heterosexual plot and female sexuality. Class is admittedly a facet of the history of the marriage plot that is underrepresented in my account of this history because of the novels I have selected, and especially because of my decision to end this account with Trollope and Oliphant. Working-class sexual *mores*, so central to the naturalist agenda of both Hardy and Moore, have a long tradition of being associated with narratives of illicit sexuality and the fallen woman in the nineteenth-century novel. Even when the fallen-woman plot is seen as part of a more normative upper-middle class setting, the fallen woman and her sexual narrative are routinely associated with the working classes—thus, Lady Audley the bigamist is exposed in her lowly origins in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), and even Lady Dedlock, emphatically not a member of the working classes, has to die in the gutter to make inevitable her association, *qua* fallen woman, with a lower order of sexual conventions.
What is, however, new and different in Hardy’s and Moore’s narratives about working-class sexuality is that they give the working-class woman a central role in the plot, and that they make (albeit incomplete and conflicted) gestures towards embracing, rather than condemning, working-class sexuality. In making the fallen working-class woman the protagonist of their narratives, Hardy and Moore deviate from a long tradition of marginalizing this character type. From Esther, Mary’s disgraced aunt in Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and Hetty Sorel in Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859) to Ruby Ruggles in Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* (1875), fallen or potentially fallible women are doubly marginalized—not only by their working-class origins, but also by being relegated to a subplot that merely provides a negative foil to a happier and more conventional courtship plot (which may take place in varying class settings). When Hardy and Moore make Tess and Esther Waters the pronounced and eponymous heroines of their novels, they thus broaden the social range of characters that can figure as protagonists of a central rather than marginalized heterosexual plot.

It seems to me that the working-class characters in the fallen-woman subplots in the earlier Victorian novels tend to express middle-class anxieties about the more varied, looser and more directly sexual customs of courtship behavior in the working classes which John Gillis describes. Hardy (and to a lesser degree Moore) transformed these anxieties about working-class sexuality by aestheticizing this sexuality. Hardy thereby begins to rewrite the heterosexual narrative involving the lower classes in a way that is less invested in condemning working-class sexual *mores*, but that of course also hopelessly romanticizes and beautifies them. The conflicted romanticizing of working-
class sexuality is, of course, replicated, complicated and reversed in its gender
connotations—as well as more painfully obvious—a generation after Hardy in D. H.
Lawrence’s novels, most notably in Lady Chatterley’s Lover (1928).

This relentless but, I hope, suggestive enumeration of novels from the 1840s to
the fin de siècle (and tentatively into the modernist era) that I have just provided by way
of a ‘conclusion’ should make clear two things: that the end-point of this study is
somewhat arbitrary, and that I have left out many crucial variants of the heterosexual
narrative along the way while telling my story of the development of the marriage plot.
The list of omitted texts could of course be extended further back into the first half of the
nineteenth and into the eighteenth century. What I have most notably omitted are sub-
genres that strike me as not only central to the development of the novel, but also to the
repositioning of the marriage plot in a larger sociopolitical discourse in the novel that
merely culminates (for the time being) in the literally political ‘parliamentary plots’ of
Phineas Finn and Miss Marjoribanks. Thus, from the emphatically political as well as
emphatically gendered plots of the late-eighteenth-century Gothic novel via Scott’s
historical fiction to the industrial novels of the 1840s, political stories are told side by
side with and more importantly through the always-present marriage plots.

However, I would argue (and hope to explore by way of such additional texts)
that the moment of defloration is the vexed central point in the novels and sub-genres that
I have omitted here. Thus, both the multiple directions in which the heterosexual novel
develops in the late nineteenth century, beyond the ending of my own narrative, and the
multiple uses of the marriage plot in ‘alternative’ genres from the 1790s on are variants
of the story of defloration. The moment of defloration is, importantly, transformed into many different kinds of climactic moments in these different texts. But these moments remain feminocentric and emphatically sexualized climactic moments in the narrative—be they the familiar proposal and assault scenes, or be they further transformed. Thus, the dynamics of defloration reverberate in moments of traumatic marital conflict, in moments of adulterous temptation, moments that epitomize the sexualized Gothic fear of the unknown, or in scenes that describe the anxiety and the thrill of social upheaval and secret conspiracy in the historical and industrial novels. In all these variants, the moment of a woman’s initiation into heterosexuality remains, I would argue, the epicenter of the tremors that are caused in these novels by the instabilities of the heterosexual narrative, and of a gendered power struggle that is implicit in this heterosexual narrative.
Endnotes

1 Outside the range of heterosexual plots, there are the emphatically masculine counterplots that, as Boone has argued, have existed throughout the century. Many ‘New Woman’ novels can be seen as attempts to write feminocentric versions of such a counter-narratives to the marriage plot. On the new woman novels, see esp. Ardis’ New Women, New Novels, and the seminal discussion in Showalter’s Sexual Anarchy, esp. in the first three chapters.

2 Even in Thackeray’s Vanity Fair (1849), Becky Sharp’s increasingly direct sexual involvement (if not her possibly always-already fallen status that may be said to result from her tryst with the curate Mr. Crisp before the onset of the novel) are always firmly associated with her distinctly working-class Bohemian origins as the drawing-master’s daughter (Cf. Vanity Fair 48-49). Barbara Lake, Lucilla’s rival for Mr. Cavendish’s attention in Miss Marjoribanks, is importantly also a drawing-master’s daughter. Class implications are, of course, crucial to many other texts. I have noted before that Gaskell’s Ruth (1853) is in many ways an interesting exception to the ‘rule’ about the plot marginalization of the fallen woman, although the class affiliation and the ultimately dysphoric trajectory of the story remain central.
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