

Fantomina and frankenstein: how gender roles are shown

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It is no surprise that the function of men and women in a society plays a huge role in the pieces of literature that would arise during a specific time. The roles of both men and women in the 18th century, for example, may even align with those in the next century. For instance, both Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina: Love in a Maze* (1735) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) depict women as nothing more than objects. In Haywood's novella, Fantomina is described as a "Victory" after she is assaulted by Beauplaisir whereas in Shelley's novel, Elizabeth is introduced, after the death of Caroline, as a "pretty present" for Victor. However, because they were written a century apart, the two texts also demonstrate a difference in response to the roles that were upheld in each of the societies the texts took place in. Both Haywood and Shelley critique the traditional roles of women during their time period but while *Fantomina* challenges the traditional roles of a woman, the women of *Frankenstein* uphold them.

One of the ways that *Fantomina* challenges the role of a woman in British society is by changing her appearance from a lady of higher social standing to a woman of lower standing - a prostitute. When Haywood states that there is no authority figure nor anyone Fantomina knew in town to whom she is accountable, she is suggesting that a lady should not be acting in such a manner, but the protagonist is still able to get away with it (Haywood 36). At the Playhouse, she resides in a gallery box at the theater, which is a key symbol of wealth and class, but as a prostitute, Fantomina smoothly enters the Pit, where the prostitutes mingled with the men, in a "free and unrestrain'd Manner" (Haywood 36). It is here that Haywood reveals the impact of one's behavior and clothes on their social status. When the

protagonist changes both her behavior and clothes, she is no longer a “Lady,” but a “Woman.” Yet with the downgrade of her status, she is able to experience a new sense of freedom, where she also mingles with men. One of the men Fantomina converses with is Beauplaisir and by doing so, she defies the societal restriction of women pursuing men, while also carrying out long sojourns outside of her town. Whereas a woman of low birth possessed the freedom of interacting with any man she wished, a lady did not. Fantomina had spoken to Beauplaisir before, but “then her Quality and reputed Virtue,” or in other words, her virtuous status, kept her from making advances (Haywood 36). Because she is unrecognizable now, Fantomina finds pleasure in freely conversing with him. However, if an authority figure or anyone Fantomina knew were around, she would not have attempted to pursue Beauplaisir at the Playhouse as herself. Furthermore, as her feelings for him strengthen, Fantomina goes to great lengths to win the affection of Beauplaisir, especially embarking on “whimsical Adventures” on the false pretence of visiting a relative in the country (Haywood 52). The protagonist’s severely virtuous mother abruptly arrives upon hearing rumors about her daughter to constrain the vast deal of freedom that she was exploiting. This suggests that British women were restricted from traveling outside of their town and were to be kept in check of taboo behavior. Lastly, Fantomina challenges the societal expectation of unmarried women’s sexuality as being a restrained quality. Under her disguises as Fantomina, Incognita, and Celia, the protagonist engages in intercourse, which she refers to as her “Virtue” and “Honor,” multiple times with Beauplaisir (Haywood 38). While unmarried men in 18th century Britain exercised their freedom to have

intercourse before marriage, women were expected to remain virgins until marriage, which is evident in Fantomina's deliberate plan in hiding her charades for the security of her reputation (Haywood 40). If women had done otherwise, they were unfit to be married because they would have "nothing left to give" to their husbands (Haywood 39). By having intercourse before marriage, the protagonist establishes a new sense of freedom that she will use as a way to manipulate Beauplaisir while she is Incognita. Typically, a man would have more power than a woman but in this case, the protagonist uses her sexuality as a way to gain some control over him. Incognita had him "always raving, wild, impatient, longing, dying" and this newfound power that the protagonist now possessed differed from the stereotypical image of power between men and women (Haywood 50).

Frankenstein reveals that it was a crucial responsibility for women to provide happiness to their male counterparts. Elizabeth adheres to this norm by believing that it is the "most imperious duty" to deliver happiness to her uncles, cousins and Victor and she is "determined to fulfill her duties with the greatest exactness," even after the death of her aunt (Shelley 26).

Shelley's usage of the words "imperious" and "greatest exactness" suggest that Elizabeth's priority was not to render happiness to herself, but to the men in her life. It also shows that women were expected to be forgetful of themselves, especially their own emotions, in respect to men. In order to fulfill her duties, Elizabeth was expected to sweep her feelings under the rug, as if they were insignificant and insubstantial. Another instance where Elizabeth demonstrates her dedication to providing happiness to her male

counterparts is when she writes to Victor, even after suspecting him of cheating: “ Be happy, my friend; and if you obey me in this one request, remain satisfied that nothing on earth will have the power to interrupt my tranquility” (Shelley 135). The word ‘ cheating’ can be defined as acquiring feelings for a person while being in a commitment to another. Elizabeth displays a lack of anger or sadness when she accuses Victor of loving and seeing another while committed to her and urges him to seek his own happiness. This would bring Elizabeth “ tranquility” and when she states that nothing in the world would be able to ruin her tranquility, Elizabeth insinuates that Victor’s happiness is the source of her everlasting happiness. Thus, Shelley indicates that the happiness of women was dependent upon the happiness of men. Shelley’s purpose of Elizabeth’s character in the novel was to accentuate the effects of Victor’s transgressive science, which ultimately leads to her death. While Elizabeth is portrayed as merely collateral damage in a fight between Victor and his creature, Margaret Saville demonstrates no significance to any of the major characters and is only included for the enhancement of the plot. Women were presented as passive figures whose presence, or lack thereof, emphasized the dominance of a male voice. Although Shelley introduces Margaret as the very first character in the novel, she provides little to no information regarding Margaret’s personal life even though she is whom Walton’s letters are directed towards. Additionally, she is not even granted a voice because she only reads the letters and never writes back even when Walton informs her of the harsh weather, which could put his life in danger, thus proving she is passive. For instance, Walton writes to his sister, “ You will not hear of my

destruction, and you will anxiously await my return" (Shelley 153). As a result, the readers are left to infer how Margaret must feel knowing that her brother's life is at risk. On top of that, the reader must also infer whether Margaret would condemn or pardon Victor's transgressive and harmful experiment. Hence, she is merely an idea because in addition to being written as a figure of moral support for Walton because of his loneliness, Shelley does not confirm whether or not Margaret is still alive. Not only was Elizabeth portrayed as collateral damage in the fight between Victor and his creature, but also Justine. Justine's character revealed that women were submissive and held no power in their male dominated societies. After being falsely accused of murdering William, Justine confesses to the court, " I did confess; but I confessed a lie. I confessed, that I might obtain absolution; but now that falsehood lies heavier at my heart than all my other sins...ever since I was condemned, my confessor has besieged me, he threatened and menaced, until I almost began to think that I was the monster that he said I was..." (Shelley 58). Justine is seen as an object of undeserving blame and despite knowing that the accusations brought upon her are false, she admits to murdering William. Justine falls as victim to a corrupt justice system and an unforgiving priest who manipulates her into believing that she is the monster he said she was. This implies that women are easy to control and are scapegoats to the wrongdoings of men. Furthermore, no one but Elizabeth made an effort to continue the investigation but, even Elizabeth's stance against the accusations proved no significance in turning the execution over. As Anne K. Mellor states in " Possessing Nature: The Female in Frankenstein," " the impassioned defense she gives of Justine arouses

public approbation...but does nothing to help Justine," (357). However, Victor was the only one who could prove her innocence. He was the one who possessed the power to reveal who the real killer was yet, he chose not to for the protection of himself. Therefore, it is evident who held the power in Victor's and Elizabeth's relationship.

In both *Fantomina: Love in a Maze* and *Frankenstein*, women were seen as nothing more than objects of love and purity whose ultimate faith was marriage. While *Fantomina* challenged the traditional roles of women, Elizabeth, Margaret and Justine adhered to those in their society. Haywood's and Shelley's texts succeeded in exposing the traditional roles of women during the time they were written in.