



The Woman in the Mask

Fantomina and the Theatrics of Femininity

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Employing Erving Goffman's theory of dramaturgy, Baylee Bozarth reads Eliza Haywood's eighteenth-century novella *Fantomina* as an extended metaphor, one that compares theatre to the performances women put on within patriarchal society. This essay was written for British Literature I with Dr. John Bruce.

ELIZA HAYWOOD WROTE INCREDIBLY progressive works for the eighteenth century, despite their roots in misogyny. The 1725 novella *Fantomina* is both praised for the shocking sexual mobility it allows the main female character and criticized for promoting rape culture and conforming to sexist social norms. However, Haywood seems too aware of the social problems for these controversial ideas to not be included in a purposeful way. *Fantomina* is not necessary an exemplum, but rather an example of the pressure women face to change and conform every day of their live. It is a story about a woman putting on masks to please the male gaze, and in doing so it represents all women and the figurative costumes they put on every day.

The audience never knows who the character of *Fantomina* really is. She is commonly referred to by that name only because the character's actual name is never spoken in the story. Instead she is

referred to as “the young lady” or simply “the girl” (Haywood 41). She is constantly changing identities, without revealing who she actually is to the primary male character, Beauplaisir, or to the reader. The story is even written in third person narrative to highlight the separation between her and the reader (Morrison 28). This type of secrecy could be in effect for multiple reasons. She could simply be trying to reiterate the need for privacy concerning her sexual exploits, so she does not get caught and publicly shamed for them. However, a compelling argument can be made that her identity is not important, because she has no true identity, and like all women is simply putting on the most convenient mask for the occasion.

The themes presented in *Fantomina* are strikingly similar to the later idea of dramaturgy. This theory is the idea that “by examining theatre-like situations in social life we get to know something about social interaction, and theatre stage or dramatic text, in turn, may give us new insights into how we act and communicate with one another” (Vösu 132). Erving Goffman uses this analogy to suggest that every social interaction people have is simply the person acting, as if on a stage, for the benefit of the people around them (Vösu 141). *Fantomina* is doing just that. Haywood even describes her as being an incredible actress, stating, “all the comedians at both Playhouses are infinitely short of her performances” (57). Social dramaturgy suggests that people put on different personas depending on their audience, which is exactly what *Fantomina* does when she pretends to be a prostitute. She wants people to treat her differently, and experience sexual desire and activities; therefore, she becomes a different character entirely (Merritt 51). The only difference is that Haywood is pointing out how necessary this process of acting is for women in order to get what they want, or progress socially. An important analogy for this is the constant costume changes.

Costuming is an important part of theatre, and *Fantomina*’s outfits and fashion are described in detail each time she takes on a new character. The way women dress is also, historically, designed specifically to please the male gaze. Maureen Turim discusses film’s

“slit aesthetic,” which is meant to juxtapose the fabric with bare skin in order to fetishize women’s body parts to please the male gaze (Young 67). Fantomina, each time she creates a new character, is costuming herself, not only to fit her new role, but also to make Beauplaisir the most attracted to her. In the section where Haywood describes Celia’s fashion, the footnotes read, “Jackets were close fitting, buttoned tightly at the waist, and deep cut, which emphasized the woman’s shape and also revealed the front of her dress or cleavage” (Pettit 52). In this note, the editor feels the need to indicate that the purpose of her clothing was essentially to make Fantomina appealing to men. The only other purpose of dressing a specific way is to indicate a certain level of wealth of social class, which is part of putting on a mask relevant to how rich she wants to appear. Everything she does seems to be for Beauplaisir’s benefit. The only way she has any control over her life is by divorcing herself from it and becoming someone new.

Femininity is directly related to the art of performing, and Haywood shows this throughout the entire narrative. The story even begins in a theatre, where Fantomina takes on her first persona (Merritt 48). She is able to gain power over her own fate by controlling how much Beauplaisir knows about her identity. If he does not know who she is, he can’t reveal that he has taken her “virtue” (Haywood 48). She also is able to “trick him into monogamy” despite his waning interest in her different personas (Morrison 32). She is such a good actress that she is able to seduce a man as four different women without him knowing the difference. This is indicative of women’s natural skill to be whatever they need to, as well as men’s complete disregard for even noticing what is happening around them. All women are acting all of the time, which is why the heroine’s final disguise, Incognita, is actually the truest representation of herself.

In her final disguise, Fantomina fully acknowledges that who she is makes no difference to Beauplaisir. She goes as far as to wear an actual mask, representing the truest version of herself that the

audience sees. This is not only because this disguise is closest to the heroine's actual financial status (Morrison 35). She is actually representing herself, as the women in the mask. She has no true identity, only masks that she wears. This costume, too, is yet another way to hold as much power over Beauplaisir as her position enables her. By keeping her identity a secret, she has knowledge that he wants. The mystery keeps him excited and also allows them a type of voyeurism, since, in a way, she is separating herself from her body (Merritt 65). She simply becomes a sexual object, rather than concrete person he can try to understand. In this way, she objectifies them both.

Essentially, *Fantomina* is an extended metaphor meant to directly compare femininity to theatre and acting. The story even reads like a play. Merritt compares the story to the Lacanian concept of the "screen," which is similar to dramaturgy in that humans' views of themselves are split between characters they show to other people and who they actually are (58). *Fantomina* acts as if she were on a screen throughout the story. She has multiple character and costume changes. *Incognita* is herself an example of what it means to be an actress with no self-identity. She does this over and over again in order to gain agency as a woman, which is a real-world problem. The story argues that to be a woman is to be an actress.

Fantomina is complicated work that uses serial identities to accomplish many goals. Haywood not only describes a woman achieving sexual and emotional power over a man, but she also simultaneously shows a plight all women face. Putting on a mask in order to conform to society is almost unavoidable and is done every day by women everywhere. It is often the only way to advance or have any power at all, especially for women in the eighteenth century. Dramaturgy is not only a sociological explanation, but a social tool important for women in order to achieve their goals. ►►

►► WORKS CITED

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