

Power dynamics and
sexual double
standards in "the
disappointment" and
'fantomia' ...



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Aphra Behn's "The Disappointment" and Eliza Haywood's "Fantomina" both imply a strong relationship between sex and power. Yet, the ways in which their characters understand this relationship is dependent on their gender. The male protagonists, Lysander and Beauplaisir, obtain power from their consummation of a sexual encounter. The female protagonists, Cloris and Fantomina, secure power in chastity and temptation in the moments before sexual gratification. These relationships with power are representative of societal sexual double standards imposed on 18th century men and women. Behn and Haywood complicate society's understanding of sexual double standards by assigning sexual desire to their female protagonists.

Fantomina's disguises grant her anonymity and allow her to act on her desire without societal consequence, while Cloris only escapes the consequences of her desire due to Lysander's impotence. The resolutions of "Fantomina" and "The Disappointment" are critical of sexual double standards; The fates of Fantomina and Cloris represent that the power dynamic that rises out of sexual double standard encourages the oppression and blaming of women that attempt to defy the double standard.

The narrators of both "The Disappointment" and "Fantomina" imply that Cloris and Fantomina have internalized sexual desire for the objects of their affection. However, both women take the passive role in their sexual encounters and do not openly state their desire. Cloris refrains from being transparent about her desire due to societal expectations: "Her bright eyes sweet, and yet severe,/Where love and shame confusedly strive" (Behn 21-22). It is noticeable in her expressions, specifically her eyes, that she lusts after Lysander, yet the looming presence of societal shame interrupts her.

She allows Lysander to take on the active role in pursuing her, as she does not want to be held responsible for the events that follow. A similar moment happens in "Fantomina" when the female protagonist is being flirtatious with Beauplaisir: "She had the satisfaction to find his Love in his Assiduity" (Haywood 45). Fantomina expresses that she gets pleasure from his aggressive passion for her and she allows him to actively pursue her as a lover. Since Fantomina is disguised and has the privilege of anonymity, she is able to accept his desire "without running any Risque, either of her Virtue or Reputation" (Haywood 45). Fantomina, like Cloris, is aware of the presence of sexual double standard. She is only confident in her ability to express her desire because her anonymity frees her from the restraints of societal consequence. Sexual double standards are reliant on the idea that women should not experience sexual desire, nor should they act on it. Haywood and Behn's representation of female desire complicates sexual double standards and leaves their protagonists in a position to make a difficult choice between satisfaction or loss of virtue.

Beauplaisir and Lysander perpetuate normative double standards by assuming positions of power and treating the female objects of their desire as conquests. The language used to describe the male protagonist's role in each sexual encounter implies that they are dominant and the women are their victims. Immediately after Beauplaisir and Fantomina consummate their relationship, Fantomina is described as "undone." Beauplaisir is said to have "gain'd a Victory, so highly rapturous, that had he known over whom, scarce could he have triumphed more" (Haywood 46). Beauplaisir is powerful in this moment due to his ability to act on his desire without societal

repercussions. This passage paints Beauplaisir as victorious over his distraught victim, as if her body was a territory subject to conquest. In "The Disappointment," the narrator describes Cloris' virginity as "A victim to love's sacred flame" (Behn 68). This implies that Cloris is victimized and Lysander has power over her. Lysander is about to take from Cloris the one thing that gives her power in this moment. Yet, due to Lysander's impotence, he is "unable to perform the sacrifice" (Behn 70). The violent imagery used to describe their encounter is significant because it reinforces societal misconceptions about male-female sexual relationships. This moment renders Lysander powerless because he is unable to perform sexually. Cloris remains in the powerful position, as her supposed enemy has not been able to strip her of her virginity. Both stories perpetuate societal norms through representation of the idea that the consummation of a sexual relationship is viewed as a success for the male partner and a defeat for the female partner.

Fantomina and Cloris are assigned power in moments where they are able to preserve their virtue. Fantomina is able to provide Beauplaisir with the appearance that she is virtuous in every new sexual encounter, which is why he desires her so deeply. After her and Beauplaisir were intimate, she recognizes that "the most violent Passion, if it does not change its Object, in time will wither: Possession naturally abates the Vigour of Desire" (Haywood 65). Her ability to outsmart Beauplaisir and recreate the initial feelings of temptation for him are what keep her in the position of power. She wants sexual gratification from him and, therefore, gives him the illusion that he is consistently taking on new conquests. Her anonymity and,

therefore, freedom from societal constraints allows her to “ have him always raving, wild, impatient, longing, dying” (Haywood 65). Men are rendered powerless in the moments before consummation, as the woman holds something that they need from her. She is never truly defeated by him as long as she can continue to outsmart him. Since Lysander has trouble performing sexually, Cloris maintains her position of power. Lysander’s impotence leave him defenseless: “ But oh what envious gods conspire/To snatch his power, yet leave him the desire!” (Behn 79-80). He is unable to perform the active role in this sexual relationship and, therefore, unable to prove his dominance over Cloris. He is left in the moment of wanting the object of his affection, yet being unable to obtain it. Although Cloris does not create this moment, as Fantomina does, she benefits from it from societal standards. Women are depicted as powerful when they are sexually inactive.

The resolution of both tales provide critical insight for the consequences of sexual double standards. In “ Fantomina,” although Beauplaisir and Fantomina both participated in their sexual acts, the female protagonist is the only one who is shamed. Fantomina’s pregnancy is coined a “ dishonour” by her mother. Her mother also claims “ the blame is wholly her’s,” and denies Beauplaisir any responsibility in the matter (Haywood 71). Her mother represents the reinforcement of societal standards. From a public perspective, Beauplaisir was expected to be having sexual relationships with women and Fantomina was expected to keep her virginity intact. Fantomina is rendered powerless because she defied societal standards and Beauplaisir is empowered due to his ability to easily escape societal shame. In “ The Disappointment,” although Lysander’s impotence was to blame for the lack

of sexual gratification, Lysander “cursed” Cloris for not being charming enough to allow him to perform (Behn 146-148). He claims she “damned him to the hell of impotence,” as if it were her fault for the failed sexual encounter (Behn 150). As far as the reader is knowledgeable, Cloris does not experience any societal shame due to her inaction. In this moment, Lysander is rendered powerless due to his inability to rise to societal standards for men and Cloris is victorious from a societal standpoint. Yet, Cloris is also defeated due to her inability to achieve sexual gratification and the shame she experiences from her lover. Due to the existence of sexual double standard, women are unable to be empowered as long as they experience sexual desire. Since Behn and Haywood affirm the existence of female sexual desire, these tales are critical of the position women are assigned by society. If a woman acts on her desire, she will be shamed societally; Yet, if a woman is unable to act on her sexual desire, she will be shamed by potential male lovers and she will be unable to fulfill her need for sexual gratification.

“Fantomina” and “The Disappointment” are strong representations of the ways sexual standards encourage power dynamics between male-female lovers and ultimately always lead to the oppression of the female partner. The active role in any heterosexual relationship is normatively assigned to the male, while the passive role is assigned to the female. If a woman, like Fantomina, attempts to defy this standard, she is rendered powerless at the moment of consummation. If a woman, like Cloris, is to have desire at all, she may escape societal shame; However, she will always be victimized by her male lover’s disappointment. Sexual double standards operate under the assumption that women do not experience sexual desire — yet, they do.

These texts are revolutionary in that they acknowledge the existence of female desire and they resonate with the difficult position women are put in when they are forced to choose between sexual gratification and social acceptance.