

# The squandering of wit



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Women living in the long eighteenth century in England found themselves snagged in a male-spun web of expectations and exclusions. Despite wit being considered a desirable quality in a woman, the expression of wit was only acknowledged favorably when it was perceived as being beneficial to men. Daniel Defoe writes that the compliment of wit was only paid to a woman who could stay within her feminine role, and use her intellect to enhance that role with an acute attention and awareness of social graces. In Jane Austen's *Emma*, for instance, the heroine is drawn to taking on additional roles in order to elevate herself into a position of augmented power. Taking on the role of a matchmaker, queen of her social circle, and Lord of Hartfield, allow her to extend her reach of influence and control beyond that of her given role as a single woman. The unnamed Lady of Haywood's *Fantomina* discards her well-bred role in exchange for the power of freedom in pursuing her desires and designs, free of the consequences of a tarnished reputation. Consequently, the literature of the long eighteenth century suggests that wit was a double-edged sword for these women, as it allowed them to gain social influence, but also made them painfully aware of the limitations of their influence within their roles. Jane Austen and Eliza Haywood suggest that this frustration pushed them to pursue other roles in an effort to acquire as much power as they could glean through their wit and manipulation.

Perhaps it would first be prudent to define the positive connotation and intended utility of "wit" as it is represented in the works of this period.

Daniel Defoe's *An Essay Upon Projects* provides the most encompassing and

historically representative definition of the term, as he writes from a nonfictional male perspective. He suggests that women should be taught “the proper management of her natural wit” (Defoe 272), affirming that the quality is only complimentary when it is accompanied by refined manners. Although he speaks of this “natural wit”, he is also very quick to promote its regulation through good breeding. He acknowledges that there exists a “fear they should vye with the men in their improvements” (Defoe 268), which he claims to consider false. However, it is evident that he believes unguided and nonconforming wit will result in a woman being “impertinent and talkative” (Defoe 272). In describing the ideal educated woman, he says that she must be “all softness and sweetness, peace love, wit, and delight” and “suitable to the divinest wish” (Defoe 272). This implies that a woman who has wit, but does not use it to make overarching efforts to be pleasing to her society, is not worthy of the compliment. Without possessing more submissive qualities, intellect is considered a threat.

Jane Austen reveals Emma’s wit most conspicuously through her conversations with Mr. Knightley, who describes her as not often being “deficient either in manner or comprehension” (Austen 161). It is unsurprising that Emma she uses this mastery of social awareness and intellectual capacity to explore her realm of power by carefully adopting roles. By identifying herself as a matchmaker, she remains within the feminine sphere of romance, but quietly holds authoritative control over Harriet’s decisions and emotions. By wisely selecting Harriet, born into “illegitimacy and ignorance” with “no sense of superiority” (Austen 61), Emma is able to exercise full jurisdiction over her without social consequences. While Emma

will never openly have the opportunity to assume the position of an authoritative figure as a woman, she is able to secure the pleasure of this role by having “no hesitation in approving”, or disapproving, of Harriet’s personal decisions (Austen 52). Emma is also the undisputed queen of Highbury’s circle of good society, delegating upon who is accepted into the circle, what is considered proper, and receiving unabashed praise from all her neighbors. It is she who is asked to arrive early to the Weston’s ball “for the purpose of taking her opinion as to the propriety and comfort of the rooms before any other persons came” (Austen 299). It is clear that Emma is not only aware of her position, but works hard to maintain it through her intellect and attention to societal expectations. Despite her dislike for Mrs. Elton, she holds a dinner for her at Hartfield fearing that she would be “exposed to odious suspicion” (Austen 270). Emma stifles her personal feelings and exhibits a hyperawareness of her actions and their implications in order to retain her position as the social dictator of Highbury.

The role that truly sets Emma apart from the other women in Highbury, and reveals her desire for authority, is her unspoken role as the Lord of Hartfield. Mr. Woodhouse, as well as the early occurrence of Mrs. John Knightley’s marriage, allows Emma to reign as the “mistress of his house from a very early period” (Austen 9). Austen goes on to say that Emma grew up doing “just what she liked” and that the “real evils” of her circumstances “were the power of having rather too much her own way” (Austen 9). This suggests that Emma not only enjoyed having authority, but that she also expects it as a result of her unrestrained upbringing. She possesses the wit to understand that her position in life is unique, as she claims to have no interest in

marriage by recognizing that “ few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house” (Austen 82) as she is at Hartfield. By assuming the most dominant position in her household, she is unaccustomed to being submissive to men. The only real authority over Emma is her knowledge of societal expectations, causing her to express her masculine sense of power within the boundaries of her own home. As Defoe might say, she displays a “ proper management” (Defoe 272) of her wit by knowing and exhibiting her independent capabilities, and yet never allowing them to arise to the surface of her reputation by being an open proponent of her own agency. This is perhaps a significant reason behind her desire for “ Hartfield to continue her home” (Austen 419) even after marriage, as it would allow her to stay comfortable within her realm in which she was respected as the highest authority.

One of the most notable differences between Emma and the Lady of Haywood’s *Fantomina* is that no one holds her directly responsible for her actions. With the absence of a watchful figure, she is free to use her wit and take on roles far less cautiously than Emma would ever dream of. By disguising herself as a prostitute, she creates an opportunity to seize “ the gratification of an innocent curiosity” (Haywood 42). With an understanding of the change in social expectation in accompaniment with her role, she is granted the power of sexuality and flirtation. However, similarly to Emma, she still remains cognizant of her primary role as a Lady and takes the precaution of giving her name as “ *Fantomina*” to avoid the “ loss of her reputation” (Haywood 49). She continues to explore new roles by embodying the maidservant Celia and the Widow Bloomer. As Celia, she willingly puts

herself in a position of vulnerability, but comments that the “shortness of her petticoat did not the least oppose” (Haywood 53) Beauplaisir grabbing her leg. This suggests an increased sense of comfort in playing the seductress. Her vulnerable position does not function as a submission, but rather as a method of assuring that she will undoubtedly get what she desires. As the Widow Bloomer, she fails to respond to any of Beauplaisir’s consolation until he breeches the subject of “joy-giving passion” (Haywood 56). The Lady embraces the power to pursue a sexual relationship without a commitment to marriage, an exploit that could never be tolerated in her natural role.

By assuming the mysterious role of Incognita, the Lady reveals the satisfaction of her most blatantly authoritative role. She purposefully withholds information from Beauplaisir, who finds himself “admiring the wonders of her [your] wit” (Haywood 64). This is the first moment at which the Lady allows him to discover that he has been deceived by a woman. She praises her own cleverness as sharper than a man’s, claiming that “no Italian Bravo, employ’d in the business of the like nature, perform’d his office with more artifice” (Haywood 63). The Lady expresses her enjoyment in holding control over Beauplaisir, who now finds himself at her will in quenching his curiosity. He is finally rendered into a “trembling creature” (Haywood 70) at the revelation of her deception. She also speaks of the folly of her “believing sex” who “make their life a hell burning in fruitless expectations” (Haywood 59), suggesting a clear awareness and resentment of the powerlessness of a gentlewoman’s role. Unlike in *Emma*, the novella reveals the consequences of reaching too recklessly for power beyond one’s

given role. When she discovers that she is pregnant, her wit can no longer serve her positively as she has failed to preserve her social reputation, tarnished by “shame and indignation” (Haywood 69). Back in her role as a Lady, she is sent away to a monastery, stripped of all the freedom and control she had enjoyed in her other roles.

One might think that these women of high rank, beauty, and cleverness possessed enough command in their given role to be satisfied. However, the very quality that makes them particularly desirable is what also creates an inherent discontent with their positions in life. Both women recognize that their wit is equitable, and often superior, to that of the men in their societies. They are able to see that their capabilities would make them unquestionably powerful if they were not limited by their roles as women. This juxtaposition of purposeful wandering in the mind and imprisonment in the female body lures them into undertaking and embodying additional roles in order to take a few steps outside of their cages. In these roles, they experience a sliver of the authority that is denied them, and find some contentment in the utility of their wit.

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