

Identity theft:  
feminism in  
"fantomina; or love in  
a maze"



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In a time when women were never considered victors in the realm of sexuality, author Eliza Haywood protests these standards in her writings. She creates female characters who show the world that women can win, even in patriarchal societies. Victorious female characters make the world a better place by further empowering other women. Whether they are accomplishing their dreams, raising a family, or finding a mate, women benefit from living their lives with the freedom to make their own choices. In Eliza Haywood's novella, "Fantomina; or, Love in a Maze," the unnamed protagonist (Lady —) represents a strong female character in an early example of feminist literature.

The story "Fantomina; or, Love in a Maze" begins with a description of the protagonist as a "young lady of distinguished birth, beauty, wit, and spirit" (Haywood 2740). Lady — attends the playhouse one night and curiously notes the way men give attention to the prostitutes in another section of the audience. She decides to gratify her "innocent curiosity" (Haywood 2740) and visits the playhouse the following night dressed as a prostitute herself. Men flock to her, praising her beauty. One man in particular, Beauplaisir, makes her swoon. She agrees to go with him the following night. Once Beauplaisir and the young woman have sex, she is afraid of her undoing. She backtracks and says that she is not actually a prostitute, but Fantomina, "a daughter of a country gentleman," which is why she is ashamed of her actions (Haywood 2744).

Nevertheless, they continue to meet, she assuming the identity of Fantomina. When he tires of her and travels away, she assumes a new disguise to attract him. Her new identity is a maid at the place he is staying, <https://assignbuster.com/identity-theft-feminism-in-fantomina-or-love-in-a-maze/>

and she calls herself Celia. Beauplaisir becomes attracted to the protagonist as Celia (unaware that it is the same woman as before). After a month, he grows sexually weary of her as well and goes back home. Not to be forgotten, she assumes a fourth identity, calling herself Widow Bloomer. Once again Beauplaisir is beguiled, thinking she might be able to “ ease the burden of his love” (Haywood 2749). Once again, they form a sexual relationship, but unsurprisingly Beauplaisir wants something fresh rather quickly. Finally, Lady — (Haywood 2740) puts on her fifth and final identity, the mysterious and masked aristocrat who goes by the elusive title, Incognita. At last, she becomes tired of her scheme and trickery, not without discovering she is pregnant. Her mother visits, “ not approving of many things she had been told of the conduct of her daughter” (Haywood 2756). The young protagonist hides her pregnancy well until she goes into labor prematurely. Her mother demands Lady — confess who the father is, to which she offers up Beauplaisir’s name. He comes, but denies he is the father, still not realizing the woman before him is the same as the other five women he has slept with. Lady — confesses her trickery and must take full responsibility for her actions. When she is healed, she is sent off to a monastery.

Readers struggle to interpret who Lady — really is. Is Lady — a strong, independent woman who is ahead of her time, or is Lady — a self-conscious, fragile character who is so dissatisfied in her identity that her only option is to experiment with the identities of others? On the one hand, she makes her own decisions as she pleases and holds sexual power over a man, but on the other hand, she hides her true self from readers. Who really is Lady—? She is

a woman who defines independence and inner-strength. She defies societal expectations to become who she wants to be with no help from others. She, although excelling at mystery and multiple identities, does not become confused in her inner identity, "one of distinguished birth, beauty, wit, and spirit" (Haywood 2740). Even though her final circumstances (of pregnancy and a monastery) appear to be her downfall, Lady — does not surrender to the appearance of weakness. She holds her head high, still identifying with her real self — a popular young woman who frequently attends high-class social gatherings. Finally, she ends up in a all-female society that empowers women to strip themselves from the bondage of men.

Some critics disagree with the argument that Lady — is a strong, independent woman who is ahead of her time. According to Kate Levin, Lady — is not mature because she only acts in relation to Beauplaisir (Levin 1). Levin also argues that the protagonist is always saying yes and no at the same time, a weakness that she calls "collusive resistance" (Levin 2). Margaret Croskery believes that because Lady — demonstrates "collusive resistance," she is neither the victor nor the vanquished, a protest of both kinds of norms (77). Others note that Lady —'s pregnancy takes away from the power of feminism (Ballaster 190). Pregnancy is a consequence that she cannot run from and ultimately shows the weakness of the female sex, something, though, that Lady — herself cannot control. Lastly, while some say Lady —'s transportation to a monastery is a continuation of the female society (Craft 831), others debate that it is a punishment and an imprisonment of female freedom (Levin 1).

Even the text itself is its own critic. At some points, it seems like Lady — and Beauplaisir really love each other, and it is a mutual, loving relationship. In the beginning, Fantomina and Beauplaisir “ were infinitely charmed with each other” (Haywood 2741). Lady — even “ almost died for another opportunity of conversing with him,” and calls him her “ beloved Beauplaisir” (Haywood 2742 & 2746). And “ nothing could be more tender than the manner in which he accosted her” (Haywood 2742). At other times, it seems that the relationship (in both their eyes) is simply a lustful and passionate affair. Beauplaisir quickly loses interest over and over again, “ the rifled charms of Fantomina soon lost their poignancy, and grew tasteless and insipid (Haywood 2745). Even Lady — eventually reveals that it was fatal to have gotten involved with Beauplaisir because of the trouble it had caused her (Haywood 2757). Readers may question if Lady — is a desperate woman who wants attention or if she is in search of a genuine lover but gets distracted by the game of identity. Because of the discrepancies and changes in feelings, especially Lady —’s, some critics still debate if the protagonist is actually empowered and should be hailed as a heroine in feminist literature (Merritt 46). Despite all the criticisms, Lady — does display a striking freedom in the way she expresses herself and is fearless in her quest towards the discovery of love, sex, and power.

The feminist literary criticism approach can be used to study the protagonist, Lady —, in “ Fantomina; or Love in a Maze.” Elaine Showalter argues that there are three literary subcultures, or major stages of female development, in literature. The subculture itself means “ a habit of living” (Showalter 14). The first is the Feminine Stage, which involves the “ imitation of the

prevailing modes of the dominant tradition" and " internalization of its standards" (Showalter 13). The next, Feminist Stage, is " a protest against these standards and advocacy of minority rights" (Showalter 13). Finally, the Female Stage is a " phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity" (Showalter 13). Showalter says that a character can display characteristics from more than one developmental stage, even though the stages roughly follow literary time periods (13). According to Showalter, the Feminine phase in literature included texts written between the 1840s and 1880s; the Feminist phase from 1880s to 1920; the Female stage from 1920 to the present (13). Eliza Haywood wrote this particular novella in 1724, long before females became common protagonists and long before the Female stage began. The protagonist in " Fantomina; or Love in a Maze" strongly illustrates the final developmental stage (Female) and demonstrates some characteristics in the Feminist stage as well. This is determined by the character's knowledge of what she wants and her desire to get what she wants, her protest against stereotypical female standards by advocating self-discovery of identity, her trickery that makes her the victor, and her continuous inner strength.

Lady —'s motives guide her during the process of getting what she wants. At first, her motives are " no other aim than the gratification of an innocent curiosity" (Haywood 2740). According to one critic, Lady —'s motives stay here the whole story, meaning she is only interested in learning more about what male attention feels like, nothing more (Merritt 49). Other textual interpretations acknowledge that her curiosity turns into sexual knowledge and experience because she keeps trying to sleep with Beauplaisir. A " hope

of interest" becomes her new motive in keeping Beauplaisir close at hand (Haywood 2743). She says that " she loved Beauplaisir" (Haywood 2746). She wants have some sexual control and be sexually satisfied at the same time, hoping to " once more 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 ardor" (Haywood 2746). Once the fun becomes a glorious scheme to trick Beauplaisir into loving and lusting more than one woman, her motives finally turn to being the victor in the game of love and sex. According to Catherine Craft, this is Lady —'s " fantasy of female freedom" (830). Craft notes that she adopts disguises for her own pleasures and is proud and content with her actions during the game (830). Her motives, although shifting frequently, demonstrate character complexity and depth.

Lady — knows what she wants and will not stop at anything to get it " no matter the consequence" (Haywood 2742). In this, she defines strength and independence because what she wants defies what society says women should " want" in that day. Lady — chooses to fight for what she desires, even if society opposes it. The exception to this rule is when her mother comes to town, because not only are there uninvited consequences (pregnancy), but she has to be responsible for them. Lady — takes on five different identities to keep the game alive. With each disguise and performance, she prepares more, meaning that she learns quickly how to become someone else (Hodgson-Anderson 5). However, she does not lose sight of who she is and proves that it is okay for women to do whatever necessary to win. As her experiences broaden, she begins to understand the

complex differences between the sexes. She learns quickly that men desire difference while women desire sameness so she elegantly disguises her desire for the same object with his for a new (Merritt 53 & 55). Emily Hodgson-Anderson argues that although Lady — plans everything out beforehand, her feelings for Beauplaisir are still genuine, which is why she succeeds overall (2). Thinking ahead and preparing how she will seduce Beauplaisir is, Hodgson-Anderson argues, what makes Lady — a feminist character (6). Lady —'s strong will and deep thinking further empowers her throughout the story.

Lady — actively protests stereotypical female standards as she discovers her own identity. First, she protests common gender roles. She promotes her own power when she first refuses Beauplaisir's service, " observing the surprise he would be in to find himself refused by a woman, who he supposed granted her favours without exception" (Haywood 2742). Although Lady — is dressed as a prostitute, she does not live to the standard of one, which threatens Beauplaisir's expectations of manliness and conquering. When Lady — addresses Beauplaisir in a letter as Incognita, she calls him the " all-conquering Beauplaisir," buttering him up and praising everything about him (Haywood 2753). However, when Beauplaisir responds to " the obliging and witty Incognita he calls himself " your everlasting slave" (Haywood 2754). The way Lady — writes Beauplaisir puts herself in the spot of the victor. No matter how powerful Beauplaisir thinks he is, when it comes down to it, he is at the hands of Incognita because she has to make the first move. He never has to make the first move because he is being eloquently pursued, an ironic twist of gender stereotypes. Beauplaisir's hands are tied



— he is subservient to a woman. Lady — has great power over a man in this part of the story and she delights in it. The power she has promises a chance to finally control Beauplaisir's attention, making him focus on Incognita alone.

Lady — even experiments with social class, creating identities as lowly as a prostitute and maid to as high as an aristocrat. Lady — herself, being born of “ distinguished birth” (Haywood 2740) would have never experienced life from the perspective of lowly characters like the prostitute, Fantomina, or the maid. According to Craft, each disguise Lady — assumes is a higher class than the last, but more sexually accessible, which is the opposite of standards of the day (829). As a prostitute, she is “ fearful, confused, altogether unprepared to resist in such encounters” (Haywood 2743).

Although she may start out sexually weak, she develops her sexual strength and dominance, so by the time she is Incognita, she “ yielded without even a shew of reluctance” (Haywood 2755). According to Hodgson-Anderson, Incognita is the identity most threatening to Beauplaisir (6). This is not because she is the highest class citizen, but because she refuses to share her real name or her face. A refusal to share these things makes Beauplaisir uncomfortable and frustrated because he has no power and may end up the fool in the end. A lack of accountability could mean the woman he is sleeping with is not an aristocrat, or worse (in his mind) — ugly. But what really scares Beauplaisir, while empowering Lady —, is her mask. Juliette Merritt suggests that masquerade is a game in which women win because in realigning femininity, women create a new identity that will not compromise their public identity (45, 47, & 51). The mask also allows her to freely express her

genuine desires (Hodgson-Anderson 6). According to Hodgson-Anderson, this is a positive personal demonstration called self-conscious performance, which is when women act out roles that they have internally conceived for themselves so they can achieve female passions that society would consider immoral or disastrous (1). Lady —'s strength is further defined by the way she grows to handle the pressure sexual encounters create, and how she controls her own identity's desires through the names and costumes of others. By creating false identities, Lady — is freely expressing what society would not normally allow her to express — her true desires.

Lady — uses trickery to first become and then stay the victor in the game of sex. She genuinely enjoys tricking Beauplaisir and being the master behind the curtain. She "imagines a world of satisfaction to herself in engaging him in the character of such a one" (Haywood 2742). She is convinced that no one knows of her scheme, proud that "I shall hear no whispers as I pass, — She is forsaken: — The odious word forsaken will never wound my ears; nor will my wrongs excite either the mirth or pity of the talking world" (Haywood 2745). Even the narrator brags on Lady — in the text, "she was so admirably skilled in the art of feigning" (Haywood 2749). This proves that whether or not Lady — is actually interested in Beauplaisir, she wants to play a game, and Craft even argues that Lady — gets tired of Beauplaisir just as often as he gets tired of her (831). "She began to grow as weary of receiving his now insipid caresses as he was of offering them" (Haywood 2756), which further suggests that Lady — is interested in something short-lived that gives her power over a man. The complexity of her trickery and her character keeps the game alive.

Instead of playing the typical weak female or the victim, Lady — presents Beauplaisir as the fool in the relationship. He is “ both surprised and troubled at the mystery” from the beginning when Lady — tells him she is not a prostitute (Haywood 2743). Thus begins the more advanced labyrinth of deceit. She “ provided herself of another disguise to carry on a third plot” (Haywood 2747), and then “ she had prepared herself for it, and had another project in embryo, which she soon ripened into action” (Haywood 2751), a deceit unmatched by any other. Her disguises empower her because only she knows what is real. Beauplaisir can only guess who these beautiful women are, clueless that it is all the same person. The mystery of the disguises keeps her reputation safe while allowing her to pursue her desires. She turns the relationship into a maze (and a game) that she gets out of, while he is still left clueless, “ 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” (Haywood 2751). She lets Beauplaisir think he is seducing her, but she is seducing him and is in charge the whole story (Levin 4-5). Hodgson-Anderson points out that Beauplaisir thinks he has conquered four women, when he is actually making love to the same body every night (3). Such a belief on Beauplaisir’s part would make him feel like a male victor, a king in the field of sex. But when Lady — confesses what she has done, he is “ more confused than ever he had known in his whole life” (Haywood 2758), an entire defeat on his part, one that will forever remain with him. Lady — ultimately “ proves skill in a game against the man perceived to be the best” (Levin 5).

Finally, Lady —'s inner strength throughout the novella proves her to be in the feminist and female stages of Showalter's female development theory. First of all, she depends on only herself to get through the game and any pain it might cause her. She " did in every thing as her inclinations of humours rendered most agreeable to her" (Haywood 2740) and " depended on the strength of her virtue, to bear her fate through trials more dangerous than she apprehended this to be" (Haywood 2742). When she succeeds, she is proud of herself because " I have him always raving, wild, impatient, longing, dying" (Haywood 2754). Things start downhill because she is raped by Beauplaisir, " she was undone; and he gained a victory so highly rapturous, that had he known over whom, scarce could he have triumphed more" (Haywood 2743). Even so, she rises above, becoming the victor in an uncomfortable and taboo situation that first puts her on the bottom of the social pyramid (Ballaster 188). Next, she is accountable for her actions and accepts responsibility for them. Helen Thompson says it is important to note that Lady — does tell Beauplaisir about the trickery she involves him in (207). Even if it would have cost her reputation and been completely terrifying, " she related the whole truth" (Haywood 2758). Lastly, she does not get confused in her own identity, despite putting on so many others. Lady — is able to maintain her personal identity so that " she met him three or four days in a week, at the lodging she had taken for that purpose, yet as much as he employed her time and thoughts, she was never missed from any assembly she had been accustomed to frequent" (Haywood 2745). According to Croskery, her adopted roles reveal traits about her own identity because in the fake identities, she can express desires that she normally could not based on her sex and class (4). Her ultimate inner strength is her <https://assignbuster.com/identity-theft-feminism-in-fantomina-or-love-in-a-maze/>

self-composure and belief in herself, which is how she presents herself to the world (Merritt 67).

Lady —'s inner strength continues even when she becomes pregnant and is sent to the monastery. Even though she is pregnant, she still retains her true identity, attending social gatherings appearing as a lovely virgin, " by eating little, lacing prodigious straight, and the advantage of a great hoop-petticoat, however, her bigness was not taken notice of" (Haywood 2756). She gives birth to a daughter, someone who will be pinned down by society as an illegitimate child. However, that child will grow to become a woman who will have the choice to be whoever she wants to be. Lady — is the one the child can look up to in this way, because Lady — not only defies stereotypical female standards, but pursues the self-discovery of identity. In the monastery, Lady — has the opportunity to live in an all-female society, a society that is free from male bias, power, and control. Instead of living in a place where men rule and women submit, Lady — can finally rest in a home that promotes female empowerment, something that Lady — exhibits throughout the story.

The archetype of seduction begins in the garden with Eve and the serpent (Levin 3). In this story, however, it is not the woman who is beguiled, but the man. This story weakens the criticism of women on the basis of the garden. Instead, men are attacked with the point that they are " stupid and beguiled" (Craft 831). Seduction is a hot topic in literature, especially in Haywood's writings, who, according to literary critics, is known as the " Great Arbitress of Passion" (Hodgson-Anderson, 1). Haywood writes " Fantomina; or Love in a Maze" to play with the idea that the best seduction is mutual (Levin 6). The <https://assignbuster.com/identity-theft-feminism-in-fantomina-or-love-in-a-maze/>

passion in this story is a split flame — one lover's flame burns out over and over again (Beauplaisir) while the other's constantly grows stronger (Lady —). Not only does the story " Fantomina; or Love in a Maze" frequent the topic of passion, it focuses on rising above the stereotypical gender roles in the game of sexuality. According to Levin, the female protagonist learns sexual knowledge through experience, she jumps over conventional boundaries by becoming the teacher instead of the learner (5). As her sexual identity forms, so does her identity as a female. Her final identity settles as a mother when instead of creating another disguise, Lady —'s body creates another being (Thompson 207).

The introduction to " Fantomina; or, Love in a Maze" is a couplet by Edmund Waller which reads, " In love the victors from the vanquished fly. — They fly that wound, and they pursue that die." While traditionally Lady — would be the vanquished, she is in fact the victor because she empowers herself and mystifies the sex that is usually all-powerful. Beauplaisir is the vanquished, weak, and confused one. The story ultimately proves the power women have when they are given the opportunity and freedom to express it. Lady — is a woman who demonstrates incredible independence, empowerment, and control for a female of her time. Through her motives, quest for identity, trickery, and inner strength, Lady — demonstrates that she is a strong female character in an early example of feminist literature.

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