

Icon

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the title character in *Fantomina*, a short story written by Eliza Haywood in 1724. The question of what role the character plays has been debated, and through this work, it is argued that she is a feminist character in a society that did not respect these values. Our main character is able to convey the double standards women in the 18th century face when it comes to sex and their place in our societal structure, and shed light on the parallels in today's age.

“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” (Haywood 275). *Fantomina*, by Eliza Haywood, is a piece of literature that invokes a strong divide between readers. Revolving around an unnamed woman, the audience follows her journey as she continually seduces her rapist under different guises, one of them being named Fantomina. Fantomina is first introduced to promiscuity through her fascination of prostitutes. She observes them, and even portrays one, leading her to meet a man

named Beauplaisir. Although not entirely understanding the role she has committed to, she agrees to meet with Beauplaisir. Assuming she is a prostitute he makes advances and attempts to pay her, which she declines. This does not yield the results she wants, and she is overpowered and taken advantage of. After this event, she continues seeing Beauplaisir, but he soon grows bored of her and avoids her. She begins taking on different personas in order to continue sleeping with Beauplaisir; he becomes bored with one and she then takes on a new guise.

When Beauplaisir first makes his advances, Fantomina tries to postpone their meeting to another time so she is able to assess the situation: "In vain she endeavoured to delay, till the next Meeting, the fulfilling of his Wishes: — She had now gone too far to retreat: — *He* was bold; — he was resolute: *She* fearful" (Haywood 5). From the description of the two characters interacting, it is clear the power dominance that Beauplaisir has over her, and her hesitation to decline him. His description of being "resolute" is an important factor to notice from this quote. This implies that his decision, his word, is final. They have more weight and meaning than any woman's voice. Beauplaisir wanting sex from Fantomina will always inevitably end with him having sex, consensually or not, with Fantomina. Fantomina is also described as feeling she could not turn him down because of his position in society: "at the apprehension of really losing her Honour, she struggled all she could, and was just going to reveal the whole Secret" (Haywood 5). Women of this time period associated honor with chastity.

If they were to participate in sexual intercourse before marriage, they were extremely looked down upon. Men on the other hand, had a much broader category for what is defined as honorable, and are not condemned for participating in sexual behaviors. With this being said, Beauplaisir proceeds to rape her, providing the story with the pivotal moment.

Fantomina's first sexual encounter was one of assault, immediately introducing her into the world of male domination and female oppression. Being so newly integrated into how society functions, Fantomina approaches her situation like many victims of rape do; she attempts to become attached to and involved with her rapist to cope with the reality of the situation. In addition, this is also the only sexual activity Fantomina has ever participated in, and given her lack of knowledge on this subject, she has nothing to compare the experience to. She continues seeing Beauplaisir, but he soon grows bored of her and avoids her: "And here lies the great transformation of agency within the novel. After "the ruinous Ecstasy" is over Fantomina becomes the author of her own actions, and seduces and tricks Beauplaisir for the rest of the novel" (Kramnick 464). Having been tossed aside as if she hadn't given everything she had to Beauplaisir, Fantomina makes the decision that she will not mourn the loss of "love" but that she will claim her place as an equal in humanity.

Fantomina breaks down all of the societal expectations and roles that women are expected to follow by manipulating Beauplaisir. She begins to participate in activities

solely deemed acceptable for men to outwardly do. She “uses her lover to satisfy not only her libidinal desires but also her desire to move fluidly between social positions in a more integrated public sphere” (Creel 654). She is able to achieve different ways of life, socially and economically, by taking on different personas. With these different personas also comes a new opportunity to control Beauplaisir, providing her with not only a different social perspective, but also a perspective dependent on your sex. With Beauplaisir, she is able to manipulate him into taking on the submissive role without him even realizing: “Throughout the story, Fantomina uses her hard-earned (sexual) knowledge to leap over boundaries and disrupt numerous binaries, among them male/female, subject/object, victor/victim, and of course seducer/seduced” (Levin 5). Beauplaisir becomes the one being taken advantage of (although he consents to sex, unlike Fantomina did.) He is now an object for Fantomina’s self-exploration, but as well as a tool for her to gain power and revenge.

Although Fantomina’s quest may have started off with the purpose of experiencing a life of equality, we start to see how the fuel for this journey may be retaliation. There is a sense of satisfaction that she gets every time she is able to successfully deceive Beauplaisir. She is taking back what he stole from her: “Fantomina reoccupies and eroticizes the very uncertainty of consent that marked her first entry into sexual relations” (Kramnick 465). Fantomina exemplifies the traits of a feminist hero. She has made it through hardships, especially ones due to her sex and gender. The

character of Fantomina also shows someone who is fighting back, which is a trait that is not often shown in female protagonists.

It is an important detail that the main character's real name is never given. One of the opening scenes is her pretending to be a prostitute to get attention from men, and she has no name. Then, she is raped by Beauplaisir, still with no name. She is just being referred to as the Mistress. But, once she begins taking on different personalities, getting revenge on Beauplaisir, she begins to possess names, such as Fantomina or Celia. She is claiming herself. This represents character growth and development. She is no longer the image that a man or that society has created for their own needs. It is entirely up to her, she is now in control of her own story. As she works towards getting her pride back, she gains a bigger sense of identity. Fantomina is evolving from an object into a subject. Again, she is portraying the positives for providing women with rights and with equal respect.

Fantomina's role in the story becomes highly debated once she begins taking on different personas in order to sleep with Beauplaisir. Some readers interpret this to be a step back from feminism, considering Fantomina dedicates her entire life to sleeping with a man who clearly does not want any sort of relationship. She follows him, puts her life on hold, and becomes relatively obsessed with her involvement with Beauplaisir. But, the counterpoint to this argument is that Fantomina is in no way doing this out of love or lust. She is taking part in this scheme because she "desires is to act

freely in a male dominated society” (Nicolaescu 59). When analyzed further, this argument becomes apparent. Fantomina learns quite quickly that her position in society, as a woman, is nothing more than an object for men to use to whatever extent they so choose. She has no self-agency when it comes to deciding how she wants to live her life. Fantomina learns that if she attempts to participate in activities concerning her “honor” or her virginity (or lack there of), like Beauplaisir, flirts or shows any interest in physical romance she is ostracized or treated terribly. We see that in her first encounter with Beauplaisir. She showed some sort of interest in possibly being intimate, and when she chose to abstain from sex, “she is punished for her sexual curiosity: she is ruined while he is satiated” (Creel 4). This drives Fantomina to go forward and continue taking on new personas and identities in order to gain the rights she is denied as a woman. She does not chase after him as an act of obsession or love, but on the need to participate in all the things that are specific to men and have caused her so much pain and agony.

Fantomina is not only a victim of Beauplaisir, but a victim of the institutions set in place. If we look at her as if she is from our day and age, there are significant qualities and meanings lost. She is living in a time where women had little to no rights. She is able to devise a plan that provides the opportunity to avoid those limitations. Many readers who see Fantomina as either anti-feministic or as a villain, judge her solely on her actions and nothing else. It is important in such dynamic characters to look at all aspects of them. With Fantomina, it is important to think of the “why?” Why

is she following the same man around and tricking him into sleeping with her? Why is she concerned with him staying with her? Why is it so important about being exclusively with this one man? Why is she doing this and what is her motivation or goal? When these questions are considered it becomes obvious that Fantomina is not in love, or infatuated, or just completely mean spirited. As mentioned previously, she has a reason for each of her actions. She wants to take back her name.

Fantomina's ability to discuss issues like oppression of women and rape culture in an 18th century story, shows just how important this text was back then and how important it still is. This is why Fantomina is a feminist icon. She "manipulates what is to be expected from a woman: instead of showing gentleness and virtue, she presents instead a fun spirit and the high ability to overcome others by ingenuity" (Nicolaescu 59). She is not defined by her faults or the trauma she has been through. She takes both into her own hands and uses it to benefit her in the future. She is able to fight back and advocate for herself. In addition to this, Haywood writes Fantomina into several different roles, portraying women of different economic status, different social standing, etc. This also provides a feminist contribution to the story: "In the disjunction between Fantomina's ruse and the reality of her identity, Haywood creates for her character a democratic space in which Fantomina's is able to impersonate every estate available to women at the beginning of the eighteenth century" (654). This piece of work can, and should, be read as a feminist work in terms of today's age.

The title character does not share the same moral values that were held at the time this story was written and in some cases her morals do not line up with what we encourage today. Because of this, there is much debate on the role Fantomina plays in this text. Is she a villain or is she a heroine? Fantomina is promiscuous, manipulative, and shows a lack of remorse for her actions until she is faced with the consequences. These characteristics cause many readers to be upset and frustrated and question Fantomina title as a "heroine". But Fantomina defies all the molds that women were expected to fill at the time. This piece of literature provides a commentary on the double standards existing between the two sexes. The parallels between Fantomina's character and the male sex provide an amazing observation on how women were held to such a different standard than the male citizens. Fantomina is not an unruly barbarian, but rather a feminist icon.

There are many connections between what is going on in *Fantomina* and our society currently that it would be very small-minded to read it as if it was completely unfathomable. Part of the importance of reading this story and seeing Fantomina as a feminist role model is the ability to connect it to today and see how much has changed, or to see how little has changed. If we looked at the beginning of the story through the lens we are currently looking through in 2018, people would sympathize with Fantomina more. We are living in a climate right now where it is becoming more common to share stories of being sexually assaulted, but sadly it is still a prevalent

problem. It is important to have a character like Fantomina in literature because their struggle is something readers can relate to and someone who is able to stand up for themselves and take control of the situation. Women are also still facing the problem of being told to be reserved, but then expected to be sexually intimate. In *Fantomina*, we see her not want to engage in any sexual activity, and Beauplaisir does not take that as an acceptable answer and has unconsensual sex with her. Yet, it is obvious that if she had had sex with someone else, Beauplaisir would have disapproved. There is no in-between. If you do not want to have intercourse you are a prude and if you do want to have intercourse, you are a slut. This is a problem we still see today, especially in the sex work industry. For example, the mass majority of men are shaming prostitutes, yet they are the ones who pay and want the services. They only support it when it is directly affecting them, and then once they are done they turn back against it. Reasons like representation and starting a conversation on the topic are two top reasons why *Fantomina* as both a book and as a character are so important.

Fantomina redefines the role of a woman in the 18th century while also providing commentary on the institutions that lead to the suffering endured. She is a perfect connector between human beings operating individually and human beings who come together and form a community. While both are suppressive, each one has a different way in trying to control *Fantomina*, and in turn the female population. Society is shaming women for being promiscuous while individual men shame (and sometimes

assault) women who do not want to have intercourse with them. Fantomina is able to respond to her trauma in a unique way that incorporates strength, anger, confidence and determination, unlike many female characters in works of literature at the time. She was deviant and schemed, like any male hero, and needs to be perceived in this way. She can be read as a character of sensibility due to the fact that she follows the same man around and seduces him as other people when he is no longer interested in her. But, this is all observed from the surface. Her relationship with Beauplaisir is a simple but perfect example of the gender differences at the time, and of the double standard that comes into play. Her reaction on top of this is all in response to her inability to have a say in her own life. Fantomina was a feminist role model when this was written and she still currently is.

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