

Custom reconciliation in fantomina



'The heroes in the ancient romances have nothing in them that is natural; all is unlimited in their character'[1]. Haywood's amatory fiction withdraws from traditional romances in introducing human limitation, and accepting vice and virtue as one. Custom, as an established and widely accepted system, is therefore not necessarily the right system; Haywood proclaims from the title page it is a history of 'two Persons of Condition'[2], suggesting immediately a break in tradition from people who are assumingly, without 'Condition. Ancient romances exhibit love as either faultless when one has it, or tragic when one loses it. Haywood instead introduces love as flawed, alienating the romance genre from custom, but reconciling it instead with a new reality of unpredictable human emotion. Tradition can thus be outdated, and have a negative effect in dragging 'everything' back to the familiar but obsolete. Even in fiction, one must alienate us from custom to encourage a new order in society.

It is unavoidable that men and women are to be categorised separately. Traditional gender norms that separate the two sexes -occupation, strength and physical appearance -are irrelevant when considering emotion, specifically love. Instead, Haywood characterises Beauplaisir and Fantomina through constancy and inconstancy in love to produce views of gender that work against the traditional image. Through this constancy in love, Fantomina as a female lover refuses to be stereotyped as the 'hysterical woman'[1] who considers 'Complaints, Tears, Swooning' and 'Extravagancies' (Haywood, p. 233) to manipulate the other gender. Even if her actions are arguably extreme, she remains emotionally stable and outwardly calm in her façade; hysteria was seen as being shown through

physical defects, of which Fantomina displays none. Whilst Fantomina's deception rejects traditional expectations gender through retaining control of Beauplaisir, she only ultimately has temporary domination of him during the initial courtship. This control is almost completely surrendered when the social aspect of courting ends, and the physical reduces her performative layer to carnal desire. He: held to his burning Bosom her half-yielding, half-reluctant Body, nor suffered her to get loose, till he had ravaged all and glutted each rapacious Sense' (Haywood, p. 235). Traditional gender norms are restored through physical activity. The human body is reduced to a fundamental animal magnetism, stripping away all social behaviours that arguably cloud one's true nature. Fantomina fights between the control she wields in the courtship, and the submission to pleasure in the erotic, with natural impulses ' half-yielding' and ' half-reluctant', as if conscious and unconscious desires remain in opposition. Yet this reluctance also defies custom. Novels such as Richardson's Pamela refuse sexual encounter through an upholding of virtue, typically expected of women. Haywood's protagonist is torn between pursuing a carnal satisfaction and retaining control, both patriarchal traits. Even in inverting what is expected of her gender, her submission, even if it is willing to secure pleasure, can still be read as a submission. A slave-like metaphor is inferred in preventing the woman from breaking ' loose' from his grasp, suggesting not only his physical hold on Fantomina, but the shackles of tradition that prevent female satisfaction. Here, custom unites women with an expected patriarchal dominance, far from a reconciliation as they are unwelcome. Female gender norms are challenged, whilst male are not, presenting a mockery of custom that doesn't change, but should. Beauplaisir is representative of all male

lovers; his name literally meaning 'fair pleasure' dictates his identity as interchangeable. It remains important not that Beauplaisir 'ravaged' or 'glutted' the senses, but that he obtains the right to do so. *Fantomina*, despite stepping outside her class boundaries to obtain what she wants, questions neither his dominance nor his imminent boredom, accepting quickly that 'Time will wither' the 'most violent Passion' (Haywood, p. 243). Haywood therefore associates the inconstancy of hysterical women with the male, and a calm business-like manner with the female. Yet the woman is seemingly accused of being submissive despite embodying male attributes, and the established patriarchy deems almost all male activity as acceptable. Gender is inverted, but custom reconciles this inversion back to normality through perception.

Custom is, by definition, a public practise that is seen acceptable in society, and more specifically a certain class. To defy custom is to differ from what is widely accepted and is consequently considered alien and wrong. The appearance of custom thus reconciles *Fantomina* to a respectability that allows her private, sexual pursuit without losing honour or reputation. Public appearance is only important because *Fantomina*'s origins, assumed to be aristocracy; her licentious behaviour would be more widely accepted in the lower class, where prostitutes would reside. Customary public 'face' is not only specific to time and location, but social class. *Fantomina* can only defy the traditional behaviour of her social sphere, assumed to be aristocracy, through the masquerade. Social class is, within this novel, constructed fundamentally on who you are, not how you act. Only partial descent to a lower social class is actually achieved, as the masquerade changes the top '

performing' layer of identity but not the core of the being. The initial masquerade is emphasised through the theatrical setting: ' She had no sooner designed this Frolic than she put it in Execution' (Haywood, p. 227). Fantomina's actions are constantly named as a ' frolic', ' game' and ' play' (Haywood, p. 229), presenting a juxtaposition between the genuine feelings she exhibits for Beauplaisir, and the artificial nature of the front she presents. Perhaps the only way for society to be seen as even partially matriarchal is through a ' design' of the imagination: a society governed by patriarchy would never produce this role for a woman from the foundations set by men. It must be imagined by a woman, but men's minds are limited by power. The masquerade in execution is also a necessity. Whilst men could begin to cross social boundaries, such as those who descend to the ' Pit' but remain upper class (Haywood, p. 227), women were restricted to polite areas, such as the stalls the protagonist is first encountered in. Pretence is therefore the only way for Fantomina to continue her escapades without the novel descending to a tale of social damnation. Furthermore, this ' execution' seems extremely clinical; each identity Fantomina inhabits is specific and well-thought. It remains almost as if she delivers each performance with the expectation of it coming abruptly to a close, only to execute the next. She perhaps appears as a well-versed actress through social expectations of male desire, and matches her short-lived performances with inevitable male boredom. Reality is mimicked by a masquerade, it is an imitation of actual life. Yet even in its lack of originality, the performance reveals truth about reality. In assuming four different identities –Fantomina, Celia, the Widow and Incognita –the protagonist reveals Beauplaisir as a rake, information only achievable through the

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masquerade. Even though the masquerade is not true, it almost becomes reality for Fantomina. She refuses to reveal her real name, even to the reader, and therefore remains constantly in disguise. She performs to an unknowing audience, never leaving her name on the credits.

Reality cannot be considered a single concept, it must also be considered as specifically based on an individual's perception. Reality as a generalised notion is universal and based upon social expectation and long-held customs. A different reality is specific to the person, based on how they perceive the world, with expectation originating only from their internal moral compass. Therefore, whilst custom in a generalised reality is an idea 'widely accepted', this can alter depending on what each person accepts. Ideologically, Fantomina can continue her 'whimsical adventures' for as long as she desires, as they belong to her imagination. Only when she attempts to include another person in her version of reality, specifically a stock character that will act according to basic expectation, is she dragged back to a universal reality where one must accept responsibility of consequence. This occurs through childbirth, yet not the pregnancy itself. As long as the change in her body is stationary and able to disguise, the game can continue despite the physical deformity. It becomes biologically necessary for the protagonist to reconcile with reality, satirising the achievement as this 'whimsical adventure'; for a woman to act outside her class will always be a short-lived fantasy as nature prevents them from ever fully assuming a different identity. Throughout the 'Secret History', Fantomina rejects this stereotype of a hysterical woman through suppressing her emotions. She is then presented with the physical signs of hysteria, as the pregnancy reveals her

publicly as a vessel of desire: she could not conceal the sudden Rack which all at once invaded her; or had her Tongue been mute, her wildly rolling Eyes, the Distortion of her Features [...] she laboured under some terrible Shock of Nature” (Haywood, p. 246). Nature is here presented as the adversary. In eighteenth century belief, the womb was seen as a natural deficiency as the most potent difference to men. In *Fantomina*’s imaginative reality, she appears to almost lack this reproductive organ. This is emphasised through the selected narration, where the reader learns ‘all at once’ of the situation also, as if *Fantomina* is only shocked back to reality through the pain of childbirth. Even in childbirth, it can be argued that she still continues to reject nature, as the vision ‘invaded her’; only with physical force will *Fantomina* accept reality. Samuel Johnson commented that romance should “imitate nature; but is necessary to distinguish those part of nature [...] which are most proper for imitation”[1]. If Haywood’s novella was considered as negatively influential on its audience, a reconciliation to a female stereotype and traditional punishment allows the ‘improper’ parts to act as a moral ‘[lecture] of conduct’. Yet whilst *Fantomina* should be reconciled to reality through being sent to the French monastery, she perhaps isn’t as she shows little remorse. The only people who must be reconciled back to a general reality are the readers, brought to an abrupt ‘shock’ with ‘finis’.

Tradition is so because it is repeated, and therefore fixed within society. Perhaps Haywood actively refuses to ‘reconcile’ *Fantomina* with any existing traditions due to her lack of satisfaction. ‘Reconcile’ is, by definition, to exist in a harmonious relationship. The customs exhibited in *Fantomina: Or, Love*

in a Maze all originate from a patriarchal foundation, assuming a naturally negative relationship to the submissive female. Lack of reconciliation and a refusal to align oneself with these gender expectations is possibly the only way to solicit change. Custom may reconcile us to a familiarity, but not to a future where patriarchal oppression is lessened.

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