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Eliza Haywood Unmasks Female Sexuality in Masquerade Novels

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Where in all the world did you get the idea that the Lord wants the truth from us? It is a strange, a most original, idea of yours, My Lord. Why, he knows it already, and may even have found it a little bit dull. Truth is for tailors and shoemakers, My Lord. I, on the contrary, have always held that the Lord has a penchant for masquerades.

-Isak Dinesen, *The Deluge of Norderney*

Introduction

The essence of the masquerade ball is one of secrecy and fantasy. As a uniquely 18th century phenomenon, the masquerade was an environment where one can transform into anything imaginable. One of the most prolific female authors during this period, Eliza Fowler Haywood, sought to capture the luxury and imagination of the masquerade within her novels published from 1724 to 1725: *The Masqueraders* and *Fantomina*. For Haywood's female protagonists, the setting of the masquerade ball, along with its associated elements such as masks and disguises, grants them sexual power in addition to the power of the gaze, a privilege previously held by men. As Karin Kukkonen notes in her essay, "The Minds Behind the Mask: Reading for Character in the Masquerade" the "masquerade is a place where Eliza Haywood's heroines don masks in an endeavor to satisfy their (sexual) curiosity and, at the same time, to escape social censure" (163). In this essay, I will explore how the masquerade promoted this sort of sexual freedom within the 1700s, and I will analyze how the female protagonists within both of the aforementioned novellas interpret the theme of masquerade as sexual license. Furthermore, I will examine how the tragic and paradoxical endings operate within the narratives – as a moral warning to those participating in licentious acts, a means against the male-dominated romance

genre and empowers the female voices in the works, or a realistic outcome based on the patriarchal structures reigning in 18th century society.

Eliza Haywood and Her Readers

Haywood is considered one of the most prolific British authors of the 18th century, and her work crosses over into plays, novels, and political essays, though she is primarily recognized as a novelist. Writing alongside her included female contemporaries Aphra Behn and Delarivier Manley, both of whom also delved in fiction and the stage. The trio looked to the French to model its own British version of amatory fiction (Warner 91). Their work appealed to not only female but also male readers. William B. Warner, who penned *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain 1684-1750*, explains how readership bridged the gender gap: “The fact that their inventive complications of the ordinary courtship plot, through the use of masquerade, incite a desire which is polymorphous, and which exploits the pleasures of cross-gender identification” (92). These amorous novels, which Warner defines as some of the first formula fiction on the market, spurred a debate on whether or not reading novels – a relatively new invention, so to speak – was dangerous. Warner explains that these texts “teach readers – men as well as women – to articulate their desire and put the self first” (93). Thus, Haywood’s novels, and her contemporaries’, can be interpreted as voyeuristic texts in which readers can live out the fantastical plots without actually participating in any sort of misconduct.

As opposed to Behn and Manley, Haywood simplifies her fiction by creating characters who simply function to move the plot forward and by foregoing any complex allegories. “Haywood gives a special privilege to love over every other social value, and subordinates traditional claims to improve the reader to the relatively new one of offering diversion and

entertainment,” Warner describes (112). Thus, these novels could follow a formula and be churned out to the general reading public. But, Warner is also quick to note that the churning out of these novels, some of which could be written in under a month, is a stain on the canon of 18th century British literature due to the mechanical nature of the work. Others, including scholar Tiffany Potter, claim that Haywood’s early work is particularly nuanced, especially in regards to its treatment of the masquerade. The form of these novels allows readers to “produce the spectacle within their own head” (Warner 126). Yet, when that spectacle is sex, the question arose about if readers would imitate the supposedly dangerous actions of the characters. The masquerade itself was already a sexually-charged event, so some of Haywood’s contemporary critics accused her of moral ineptitude.

The Masquerade

The social phenomenon of the masquerade, seen as somewhat a vestige of Italy’s Carnival which originated sometime in the 13th century, was a highly visible and popular institution in the public’s eye and a sensational cultural symbol of the times, Terry Castle explains in her book from 1986, *Masquerade and Civilization* (2). For a Londoner in the 18th century, the masquerade was intrinsically linked with the “erotic, riotous, and enigmatic” and an event that inherently granted sexual freedom and promiscuity (3). More than that, though, Castle goes on to describe that “the masked assemblies of the eighteenth century were in the deepest sense a kind of collective meditation on self and other” (4). This sense of self is first expressed through dress – “an inversion of one’s nature” – and later, the mask, which obscures the true personality in exchange for a foreign identity (5). “The pleasure of the masquerade attended on the experience of doubleness,” Castle writes. “The alienation of inner from outer, a fantasy of

two bodies simultaneously and thrillingly present, self and other together, the two-in-one” (4-5). As the masquerade grew in popularity, Haywood and other writers and playwrights quickly learned to capitalize its “sensational association with sexual license and libertinage” (3-4). Potter expounds how the masquerade can work on two levels:

On the narrative scale, the masquerade is both the site of the requisite seductions and dramatic confusion, and also the source of dramatic resolution and women’s empowerment. On a larger scale the masquerade is an important example of the social complexity of popular culture: masquerade was universally known, attended by disguised men and women (aristocrats, gentry, merchants, thieves, and prostitutes alike), and for those reasons, heatedly debated in popular media. (4)

Haywood’s early novels are “sites of cultural negotiation and contention, balancing the demands of profit, morality, fashion, and pleasure in a way that is informed by the same conventional notions of performance, class and gender that her work also interrogates” (Potter 5). So instead of seeing Haywood’s works as formulaic or even hack writing, as Warner suggests, her novels, along with other writers at the time, can be seen as a deeper social commentary on the social phenomenon of the masquerade.

As a concept, the masquerade, along with masks and disguises, carry great symbolic meaning. Efrat Tseëlon explains the metaphor and freedom of figurative and literal masks in the introduction to a collection of essays in *Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality* by listing everything a mask can do: construct, represent, conceal, reveal, protest, protect, highlight, transform, defend, give license to, empower, suppress, and liberate (11). These forces are captured in the literature of Eliza Haywood and create friction as the plot progresses.

Similar to the reception of the novel, the masquerade was not favored by all. Although the masquerade was popular among the masses, it drew sharp criticism from public organs, including the Church. In an anonymous pamphlet printed in 1724, the author expressed the need for public events, including masquerades and theater productions, to “covey moral instructions,” the “useful rules of life,” the love of our country,” and a “zeal for public welfare” (4). In regards to plays, the author condemns how such diversions cause men and women to succumb to idyllic musings and romantic leanings, instead of focusing on more intellectual endeavors. But, it is when the author starts discussing masquerades that he becomes absurd. He suggests that any man seen at a masquerade should be stripped of “any post of honor, trust or profit” (21). His reasoning is partially derived from the fact that masquerades originated in France and came to Britain as a way to “seduce us ... and to undermine the virtue of the Nation by such methods of luxury” (22). He elaborates further to say that British women have as much freedom as men – a lie – and do not need to disguise themselves simply to converse with the opposite sex. Like other arguments of the time period, the author turns to religion as the crux of his opposition to the masquerade: “These practices are in defiance to the very design of preaching the Gospel, which is, to turn men from those vanities to the living God” (25). This frankly scathing pamphlet captures an extreme attitude on public entertainment like the masquerade, but it is this outlook that makes novels like Haywood’s even more provocative.

The Masqueraders

Part One

Haywood published *The Masqueraders* in two parts and follows a group of men and women – all of whom are scheming in their own self-interests – who coalesce at various

masquerades. The core of this novel, Kukkonen suggests, is the “struggle between mind-readers and those who hide their mental states” (164). In other words, the female characters – Dalinda, and Philecta of part one – attempt to mask their emotions against the main male character – Dorimenus – who is able to “ascribe a mental state to others ... [so] that his seduction will be successful and he can safely make his next move” (164). The two parts, published in 1724 and 1725 respectively, follow how these characters, against the backdrop of the masquerade ball, deceive each other for the sake of their individual passions. The arc across the two parts follows “a libertine anti-hero and his serial seductions of women who believe they can manipulate to their own benefit the social conventions that are expected to limit them” (Potter 3). Here, I will focus solely on the first part of *The Masqueraders* to examine how the characters, particularly the two main women, use the masquerade as a mechanism to live out their fantasies until reality ultimately prevails.

The first part opens with commentary from Haywood herself about the masquerade and its popularity: “Great-Britain has no assembly which affords such variety of characters as the masquerade; there are scarce any degrees of people, of what religion or principle soever, that some time or other are not willing to embrace an opportunity of partaking this diversion” (5). In *The Masqueraders*, this diversion is where these characters can abandon their inhibitions in favor of pleasure. This broad introduction is Haywood’s way of showing that “she is not representing unattainable fantasy, but a known site for knowable interactions and relationships,” despite the somewhat fantastical elements of the plot (Potter 6).

From the beginning, we see how the power dynamic is structured at a masquerade. An unnamed woman dressed as a simple, innocent shepherdess faints in the crowded ballroom. Dorimenus, a suave and “passionate lover of intrigue,” immediately rushes to assist the young

woman (Haywood 5). To revive her, and as a power move, he removes the still unnamed woman's mask. In this one effort, Dorimeneus quite literally takes her identity away. And, because Haywood has not revealed the name of this character, this woman is now completely vulnerable. Not only does she lack a disguise, but she is also at the mercy of Dorimeneus, who is acting as a savior figure. Dorimeneus automatically acquires the upper hand by coming to this woman's aid. The masquerade ball is painted as an environment with hierarchical levels, and though Dorimeneus currently is at the top, the power structure is unstable and is likely to upset easily.

Haywood places a particular importance on the beauty of her characters to show how it can be used as a weapon in a game of desire and to further shake this hierarchy at the masquerade. Though Dorimeneus believes he has the advantage after saving Dalinda, her beauty immediately takes a hold on him and ensnares him in a plot that he could not have expected. Haywood notes how powerful this woman's beauty really is: "Tis difficult to determine, whether, at the first plucking off her mask, the sight of her face gave greater motives of uneasiness to the men or the women which were about her; those only who have experienced what it is to love or envy, can be judges what kind of pains the one felt in a hopeless desire, or the other in seeing themselves so far outrivaled" (7). Her beauty is described in this manner only after her mask is removed. Albeit, Haywood is quick to note that Dorimeneus, who is adored by most women who lay their eyes on him, will become enamored by any sort of beauty: "[his] heart was easily set on fire by the sight of the least kindling beauty, could not behold perfection, such as hers, without feeling an excess of that passion it was created to inspire" (7). Beauty will remain an important tool to our female protagonists throughout Haywood's works because it is also a mask that can (and will) fool the dubious men pursuing them.

Beauty is intrinsically associated with femininity, and what Dorimeneus is attracted to is femininity itself. In their essay, “Is Womanliness Nothing But a Masquerade?” Aleline van Lenning, Saskia Maas, and Wendy Leeks draw on the works of multiple feminist theorists – including Luce Irigaray and Elizabeth Grosz – to justify how femininity is a masquerade – an aspect at play in *The Masqueraders*. “The female coincides with its representation; when female figures appear, that is considered to be femininity itself,” the essayists explain. “And when these visions of femininity are viewed as the female, the female itself is completely wiped out by this representation” (93). Furthermore, the concept of gender itself, which is a social construct designed to keep the sexes separated within a hierarchy, can be seen as a performance; similarly, sexuality is a “culturally enforced performance” (93). A myth persists, however, that femininity is natural, “[contributing] to the eternal mystery of the woman, and the urge to look at her appearance and to know her body: the supposed essence behind the masquerade” (93). This masquerade “[creates] a distance between self and image [which] problematizes comfortable assumptions of gender, sexuality and categorization as a system” (96). Relating these theories back to Haywood’s work, Dorimeneus is so enamored with Dalinda’s physical appearance, her femininity to be exact, and deeply desires to discover its supposed mysteries. Yet, he’s projecting this enigma onto Dalinda – she’s not, to use the essayists’ words, “dictated by her body” (93). Dorimeneus is taking away this woman’s agency simply with his gaze.

The language of the eyes plays a crucial role within the masquerade novels because the characters strive to maintain power through who holds the gaze of those who will succumb to the power of the gaze. Dorimeneus works to maintain control through the language of eyes. This language is a constant presence throughout both parts of the novel. The first reference comes when Dorimeneus is able to “read in her eyes” the desires of the unnamed woman (8). Dorimeneus

uses this ability to his advantage to spend more with Dalinda so that they may become lovers. Perceiving that this woman owes him for reviving her from her fainting spell, “[Dorimeneus] made his advantage of those glances which she could not refrain . . . made use of all his eloquence to persuade her to permit him to accompany her home” (8). And the woman could not refuse and “had a fear of appearing too free” (8). She was bare and vulnerable without a mask and thus lacked agency to say no to the overpowering Dorimeneus, who carries a kind of savior complex. When our main female character is named – Dalinda – she is then reduced to “the present victim of [his eyes’] voice,” and Dorimeneus was able to “conquest . . . her heart” (10-11). So, despite being named finally, Dalinda has still been reduced to an object that is described in military-like terms.

The demise of our main heroine derives from not being able to see through the masquerades of others, demonstrating that the game of love (and lust) requires a keen eye and critical thinking skills. So, Dalinda falls for Dorimeneus, and he her. Dalinda, a slave to her own passions, feels the need to inform her friend Philecta of her recent romance. Though Philecta often lacked luck when it came to romance, she automatically knows that her friend is undeserving of Dorimeneus’ affection and attention. To split up Dalinda and Dorimeneus, Philecta begins to plot. Philecta assumes a guise of sisterly friendship and warns Dalinda of the man’s rogue ways. Kukkonen writes, “Haywood uses [Philecta] to investigate the workings of these mind-games in greater detail” (164). As opposed to Dalinda’s emotional responses, Philecta acts with reason and precision. Her first deception takes place, of course, at a masquerade. Philecta discovers what Dalinda planned to wear to the next ball so that she may dress in the same manner. Both dress as Indian slaves, a costume representing an oppressed race conquered by the Western peoples which parallels how British women were also oppressed by their male

counterparts in 18th century society. The disguise shows how these two women are reducing themselves to a subservient position for the sake of this one man. The motif of the eyes rises again when Philecta is about to meet Dorimeneus at the masquerade ball, and she wants to take “advantage of her appearing well in the eyes of Dorimeneus” (22). Philecta arrives at the dance before her companion, and Dorimeneus immediately takes Philecta for his own Dalinda for she “[resolved] still to act the part she had begun, till necessity should oblige her to confess the counterfeit” (16). At the sight of Dalinda, though, Philecta disappears so that the charade may continue. But her plan has nearly come to fruition already: Dorimeneus is falling out of love with Dalinda and begins to fall for Philecta. Philecta isn’t the only one playing a game: Dorimeneus plays along with his own goals in mind. Haywood writes that “as the affair was, he had indeed a nice game to play, and it required all the fine sense and artful sophistry he was master of” (25). While Philecta was playfully resisting the gentleman, he continued to pursue her in the face of her soft protestations. In the midst of all these games, the most crucial tool to winning is learning how to decipher the masquerades of those playing along, whether they know it or not.

Ultimately, this novella is more than who is in love with who: it actually speaks to the differences between emotion and reason and how the overabundance of the former can mean a deficiency in the latter, leading to bitter consequences. While Dorimeneus and Philecta are relishing each other’s company, Dalinda despairs why he would abandon her in such a way, still ignorant of her friend’s plotting because she is still overcome by passion. But, instead of being governed by emotion any longer, Dalinda opts for reason and cuts the man from her life. For a short while, at least. When Dorimeneus makes a visit to her home and leaves a note while she is away, Dalinda is back to her original enamored state and her judgment is once again cloudy. Her emotional written response, where she admits that he is “even in falsehood, dearer to [her] than

[her] life,” actually leaves Dorimeneus dumbfounded (38). He is “humbled beyond expression to find he had been so much deceived in the language of the eyes, which he was used to imagine he had a perfect understanding in” (39). However, Dorimeneus let his lust guide him instead, and he still flocks to Philecta rather than Dalinda.

Haywood frequently employs the language of war and the military to communicate the spoils of lust and love. This careful word choice denotes the masculine domination in both war and in sexual relationships. Dorimeneus views his affinity with Philecta as more of a hunter and prey situation rather than a more egalitarian partnership. The thrill of the hunt with Philecta intrigued him way more than the relatively easy pursuit of Dalinda. Haywood writes how “love triumphed over all, and reveled in the spoils of honor. The difficulty with which Dorimeneus had gained this conquest enhanced the value” (41). Again, Haywood’s diction here suggests a victor and victim relationship. So, it’s not simply that Dorimeneus is attracted to Philecta’s appearance or personality; he’s motivated by her mystery which all began at the masquerade. Yet, once Dorimeneus has won, Philecta has actually lost. The victim terminology returns when Haywood writes that “when once a woman of virtue falls a victim to love, she is by as many degrees more vigorous in the gratification of her passion as she was in her efforts to overcome it” (42). Philecta is even more in the throes of passion and love at this point, but it all comes to a head when Dalinda discovers her friend and former lover together. The relationship unravels more quickly than it took to put it together. Dorimeneus promptly leaves the country, only to become betrothed to another, while Philecta is left alone and, she soon discovers, pregnant. Despite her efforts of engineering the majority of the plot, Philecta is at a loss. Because she “[indulged] a curiosity which proved so fatal to her virtue, her reputation, her peace of mind,” and she must now deal

with the consequences (45). What started as a fantasy at a masquerade ball turned into a stark reality featuring hefty costs for actions made.

Fantomina

In one of Haywood's most celebrated works, she does not deal directly with the setting of the masquerade, but she does implement physical costumes, much like what would appear at such an event. At the center of *Fantomina*, also published in 1724, is Haywood toying with the idea that to men, all women are the same. The title character "becomes a quintessentially Haywood heroine; she acts out Haywood's entire ideology of disguise, masquerading as the double, feminine persona of virgin and virago, as both male and female heroine" (Schofield 47-48). Scholar Helen Thompson describes *Fantomina* in her article "Plotting Materialism" as a narrative that "envisions a heroine who resolves patriarchal contradiction not because she has been freed from patriarchy's laws, but because she repeatedly manifests her observance of them" (196). Though her true identity is never revealed to the reader, our protagonist acts like a chameleon to pursue more sexual desires as opposed to amorous ones. As Haywood "conjures feminine agency from patriarchal constraint," *Fantomina* defies the societal standards of women, who are supposed to be demure and lack agency, by using her intelligence to outwit her male counterpart in pursuit of sex (Thompson 196).

The initial setting of the theatre in *Fantomina: or Love in a Maze*, nonetheless, is somewhat similar to a masquerade ball and sets the stage for the deceptions to follow. Similar to what would occur at a masquerade ball, this opening scene features several prostitutes soliciting men. (This aspect of these events that the aforementioned pamphleteer was not particularly fond of because it detracted from the sanctity of marriage.) Our main character, whom we never learn

her true name, easily becomes fascinated with how the prostitutes “create acquaintance with as many [men] as seem desirous of it” (257). While we do not know her identity, we do know that she comes from a distinguished background. And, because she’s visiting from the country, she is not versed in the characteristics of a bustling city, particularly its more seedy aspects, and is rather innocent. Without a name chaining her to a singular identity, and being in a brand new city, our protagonist can be whoever she wants to be. Her naïveté leads her to try to mimic how the prostitutes act in the theatre; this is how she first dabbles into the idea of disguise. She didn’t want to live vicariously through these women anymore; she wants to be them: “The longer she reflected on it, the greater was her wonder, that men, some of whom she knew were accounted to have wit, should have tastes so very depraved. This excited a curiosity in her to know in what manner these creatures were addressed” (257-258) Although she comes from the country, acting in the manner of these other women at least makes her somebody instead of nobody. Her ultimate desire, of course, is attention.

Attention, through the power of the gaze as I discussed in relation to *The Masqueraders*, grants more power to the one receiving the attention than the one giving it in this case. And attention the unnamed woman does receive. She dresses in the first of four total disguises. Her first façade, predictably, is the tamest and most simplistic. This disguise is closest to her actual self, only exaggerated more to receive attention. Men, referred to as “purchasers,” at the theatre flock to her “offering her a price for her embraces,” as if she were chattel up for auction (258). When she meets Beauplaisir, who seems remarkably more suitable than the other men, “she found her disguise had answered the ends she wore it for” (258). They arrange a time for a rendezvous because “he believed her a mistress, but believed her to be one of a superior rank” (262). Here, she reveals that she is a virgin, not a mistress. Beauplaisir, asserting his masculinity,

practically forces himself onto her until “he gained a victory, so highly rapturous” (263). Here we see again how Haywood uses war-like, and inherently masculine, terminology when characterizing male characters after intercourse. For them, sex represents another trophy to be gained rather than an emotional tour de force. After the two have sex, she employs a new counterfeit: her name is Fantomina. She dons this new persona purely to protect her identity and reputation and “eludes Beauplaisir’s sexual authoritarianism” through which he believes he can “dominate the identities of commoners” (Mowry 654). Beauplaisir does not suspect her deception, so Fantomina had gained the upper hand by choosing which information she wants to disclose. This night with Beauplaisir set a fire to the newly coined Fantomina: “Strange and unaccountable were the whimsies she was possessed of – wild and incoherent her desires – unfixed and undetermined her resolutions” (261). The disguise of Fantomina precipitates her recognizing her sexual side and rounds her character out. Instead of presenting a flat, love-obsessed female protagonist, Fantomina becomes more three-dimensional by learning more about herself and what she’s capable of.

Disguises offer characters in masquerade novels the opportunity to step outside their social positions and even their comfort zones. The first disguise of Fantomina spurs on the confidence of our protagonist, and she also becomes more knowledgeable about the ways of men. So, when Beauplaisir eventually tires of Fantomina’s presence, she recognizes that he “varied not so much from his sex as to be able to prolong desire to any great length after possession” (267). She also realizes that he was “willing to be at liberty to pursue new conquests,” using language that again diminishes women into objects and things to be won (267). Compared to the beginning of the novella, she is not as naïve to the ways of men. Instead of letting this information weigh her spirits down, Fantomina concocts a new plan to follow

Beauplaisir on his trip to Bath as a country maid named Celia: “Her design was once more to engage him, to hear him sigh, to see him languish, to feel the strenuous pressures of his eager arms, to be compelled, to be sweetly forced to what she wished with equal ardour, was what she wanted, and what she had formed a stratagem to obtain, in which she promised herself success” (268). It’s important to note that Haywood only reveals the name of the country lass after she and Beauplaisir have sex because this notion perpetuates an idea that women only hold value based on their sexuality and thus can gain an identity afterward but are treated like an object before. Now, it’s not only Beauplaisir who is desiring to conquest over others; Fantomina draws on her intelligence to plot her way into being with Beauplaisir by taking advantage of his capriciousness.

Haywood critiques the fickleness of men by having her heroine use her wit to outpace the deluded Beauplaisir. Celia could already predict that Beauplaisir would grow tired of her, so she already had a new disguise in mind – demonstrating how well she knows men and how she can creatively transform into a new woman. Her third disguise is of Widow Bloomer, a woman mourning the recent passing of her husband. Haywood interjects herself here playfully to criticize what the Widow Bloomer has already figured out:

I know there are men who will swear it is an impossibility, and that no disguise could hinder them from knowing a woman they had once enjoyed. In answer to these scruples, I can only say, that besides the altercation which the change of dress made in her, she was so admirably skilled in the art of feigning, that she had the power of putting on almost what face she pleased, and knew so exactly how to form her behavior to the character she represented. (274)

Haywood is also calling on the concept that all women are essentially the same to men because they all represent objects. When addressing the newly disguised woman in his letters, Beauplaisir is sweet and adoring but replies coldly when he has to communicate to the Fantomina disguise. Yet, she is not discouraged by her lover's fickleness, nor does she take it as any sort of attack on her character. She actually thinks to herself how her method of pursuing an amorous interest is even more refined than the ways of her own sex and of the opposite gender: "How do some women ... make their life a hell, burning in fruitless expectations, and dreaming out their days in hopes and feats, then wake at last to all the horror of despair? But I have outwitted even the most subtle of the deceiving kind, and while he thinks to fool me, is himself the only beguiled person" (277). She recognizes that she holds a certain kind of power over men because of the disguises she dons. This untraditional method of pursuing a love interest gives Fantomina the freedom to act out of her own agency, rather than submitting to the male desire.

Disguises allow for the pursuit of desires, and in the case of Haywood's masquerade novels, these desires are most often sex. Through her disguises of Fantomina, Celia, Widow Bloomer and finally Incognita, "she found the means of gratifying the inclination she had for his agreeable person, in as full a manner as she could wish" (277). And that inclination is sex. Though her disguises exaggerate femininity, our protagonist actually goes against the straight-laced expectation of a pure and dutiful woman. Instead, she pursues her desires vehemently rather than passively approaching life. In disguise, she can quite literally step away from her self and the traditional woman to control her own narrative. She moves with ease between the characters and their social positions to achieve personal and instant gratification.

As she progresses with each new identity and disguise, she gains confidence in her independence and sexual license. She thinks to herself:

Possession naturally abates the Vigour of Desire, and I should have had at best, but a cold, insipid, husband-like Lover in my Arms; but by these Arts of passing on him as a new Mistress whenever the Ardour, which alone makes Love a Blessing, begins to diminish, for the former one, I have him always raving, wild, impatient, longing, dying. --
 - O that all neglected Wives, and fond abandon'd Nymphs would take this Method! ---
 Men would be caught in their own Snare, and have no Cause to scorn our easy, weeping, wailing Sex! (283)

These disguises grant her not only sexual license but also an all-around confidence in herself, a markedly different self than she was at the beginning of the novella. Her anonymity gives her the greatest power. Neither the reader nor Beauplaisir ever find out any personal details about her, not even her real name. Instead, she (and Haywood) controls what information is revealed, which is very little. Her clandestineness gives her the upper hand throughout the story, so she is able to keep her reputation intact.

In her final incarnation as Incognita, she is shrouded in mystery and perhaps holds the most power out of all of her costumes. Both Widow Bloomer and Incognita are named before they even have sex with Beauplaisir, indicating more personhood to Haywood's protagonist. Beauplaisir hasn't even laid eyes on the newly incarnated Incognita when he identifies himself as her "everlasting slave" in a reply to her first letter to him as Incognita (283). So, it's not just the appearance that matters. It's the character that Incognita is able to develop that makes her all the more convincing and seductive. He truly is in the submissive role now because after they consummate their relationship once more, "Beauplaisir is the one with a degraded identity as he is proved unworthy of the insight into Fantomina's character he craves" (Mowry 655).

The titular character morphs into the male desire in all of her disguises. Warner analyzes the function of our heroine's disguise:

It stimulates a male desire that is in danger of fading, and carries the narrative forward to a new phase. Both a transformation of life and a romantic plasticity of the self are initiated by the heroine's artistry in changing her dress. By putting this empowering fantasy into practice, Fantomina can control the desire that would control her: by appearing as a succession of beautiful women, she fulfills an impossible male demand for variety; by tricking the male gaze that would fix her, she cures the gaze of its tendency to rove; by taking control of the whole *mise-en-scène* of the courtship scenario, Fantomina directs the spectacle of courtship that would subject her. (195)

But, is Fantomina simply changing herself for a man and continually subjecting herself to the male gaze? She chooses to don a new disguise each time Beauplaisir grows tired of one costume, but it's almost like she's succumbing to his will. Instead of being comfortable in her own skin, she feels the need to become someone new for a man who obviously does not perceive women as anything more than objects. Ultimately, it is Fantomina's choice that matters most. "Haywood's heroine achieves a freedom of choice ... she ensures the constant ardent embraces of a man of her choosing' and she 'chooses for herself what guise of femininity she will display,'" Thompson writes in response. "Second, she preserves 'herself' distinct from her masquerade: 'Fantomina maintains an ironic distance, a detachment from her representations,' she 'maintains an ironic distance between herself and her created image,' and she 'maintains the psychic distance necessary to avoid objectification'" (204-205). Thus, objectification from the male gaze is forestalled due to this detachment of the disguise and the body.

The novella ends on a sour note to show how reality and truth ultimately overcomes any deception. After her triumph as Incognita, our protagonist discovers that she is pregnant, and her mother forces her away to a French convent. Scholar Mary Anne Schofield writes, “Although the end demonstrates a certain ambivalence in the ultimate success of the disguise, Haywood’s (and Fantomina’s) assessments of its viability are clear: the romance can be controlled; women can write the scripts and make them work” (49). It’s important to note that a pregnancy, which is an exclusively feminine situation, leads to the protagonist’s downfall. She is able to outthink her lover throughout the course of the narrative, but a disguise will not mask a bulging stomach, try as she might. Thompson tactfully puts it this way: “Haywood’s heroine is arrested in the one body that she cannot control” (207). When Beauplaisir discovers her deceptions, he is shocked. He’s not so surprised to learn that he is a father, but he is more startled by the fact that a woman was capable of deceit. Beauplaisir’s standards of women are low, indicative of other men of the time period, and further illustrate how far Fantomina distances herself from the expectations of the female sex to explore herself and her sexuality.

The Conundrum of the Conclusion

What these two novellas both have in common other than their overarching themes of masking and secrecy is their lack of a so-called happy ending, or at least an ending where the heroine triumphs in some fashion. Instead, these endings stray over to the tragic. Kukkonen points out that “In the end, the social order and ‘nature’ always catch up with Haywood’s heroines and punish them for their transgressions” (163). These endings seem paradoxical to the entire message of the novellas. Though the majority of the novels espouse women finding liberation through sexual expression, that concept crumbles under itself in the last few

paragraphs where our heroines truly do come undone. It's not simply the sex that leads to their undoing. Rather, it's the freedom and confidence that comes with being able to have sex and pursue their desires. Perhaps Haywood is suggesting that with sexual freedom would usher in other more political and economic freedoms – an idea that might have been more controversial than the sexual liberation of women. But, are these unhappy endings a critique of women's promiscuity, or is it something even larger than that?

Warner doesn't necessarily think so. Pulling from some of Haywood's contemporaries as well, these amorous novels could represent a cautionary tale "wherein the good triumph and the evil are punished" and creates a "warning against wrongdoing and an incentive to emulate virtue" (148). In other words, the women who masquerade themselves to pursue their desires ultimately learn their lesson. But, this reasoning discredits the concept of the liberated woman clearly illustrated in Haywood's novels. This surface-level comprehension disregards the strides the novels' heroines make in the course of the narrative. These protagonists pursue their desires with fervor and forego the traditional image of demure femininity. Their efforts should certainly not go unnoticed.

Mary Anne Schofield has a radically different approach from either Warner. She postulates in her work *Masking and Unmasking the Female Mind* that the masquerading romance novels by some female authors of the early 18th century subverted the "male-imposed romance genre" out of dissatisfaction with the cookie-cutter, patriarchally sanctioned happy endings (10). She goes on to explain how these authors turn the genre on its head:

Unwilling and, frankly, unable to alienate their readers, these writers employ the popular form – the romance – together with its attendant romantic love and disguise in an effort to examine the true state of being a woman. They explore the romance by writing romances

and subverting the plot; they study the pervasive ideology of female powerlessness by allowing the “other side” of women, their aggressive natures to be displayed in disguise. Thus, both the romance and the masquerade provide a way to determine and define the female self. They redirect the power of the romance in an effort to rediscover the female self. (20).

Ending on a more somber note instead of a joyous note was actually a collective effort on the part of Haywood and her female contemporaries, including Penelope Aubin, Jane Barker, and Mary Davys. Schofield writes, “Their novels corrupt the approved romance form and offer scandalous, incriminating details of the far-from-utopic life most women lived at the time” (10). So, instead of concluding with a happy wedding and marriage, readers of these works of distinct female voices will encounter endings with heartbreak and unexpected (and perhaps unwanted) pregnancies.

Potter’s approach is a conglomeration of Warner’s and Schofield and offers a more nuanced approach. “The masquerade was a social event that provided women with a gateway to otherwise unknowable freedoms, but concretely, the social structures surrounding it remained unchanged, rendering women vulnerable to serious consequences for participating in an event that was technically sanctioned,” she writes. “Haywood translates that catch-22 into literary narratives that unpack the pitfalls of such cultural fictions of freedom” (6-7). Potter is thus suggesting that Haywood is not punishing our female protagonists, like Philecta and Fantomina, for their sexual expressions. Rather, Haywood is illustrating and exposing the reality of the patriarchal systems at work “that make the masquerade the only place that such equality is possible” (31). In Potter’s words, “the female characters may indeed end badly, but the unfairness and arbitrariness of the system that enforces those ends is made public, and thus

opened to interrogation and subversion” (7). Haywood is not condoning these tragic consequences that befall her protagonists; rather she is condemning the systems that privilege men more than women. Following Potter’s line of thought, Philecta and Fantomina finding themselves pregnant and alone is not a form of punishment; rather this outcome is simply a realistic consequence based on how London society operates in the 18th century. Thus, it is also accurate to depict the men responsible, Dorimenus and Beauplaisir, getting off scot-free due to the privilege they hold due to their class and gender. For example, in *The Masqueraders*, Philecta “suffered a great deal from the admonitions of her relations and friends – all who had any concern for her reputation, advised her to break off her acquaintance with him” because the woman’s character is the one at stake, not the man’s (45). The woman is the one who loses, while the man can simply walk away. Similarly in *Fantomina*, Fantomina is the one who apologizes to Beauplaisir for deceiving him, and her mother humbly requests that he not gossip about Fantomina’s character. Instead of having concern for her individuality, the woman we knew as Fantomina wants to simply fade into anonymity once more. Ultimately, our heroines are slaves to societal standards, no longer slaves to passion, once their masks are removed. In other words, when the masquerade ends, reality picks back up. When the dancing and imbibing ends, the sun rises, and a new day begins. Thus, life starts up again. Life can’t be a masquerade forever, and that means the darker side of existence will bubble to the top. Until the next masquerade, that is.

Final Thoughts

Eliza Haywood capitalized on the phenomenon of the masquerade in 18th century England to write her novels – *The Masqueraders* and *Fantomina* being just two of her works

centered on this sexual liberating setting. Drawing from the authentic qualities of masquerade balls, Haywood spun fantasies where women finally acted with agency on their desires. In *The Masqueraders* and *Fantomina* specifically, the heroines rejoice in the freedom of disguises and masquerades, a feeling absent from other aspects of ordinary life. Yet ordinary life comes to the forefront when these fantasies meet a tragic end – illustrating that the masquerade is an escape but the patriarchal structures in London society still reign outside of the fantasy and consequences still exist. Nonetheless, Haywood boldly asserts a feminist claim in these masquerade novels by giving her female protagonists a voice and sexual agency in the context of a restrictive society.

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