



**Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina*: Performing Femininity  
through the Masquerade**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The eighteenth-century in Britain was a time in which women's attempt to liberate themselves sexually was inevitably punished. It is in this context that Eliza Haywood publishes *Fantomina*, a novel that reverses the deeply rooted gender roles and patriarchal sexual power relations. The aim of this paper is both to study critically, from a feminist approach, the social construction of the feminine and how Haywood defends female sexuality by dismantling eighteenth-century expectations for women not to resist male fetishistic gaze. The *masquerade*, the *carnavalesque*, resistance to male voyeurism, self-display, mimicry and the performativity of gender are essential concepts this dissertation analyses thoroughly. The upper-class protagonist, Fantomina, plans a stratagem to masquerade her identity and to ultimately seduce a man, Beauplaisir, by turning him into the object of her sexual gaze and power. Moreover, this essay proves how *Fantomina*'s performance of her masquerade, which is cheerful, shares some elements with the *carnavalesque*, namely its temporality.

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## INTRODUCTION

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 enjoy'd

Eliza Haywood

Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina* (1725) stands as a revolutionary novel of the eighteenth-century, a time in which Haywood's literary production was highly prolific. *Fantomina* embraces an explicit erotic style in a century in which solely middle and upper-class British women were obliged to comply with decency, chastity, modesty and traditional morality. This mentioned style earned Haywood the titles of 'great referee of passion' and 'seductive style supplier'. Moreover, her novel shows Haywood's genuine creativity and seriousness towards class and patriarchal gender systems, which considered women to be 'the weak sex' and located them in the private sphere of the domestic.

Little is known about the early years of Eliza Haywood (England, 1693-1756), but her active role as a writer, actress and publisher should not be underrated, since she published over seventy works including fiction, poetry, drama, periodicals, translations and conduct literature. Hence, along with Penelope Aubin and Daniel Defoe, she remains a representative figure among the founders of the English novel in the early eighteenth-century.

In *Fantomina*, Haywood introduces the new literary fashion of the *roman à clef*, which reflected real life behind a façade of fiction, to create a world that both portrayed the interests of the female readership and gave raise to critical thinking toward traditional gender values. Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina* narrates the scandalous and libertine story of a "young lady of distinguished birth, beauty, wit and spirit" (Haywood, 1) that experiences her sexual awakening at a playhouse, looking at several gentlemen — particularly at one called Beauplaisir—, who were utterly pleased with seducing one of those woman that "sat in a corner of the pit...for no other purpose, than

to create acquaintance with as many men as seem desirous of it.” (Haywood, 1) In her novel, Haywood explores the role of imagination, expectations and desires when it comes to deceiving human beings. Furthermore, she brilliantly illustrates the fact that men, represented by Fantomina’s beloved, Beauplaisir, are both vulnerable to their conception of women as well as to the illusion created by desire.

This essay on *Fantomina* will be framed within feminist theory and criticism, studying in particular how scholars such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Judith Butler, Terry Castle, Craft-Fairchild, Siri Hustvedt, Luce Irigaray, Joan Riviere, or Woodward among others address the concept of the *masquerade* and the *carnival* to criticise the social construction of the feminine within patriarchal culture of women as being “other”. In so doing, this essay will analyse how Eliza Haywood tries to reverse through her protagonist, Fantomina, the female subordination and silence to the male gaze during the eighteenth-century. To achieve the latter purpose, this paper will map the already mentioned concepts of the masquerade and the carnivalesque onto *Fantomina*, in order to explore womanliness as “masquerade”. The carnivalesque will be explored following Bakhtin, as a double life, changeable and temporal. Moreover, by suggesting genuine femininity and the masquerade are the same thing, this essay will point to the constructed nature of femininity itself, hence understanding gender as performance.

As Terry Castle highlights, the masquerade was associated in eighteenth-century minds with dangerous sexual license and, especially, with female sexual freedom. The masquerade implies a “comic” plot, as in Shakespearian comedies like *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*, since it encompasses a narrative transformation. Moreover, the masquerade will be regarded as a microcosm, a feminocracy, a realm of female desire in which the sensuality of seeing and being seen should not be underestimated.

Nonetheless, although the masquerade can be interpreted as female empowerment—reversing the traditional female subordination to men—, this essay will also prove through *Fantomina* how this moment of female authority, disguise and influence is not permanent but temporal, cyclical and inconsistent, much the same way as the carnival and the carnivalesque. At the beginning of the novel, the heroine Fantomina employs the masquerade as a way of resistance to male voyeurism, to destabilize the gaze of her lover; therefore, it will be interesting to explore how Fantomina grants a space to female desire. Nonetheless, as the essay unfolds, it will

show how this latter empowerment slowly disappears under the powerful patriarchal system the novel is set in.

Besides, *Fantomina* challenges her own representation and game-play based on binary oppositions such as that of “prostitute” and “virgin”, “mistress” and “heiress” which she ultimately cannot keep performing, due to an unexpected pregnancy and social conventions which anticipate her punishment to live in a convent in France.

Ultimately, examining Butler’s exploration of the relationship between power and gender, this paper will similarly argue, considering *Fantomina*, that gender is not stable, but performative and culturally constructed. This construction of gender vindicates its reinterpretation, as it is constituted through the practice of performance.

Hence, this dissertation will show how the masquerade fiction *Fantomina* stands for, helps to subvert the dominant discourse towards eighteenth-century socially constructed conceptions of gender, by disguising the female body and thus, by unmasking eighteenth-century conceptions of femininity.

## **Masking/masked femininity**

In order to understand the notion of the masquerade, it is worth mentioning how Joan Riviere equals genuine womanliness to the masquerade. The latter term can be understood as an “an action, appearance, bearing or mode of life that is mere outward show concealing true character or situation: a pretense of being something that one is not” (Woodward, 1). Therefore, the masquerade encompasses a form of self-representation, or even resistance, which hides a truth, as Haywood reflects in her work: “hugging herself with Joy, that she had the good Luck to come off undiscover’d” (Haywood, 5). Regarding Haywood’s *Fantomina*, in her attempt to seduce her lover Beauplaisir, *Fantomina* decides to adopt various female identities, after jealously observing the close contact between the men and the prostitutes at the playhouse she frequented and which greatly differed from hers: “She was young, a Stranger to the World, and consequently to the Dangers of It...having no other Aim, than the Gratification of an Innocent curiosity” (Haywood, 2). She performs these representations of self-appearance through different roles which hide her real self: from a prostitute –an object of desired gaze-, a lower class servant Celia, a middle class widow Bloomer, to the aristocrat upper class Incognita. Moreover, *Fantomina*

constructs her personality as a game of domination and manipulation; she plays with binary oppositions such as that of “prostitute” and “virgin”. This is seen when Fantomina willingly disguises so as to pretend being one of those “Town-Mistress” (Haywood, 5). By not looking as an upper-class woman —obliged to comply with the mentioned traditional codes of behavior expected for those women—, she could get the intimate contact she much desired with the man she was only sexually attracted to, Beauplaisir: “She had often...talk’d with him; but then her Quality and reputed Virtue kept him from using her with that Freedom she now expected he wou’d do” (Haywood, 3) In the first meetings she cannot control Beauplaisir: “he was resolute, she fearful, confus’d, altogether unprepared to resist in such Encounters.” (Haywood, 8) However, through masquerading, Fantomina pleasantly takes control over both the verbal codes of seduction and sexual power, in order not to be discovered by her beloved: “imagining a world of Satisfaction to herself...in observing the Surprise he would be in to find himself refused by a Woman, who he supposed, granted her Favours without Exception.” (Haywood, 5) In other words, she is able to recreate her own physical virginity as she wishes, taking pleasure from the knowledge of her sexual and manipulative power over a patriarchal system which expected women to remain passive objects of male desire:

She was told by ‘em all [all the men], that she was the most lovely Woman in the World; and some cry’d, *Gad, she is mighty like my fine Lady such-a-one*, naming her own Name. She...receiv’d no small Pleasure in hearing herself prais’d, tho’ in the Person of another, and a suppos’d Prostitute...[Beauplaisir] look’d in her Face, and fancy’d, as many others had done, that she very much resembled that Lady whom she really was... (Haywood, 3)

The latter idea of Fantomina taking pleasure from the game-play where she can disguise herself as she wishes can be retaken from the perspective of her being a ghostly fantasy (as her name can be related with the noun *phantom*), that is, the masquerade, as Castle asserts: “the emblem of universal transformation...the exemplary site of mutability, incongruity and mystery” (102). The masquerade is provocative, as Castle states, because it “embodies a liberating escape from the status quo” (103), implying

that Fantomina can have access to any social position and sexual pleasure at her will. In the novel, Fantomina repeatedly stages male sexual appetite and shows how it can be played on: “The Business of her Love has engross’d her till Six in the Evening, and before Seven she has been dress’d in a different Habit, and in another Place.” (Haywood, 13) At this point, Haywood’s ability to prevent her protagonist of remaining a sexual object for male enjoyment by reversing the established female passive role is undeniable.

However, after some time Beauplaisir gets tired of Fantomina: “He varied not so much from his Sex as to be able to prolong Desire, to any great Length after Possession: The rifled Charms of Fantomina soon lost their Poinancy...he made an Excursion to go without her” (Haywood, 14). However, she chooses to follow him, this time under the mask of a lower class servant Celia, whose sexual desires with Beauplaisir were also ultimately satisfied: “He compelled her to sit in his Lap...he call’d her little Angel...devour’d her Lips, her Breasts with greedy Kisses...till he had ravaged all...the sweet Beauties of the pretty Celia” (Haywood, 17) At this point, it is relevant to highlight how Fantomina feels she cannot refuse a sum of gold Beauplaisir gives her, “for fear of...losing the Heart she so lately had regain’d” (Haywood, 18). Under this light, Luce Irigaray claims that the masquerade can be regarded as painful, since it can be understood as a desperate renunciation of female desire. In other words, the woman experiments desire but it is the man’s desire and not her own:

She loved Beauplaisir; it was only he whose Solicitations could give her Pleasure; and had she seen the whole Species despairing, dying for her shake, it might, perhaps, have been a Satisfaction to her Pride, but none to her more tender Inclination. —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 sweetly forc’d to what she wished with equal Ardour...was what she wanted (Haywood, 15)

The masquerade is essential for the success of Fantomina’s stratagem to possess Beauplaisir sexually. Differently from Irigaray’s view, Fantomina’s masquerade is not painful, but festive: her female sexual desire does not disappear; rather it is equal to Beauplaisir’s. As the writer Riviere pinpoints, to consider that womanliness can

be worn and assumed as a mask, means equaling ‘mask of womanliness’ and ‘authentic womanliness’: “both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it” (qtd. in Craft-Fairchild, 1993: 51) This idea suggests the constructed nature of femininity itself: if in masquerading herself the woman mimics genuine womanliness, “that ‘real’ womanliness she dissimulates is itself also a mimicry, neither is essence and both are uncertain.” (Craft-Fairchild, 1993: 51)

Furthermore, Butler’s conception of ‘phantasmatic identification’ stands for what a given subject does to maintain desires which are abjected by the ‘heterosexual imperative’ that governs sexual identification. As Butler stresses, “every sexual being is constrained by not only what is difficult to imagine, but what remains radically unthinkable.” (qtd. in Tauchert, 471) This idea can be transferred onto *Fantomina* to understand Fantomina’s sexual desire as troublesome, since it is read as heterosexual and masculine. Henceforward, one possible interpretation would be that Fantomina is, embracing Butler’s words, “the woman who ‘wishes for masculinity’” (1990: 52); that she is “homosexual only in terms of sustaining a masculine identification, but not in terms of a sexual orientation or desire.” (1990: 52) Haywood’s protagonist wishes for masculinity in order to participate in men’s discourse and be empowered. Consequently, Fantomina’s womanliness would become a mask dominating Beauplaisir’s masculine identification; authentic womanliness —as the masquerade— would be a mimicry. Moreover, the masquerade “iterates a phantasmatic representation of the...gaze of desire between female-embodied subject and female-embodied object” (Tauchert, 470). Fantomina plays both the role of the sexualized object and the sexual subject, yet she willingly adopts the female-embodied object role, only to attract better Beauplaisir’s gaze and ultimately enjoy him.

As Butler highlights, the feminine is left outside of the form/matter and of universal/particular binarisms. In other words, these binary oppositions are formulated as part of a phallogocentric economy which generates the ‘feminine’ as its constitutive outside: “She will be neither the one nor the other, but the permanent and unchangeable condition of both” (Butler, 1993: 42) In addition, retaking Plato’s phantasmatic economy which “virtually deprives the feminine of a *morphe*, a shape” (Butler, 1993: 35) means reading the feminine as being permanent and the female body as not conforming to a human form, “non-living, shapeless non-thing which cannot be named” (Butler, 1993: 53) However, it is noteworthy that the fact that Fantomina easily displays

multiple representations of women opposes to the latter claim by pointing to Judith Butler's notion of gender as performance.

Butler asserts gender is performative, thus constructed, because it constitutes the identity it is purported to be: "gender is always a doing...there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (1990: 33) In *Fantomina* it is clearly reflected how, as Butler comments, gender is a set of repeated acts, a constituted *social temporality*, that *Fantomina* performs in a regular fashion during her carnival. The female body that *Fantomina* seeks to express is itself a construct, as Butler defines: "a repeated stylization of her body." (1990: 93) Furthermore, Butler underlines that, being the gendered body performative, the reason of desire, act and gesture is to be localized within the self of the actor: "imitating gender...reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (1990:137) *Fantomina's* performance enacts and reveals the performativity of gender in the sense that she repeats through her gestures, movements and styles "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler, 1990: 140). The masquerade through which *Fantomina's* performativity is identified shows the desire for an object that would offer form for a given desire, according to Tauchert, that is thought to have to remain formless and wordless under patriarchy: "Since she is stripped of the specificity of her own relationship to origins, it is only by affirming the relationship of the masculine subject to his origins that she can take her place in the cultural economy of subjectivity" (Tauchert, 482). The relation between the 'original' *Fantomina* and the 'imitation' is complex, because according to Butler: "the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin...it is a production which, in effect—that is, in its effect—postures an imitation" (1990: 138). Accordingly, Irigaray presumes that *miming* is the operation of the feminine in language:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—in as much as she is on the side of the 'perceptible' of 'matter'—to 'ideas' in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible', by an effect of playful

repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. (Irigaray, 76)

The relationship between Irigaray's assumption and Butler's premise lies in the fact that they hold that imitations remove the meaning of the original. Hence, if *miming* implies, following Irigaray's statement, a participation in what is mimed and if the language which is mimed is the language of phallogentrism, then Fantomina's language is only a specifically feminine language, "to the extent that the feminine is radically implicated in the very terms of a phallogentrism it seeks to rework." (Butler, 47) Thus, Fantomina's unique ability to play with mimesis and to embrace libertine language praises the social power inherent to the language of sexuality, as Potter indicates: "Haywood confirms the...construction of femininity...demonstrating through her most sexually disruptive female character, women's capacity to manipulate and control her...sexual position." (176) Fantomina is not only capable to reverse the position of the 'weak sex' she was assigned for being a woman, but also to prove that "the body is not a 'being', but a variable boundary" (Butler, 1990:139) Above all, Haywood is able, through her fictional heroine, to criticise the patriarchal construction of femininity.

### **Playing with reversal toward sexual liberation**

As Mikhail Bakhtin remarkably understands it, 'carnival' is a double life — changeable and temporal— which demands "ever changing, playful forms" (11). That is to say, a constructed second life that, through humor and chaos, subverts the dominant atmosphere to seek for freedom, being subject to its own laws. Haywood embraces Bakhtin's vision of the carnival by depicting Fantomina as a ghostly fantasy seeking for sexual freedom and desire consummation through the multiple representations of women types she assumes: "her...Promise...hugging herself with Joy, that she had the good Luck to come off undiscover'd." (Haywood, 5) Moreover, Bakhtin's idea that carnival is temporal is emphasized at the end of *Fantomina*, when the reader learns that the protagonist is pregnant and, consequently, punished by her mother to spend the rest of her days in a convent in France, alone with other women: "She found the Consequences of her amorous Follies would be, without almost a Miracle, impossible to be concealed: — She was with Child" (Haywood, 40) Thus, in *Fantomina*, the

temporality of the carnival is marked by social conventions, which inevitably appear to eradicate a woman's hope for a different life than the socially established in the eighteenth century. It is worth mentioning how Fantomina's virtuous mother fully embodies the patriarchal context Fantomina is ultimately victim of: "She should not hope to Escape the Scrutiny of a Parent she had dishonour'd in such a Manner." (Haywood, 43) When Fantomina tells the truth both to the man she had attracted and her mother, it is hard to determine who is more surprised at what they hear: "If Beauplaisir...that he should have been blinded so often by her Artifices; or she, that so young a Creature should have the Skill to make use of them." (Haywood, 44) After listening to her words, Fantomina's mother considered that her daughter had to be the only one punished: "The Blame is wholly her's" (Haywood, 44). Even if Beauplaisir assures her he would discharge the baby faithfully, if Fantomina would commit the new-born to his care, neither Fantomina nor her mother consent to that.

Furthermore, having discovered her daughter's pregnancy, Fantomina's mother harshly urges her to speak the name of the child's father, Beauplaisir: "Is this the Gentleman...to whom you owe your Ruin? Or have you deceive'd me by a fictitious Tale?" (Haywood, 43). At this point, Beauplaisir is confused: "He assured her that the young Lady her Daughter was a Person who he had never met, more than at a Distance, admir'd" (Haywood, 43). The author's choice of the nouns 'ruin', 'distance' and 'tale', being the latter 'fictitious', should not be underrated, as they significantly transmit the essence of Fantomina's carnival. In other words, thanks to the playful forms of the four different women she performs, Fantomina distances herself from the passive object of male desire she was expected to be and displays a carnivalesque double life, which reverts both gender roles and sexual power relations dominant in a patriarchal system: "Strange and unaccountable were the Whimsies she was possess'd of...wild and incoherent her Desires..." (Haywood, 6) By taking pleasure from the knowledge of her sexual and manipulative power over Beauplaisir, she dismantles eighteenth-century expectations for women not to resist male voyeurism: "he...did not take from her the Power of seeing and entertaining him a second Time with the same Freedom she had done this." (Haywood, 4) She constructs her sexuality playing a game of domination and manipulation, being "successful in inciting the passion of the most desirable male sexual object." (Potter, 178) Thus, it is Beauplaisir who turns to be the object of Fantomina's sexual gaze. Nevertheless, as any tale, Fantomina's carnival is transient;

Fantomina is aware its ruin would be inevitable, although she decides to conceal from anybody the knowledge of who she was: “the Intreague being a Secret, my Disgrace will be so too” (Haywood, 12). The pseudonymous heroine of *Fantomina* is aware of the dangers steaming from the potential public knowledge of the sexual act, rather than from the act itself. So even if some readers may ponder whether Fantomina is raped by Beauplaisir, Haywood proves how her protagonist is capable of keeping her public reputation as a virtuous lady at court and also her private control over her sexuality: “the Thoughts of the Liberty he had taken with her...prevented her, with representing the Danger of being expos’d, and the whole Affair made a Theme for publick Ridicule.” (Haywood, 8)

Additionally, Bakhtin highlights the need of laughter in the search for freedom: “carnival is the...second life...organized on the basis of laughter...a festive life” (8). Fantomina’s double life, in which she freely plays with her sexuality, is joyful. Under five unreal names, Fantomina undergoes this carnivalesque second life based on a game in which she sexually controls Beauplaisir, who firmly believes to be sleeping with different women. In her game-play, Fantomina masterfully has the sexual power over her beloved, what Bakhtin has defined as a logic “à l’envers” (11), though temporarily, in a social context in which her actions were unconceivable. Likewise, in her novel, Haywood reinvents the carnivalesque laughter of the medieval *fabliaux*—comic tales of everyday urban life—to open a world of possibilities for women to reach sexual freedom which opposed the patriarchal atmosphere she lived in. Fantomina, much the same way as the women of medieval *fabliaux*, manages to stay ‘on top’ of the man, what Perfetti has understood as “a subversive invitation to destabilize the rule of men over women sanctioned by medieval church writing” (12). Even if in medieval *fabliaux* it was usually the woman’s husband who was played upon and looked ridiculous, Fantomina’s ingenuity to play with her beloved can be read both as effective and comic. Still, as it has been asserted, in *Fantomina* Haywood plays both with the temporality of the protagonist’s empowerment and the sexual attraction the latter feels toward her beloved: “the most violent Passion” (Haywood, 35), which marks a sharp contrast with *fabliaux*. Even if Fantomina’s actions are subversive for her time and can make Beauplaisir look ridiculous, her initial intention is no other than “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 forc’d to what she wished with equal Ardour, was what she

wanted” (Haywood, 15). Moreover, even Beauplaisir’s comical name objectifies sexually his persona. It is only after she receives two letters by Beauplaisir with similar words of affection addressed to two of the women Fantomina represents, Mrs. Bloomer and Fantomina, that she mourns enraged at her belief of being able to conquer Beauplaisir and make him truly want her: “had I been deceiv’d and cheated, had I like the rest believ’d, and sat down mouning in Absence...wanting recover’d Tendernesses” (Haywood, 27). Furthermore, it is significant how after this moment of reflection, she grows and even laughs at the idea of fooling Beauplaisir: “while he thinks to fool me, is himself the only beguiled Person” (Haywood, 27) and she eventually reaches the climax of her artifice:

SHE made herself, most certainly, extremely happy in the Reflection on the Success of her Stratagems; and while the Knowledge of his Inconstancy and Levity of Nature kept her from having that real Tenderness for him she would else have had, she found the Means of gratifying the Inclination she had for his agreeable Person, in as full a Manner as she could wish. She had all the Sweets of Love, but as yet had tasted none of the Gall, and was in a State of Contentment, which might be envy’d by the more Delicate. (Haywood, 27)

Thus, Fantomina finds the greatest pleasure not in love, tenderness nor security, but in her awareness of her sexual and manipulative power over Beauplaisir’s body, who becomes objectified. In line with this assumption, Potter argues that: “Haywood perhaps smiles as she transliterates Fantomina’s subversive autonomy to echo the language of domestic management, so out of place in the tale of this particular woman.” (181)

Besides, Bakhtin’s understanding of the grotesque image of the body is relevant in order to appreciate better Haywood’s novel. According to the Russian literary critic, two bodies would coexist: one “giving birth” (26) and the other “conceived, generated, born” (26). This notion could be retaken to interpret the moment of Fantomina’s acknowledgement of being pregnant as her own death. Thus, it could be stated that Fantomina’s artifice dies when she learns that she is pregnant, as she cannot keep enjoying the sexual freedom her stratagem encompassed: “Never was Astonishment and Horror greater than that which seiz’d the Soul of this afflicted Parent...She could not

for a Time believe the Truth of what she heard.” (Haywood, 42) Moreover, Fantomina’s real self may truly be the ensemble of the multiple representations she creates, which is the self she deliberately chooses to be. This latter self opposes to the one appointed to her by a society in which she cannot rejoice in the freedom that the moment of carnival provides her with. Moreover, not only can the already mentioned ‘conceived, generated body’ represent Fantomina’s revelation of her true self, but also the revolution that Haywood surreptitiously presented when she *delivered* her novel. The author conceives a carnivalesque spirit that transcends eighteenth-century English patriarchal system to offer an opportunity to look at the world with a greater sense of female sexual liberation.

### **Destabilising the Male Gaze: a temporal satisfaction**

Nonetheless, whereas Bakhtin posits that “carnival isn’t a spectacle seen by the people, they live in it” (7), it is significant to consider that the masquerade is definitely a spectacle based on looking and being looked at. Masquerade suggests, according to Butler, that there is a “feminine desire or demand that is masked and capable of disclosure that...might promise an eventual disruption and displacement of the phallogocentric signifying economy.” (1990: 47) Fantomina’s desire is unmasked through the masking of her body and hence, she destabilises Beauplaisir’s gaze: “He...full of Cogitations, more confus’d than ever he had known in his whole Life” (Haywood, 45). It comes clear that Fantomina’s empowerment revolves around gaze and is therefore enhanced through the satisfaction of being looked at, yet masked: it was “impossible for her to be known, or taken for any other than what she seem’d...Fortune in this Exploit was extremely on her side.” (Haywood, 16)

The masquerade has been regarded both as ‘submission to dominant social codes’ and as ‘resistance to patriarchal norms’. For Terry Castle, the masquerade stands as a “World-Upside-Down...a feminocracy...a realm pervaded by female desire, authority and influence.” (qtd. in Craft-Fairchild, 1993: 52) Following Castle’s line of thought, the anonymity that the mask involves, allows Fantomina to escape from the patriarchal system of male sexual domination. “A woman was free to circulate not as commodity placed in circulation by men, but according to her own pleasure...the masquerade was indeed a microcosm in which the external forms of sexual

subordination had ceased to exist.” (qtd. in Craft-Fairchild, 1993: 52), but again this flight has an expiring date. In other words, women could reverse female roles, but temporarily:

She was so admirably skill'd in the Art of feigning, that she had the Power of putting on almost what Face she pleas'd, and knew so exactly how to form her Behaviour to the Character she represented, that all the Comedians at both Playhouses are infinitely short of her Performances: She could vary her very Glances, tune her Voice to Accents the most different imaginable from those in which she spoke when she appear'd herself. (Haywood, 23)

This artificially constructed microcosm of women away from the patriarchal sexual subordination which appears to be empowering is therefore not everlasting. In *Fantomina*, similarly to Shakesperian comedies such as *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*, the female empowerment through disguise is temporal. In the latter comedies, the protagonists (Rosalind and Viola) adopt a costume along with a new masculine identity (Ganymede and Cesario), but when they become themselves again, their power vanishes. Complying with a carnivalesque context, power relations and gender roles are reversed for a while after which everything returns to how its original state.

It is relevant to underline how the masquerade resembles to the carnival in that its temporality does not let the empowerment to be complete, but temporary. Beauplaisir may think he has got the power to sexually enjoy different women but, in truth, it is Fantomina who secretly enjoys him, as part of the carnivalesque situation where patriarchal order, and hence sexual power, is overturned: “In management of this Intrigue...by making no Person in the World a Confident in it...in concealing Beauplaisir himself the Knowledge who she was” (Haywood, 13) Nonetheless, although Fantomina rejoices in having Beauplaisir always raving for her, “wild, impatient, longing, dying” (Haywood, 35), she feels great anguish when she discovers how he sends letters to two women at a time with the same expression of presumed affection: “TRAYTOR! (cry'd she)...’tis thus our silly, fond, believing Sex are serv'd when they put Faith in Man: So had I been deceiv'd and cheated...mourning in Absence...vainly waiting recover'd Tenderness” (Haywood, 27) Following Siri Hustvedt's words, the disguise could be understood as revelation: carnival stands as a

temporary upside-down world, “the topsy-turvy realm of inversions and reversals, in which the mask serves not only as disguise but as revelation” (14) Similarly to how Hustvedt addresses Beckmann’s ‘Carnival Mask, Green, Violet and Pink’ painting<sup>1</sup>, Fantomina could also represent an archetype of feminine mystery and sexuality, of a woman being ‘the other’, in a gender interplay in which Haywood switches socially established power roles for men and women.

Besides, Castle argues that the masquerade praises the sensuality and provocative elements of the visual: “One took one’s pleasure, above all, in seeing and being seen. With universal privileges granted to voyeurism and self-display...bodies were highlighted.” (qtd. in Craft-Fairchild, 1993: 52) In this context, Haywood’s novel may be read as ironic in that Beauplaisir is not able to recognise Fantomina’s naked body in any of the self-display performances she undergoes: “She made herself, most certainly, extremely happy in the Reflection on the Success of her Stratagems” (Haywood, 27) Here, it is noteworthy to ponder whether Fantomina turns into an object of desire for Beauplaisir’s pleasure. If so, the masquerade would not alter women’s status, but it would rather leave them objectified as a spectacle for the male gaze and masculine desire. As it has been mentioned, Fantomina’s stratagem is successful because she consciously attracts Beauplaisir’s gaze to turn him into the object of her own sexual gaze.

Additionally, Luce Irigaray suggests that masquerade is a rejection of female desire. As it has been discussed, if through masquerading women tried to participate in man’s desire, as they desire to be desired, they would hence become sexually objectified as a spectacle. According to Irigaray, a woman enters the *masquerade of femininity* “a system of values that is not hers, and in which she can ‘appear’ and circulate only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely, men.” (67) In turn, Craft-Fairchild contends that the masquerade is theorized as “an anxiety-ridden compensatory gesture, as a position which is potentially disturbing, uncomfortable, and inconsistent, as well as psychically painful for the woman” (1993: 54). Thus, it seems appropriate to state that Fantomina is empowered through the masquerade to transfigure the image of femininity in order to attract the male gaze of Beauplaisir. The masquerade would point Fantomina’s status as spectacle rather than spectator. Fantomina presents herself as this fictitious image, a compilation of different women types, a mask under which truth is

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<sup>1</sup> The woman in the painting merges with the environment. She is an electric carnival woman, who is sexed and corpulent.

hidden and through which she can satisfy her sexual desire. As Woodward claims, the effectiveness of the masquerade “lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible” (9). It is then the proper distance that allows perceiving the mask, together with what it reveals:

Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed...To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image...a type of representation which carries a threat, disarticulating male systems of viewing. (qtd. in Craft-Fairchild, 1993: 60)

It can be argued that Fantomina does not embrace her masquerade fully convicted, as she keeps a distance from her representations which can be read as ironic. If adopted knowingly, the masquerade would work to create a space between the cause of desire (the constructed image of the self through performance) and oneself. This way, as it can be inferred from Doane's work, masquerade can withstand male voyeurism. In *Fantomina*, it can be understood that the heroine protagonist knowingly assumes the masquerade in an empowering manner, changing her disguise whenever Beauplaisir leaves her, through which she gains a constant physical contact with him. In so doing, Fantomina both finds pleasure in satisfying her wishes and in destabilising Beauplaisir's gaze: “refocusing his look upon her four manufactured selves...The first three of these disguised selves produce the gap or distance between Fantomina's real self and her constructed image necessary for the emergence of her subjectivity.” (Craft-Fairchild, 1993: 61) Thus, Fantomina's masquerade successfully resists Beauplaisir's fetishistic gaze.

Fantomina's laughter at her creation of a spectacle for men's sight is based upon the need of satisfaction of her own sexual enjoyment although, as it has been justified, this enjoyment is temporal. Nevertheless, as Craft-Fairchild states, her disguises were chosen taking into account Beauplaisir's fantasies and fancies: “Three of Fantomina's constructed selves –the prostitute, the country maid, and the widow- are lower in status and power than her hidden identity” (62), serving to mask her control to make her an acceptable and accessible sexual object for Beauplaisir's desire. Fantomina uses Beauplaisir's fantasies in an utilitarian fashion for the empowerment of her masquerade.

This empowerment is, then, her stratagem: she craves to know him and his fantasies to seduce him.

*Fantomina*'s ending accelerated after the protagonist cannot keep masking her pregnancy by "eating little, lacing prodigious strait, and the Advantage of a great Hoop-Petticoat, however, her Bigness...happen'd much Sooner than she expected." (Haywood, 41) may seem to be traumatic as she is sent to a convent in France. Gender is a performance with acutely punitive consequences, as Butler proposes, "as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems" (1990: 139). Nonetheless, the conclusion of the novel, which appears to comply with a phallogocentric discourse, might be masking a feminist message toward sisterhood and liberation. In truth, *Fantomina*'s ending is rather satisfactory, since Fantomina does not face public embarrassment and a marriage-ending would definitely not be something the protagonist would wish for. She believes Beauplaisir to be of the best of his sex "she dispatch'd as soon as she cou'd all that had hitherto attack'd her, when she saw the accomplish'd *Beauplaisir* was to reach the Bench she sat on" (Haywood, 3). Nonetheless, Fantomina receives several letters with equal words of love addressed to her different representations of women: "To the Lovely FANTOMINA...To the Obliging and Witty INCOGNITA...There is a Charm in your Lines, which gives too sweet an Idea of their lovely author...Your everlasting Slave, BEAUPLAISIR" (Haywood, 35). These letters leads Fantomina to parallel Beauplaisir with every other man whose love and affections turn quickly cold and disappear: "The only authority to which Fantomina must answer is not the booming voice of a tyrannical father but the restraint of a virtuous mother...A community of women is established at the end of Haywood's text..." (Catherine Craft, 1991: 831). Hence, Fantomina's ghostly leave to France is subversive, a prolongation of that female society. If subversion is possible, Butler claims, it will be a subversion out of which "the culturally constructed body will...be liberated, neither to its "natural" past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities." (Butler, 1990: 93)

Additionally, it can be defended that when the individuality of the self is in crisis, plurality and multiplicity prevail. As Moya reflects, the English writer G.K. Chesterton stressed that "being lucid means realising one is multiple" (10). Hence, it can be understood that Haywood does not reduce Fantomina's different representations to mere variations of herself, but rather she transforms them in other persons, in masks, in order to speak honestly. As part of her seductive stratagem, Fantomina mimes the

verbal and physical markers to perform privately and appropriately a prostitute in London, a servant girl in Bath, a widow Bloomer and an aristocrat, while preserving her public image at court. Under this light, *Fantomina* can be associated with a highly modern work of art in that she needs the active participation of her beloved to look at all the perspectives of herself she projects, at her plurality, to empower herself and make her stratagem meaningful. It could be stated that Beauplaisir is a victim of *Fantomina*'s electric game, because he does not undergo any process of abstraction to learn who the ghostly fantasy following him was. Moreover, he is not capable of recognising in *Fantomina* all the women he had slept with: "a Lady so much a Stranger to him...how far he was concern'd in it? — All the Idea one can form of wild Astonishment, was mean to what he felt" (Haywood, 43). Haywood may want the reader to undergo a process of abstraction to form an image which will reveal that *Fantomina* embodies not one, but many women. In line with Hustvedt's words, it is easy to read a representation of a masked woman as an archetype both of feminine mystery and sexuality, as another edition of woman being *other*. Like in Beckmann's paintings which Hustvedt analyses in *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women*, in *Fantomina* there is a return to the masquerade, the carnival, the masks and masking which intends a revelation, because according to this woman writer: "Carnival is the world upside down, the topsy-turvy realm of inversions and reversals, in which the mask serves as not only disguise but revelation" (Hustvedt, 14). *Fantomina* easily changes from one representation of herself to another, a reversal of the masquerade. *Fantomina*'s performance is definitely a masquerade, a resistance to the dominant social codes, to the pallocentric discourse: "a way of refocusing the male gaze upon the consciously constructed image instead of the real self" (Craft-Fairchild, 1991: 830) This is to note again that *Fantomina* secretly disguises not looking for the satisfaction of Beauplaisir's pleasures, but only for the gratification of her own sexual desires, which she applauds: "the Aversion she had to any *Confidants* in her Affairs, and the Caution with which she had hitherto acted...which she was still determin'd to continue." (Haywood, 29) It is timely to remark once more Butler's vision of gender reality as being created through social performances, which means that "the very notions of an essential sex and a true...masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character...outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination." (1990: 141)

## CONCLUSION

Eliza Haywood publishes *Fantomina* in an eighteenth-century British context, where the masquerade was particularly associated with female dangerous sexual license.

So far, this essay has analysed how an ahead of her time author is able to masquerade her protagonist in order to liberate her sexually and to reverse eighteenth-century thought on femininity. To achieve the latter purpose, the carnivalesque has been studied mainly through Bakhtin to show how *Fantomina* displays a second life in which she reverses the gender roles and sexual power relations prevalent in the patriarchal atmosphere the novel is set. It is thanks to this reversal that *Fantomina* can freely enjoy her sexuality.

Nonetheless, differently from Bakhtin's view, that considered carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people since they live in it, this dissertation has proved how *Fantomina*'s pleasure steams precisely from the knowledge of her sexual and manipulative power that revolves around gaze and which is, therefore, empowered through the satisfaction of being looked at. Hence, the female gaze is an essential element in this novel through which her author dismantles eighteenth-century expectations for women not to resist male voyeurism. Since the protagonist's actions do not entirely comply with the carnival, this work has embraced *Fantomina*'s performance to be, beyond the carnivalesque, a masquerade.

Furthermore, in the novel not only does *Fantomina* perform the role of the sexualised object, only to attract Beauplaisir's gaze, but she also constantly adopts the role of the sexual subject. In so doing, it is Beauplaisir who turns into the object of *Fantomina*'s sexual gaze. In *Fantomina* it is clearly reflected Butler's notion of gender, being a set of repeated acts, a constituted social temporality, which *Fantomina* performs in a regular fashion. In this essay, the understanding of femininity being always a doing—of gender as performance—, along with the discussed relation between *Fantomina*'s performance and the masquerade, has pointed to the idea that femininity is a masquerade.

Nonetheless, eighteenth-century social conventions appear at the end of the novel to mark the temporality of *Fantomina*'s carnival. Haywood wisely finishes the

novel and Fantomina's carnival by sending her away to a French convent—a feminocracy where she cannot look at any man nor be looked at—, since that was most likely the only possible manner to publish *Fantomina*: pleasing the masculine public by punishing her protagonist and, fortunately, making some readers reflect upon the revolutionary message she wanted to convey. Probably by reading Haywood's text, the reader may begin to realise that the world, along with its preconceptions toward gender and female sexuality, may be turning upside down by the author.

To conclude, throughout her novel, Haywood is able not to eradicate totally a woman's hope for a life other than the socially established in her time. Haywood employs her novel as her own mask under which she can be herself and defend female sexuality, hidden behind her protagonist. In other words, through the fictional façade her *roman à clef* portrays, Haywood is able to masterfully reflect the reality of a woman who has the courage and determination to challenge the imposed values of delicacy and chastity for an upper-class woman in the eighteenth-century in Britain and, hence, to liberate her inner sexual desire. Last but not least, this work is meant to appreciate *Fantomina* both as an early feminist manifesto that purports a breakthrough to the limits of women's expression and writing, but also as an extraordinary work of art that invites the reader to unmask critical thinking toward traditional gender roles throughout its pages.

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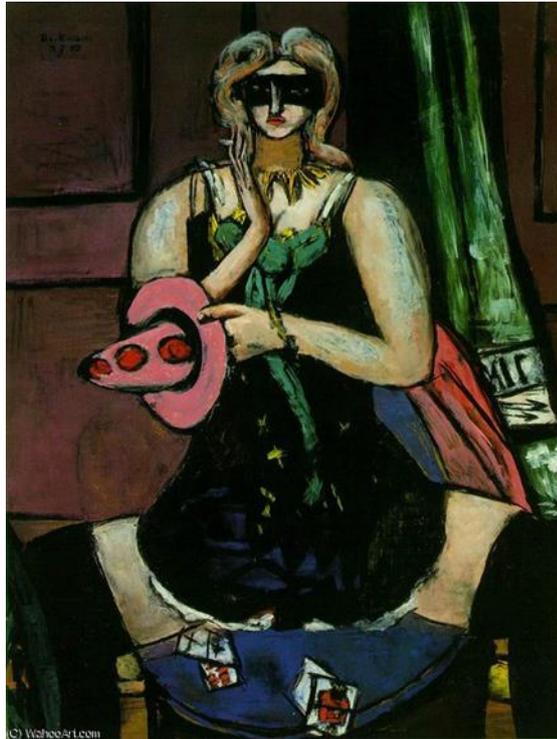
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**Annex 1**



*Carnival Mask, Green, Violet and Pink* (1950). Max Beckmann. Oil on canvas.