

Setting the stage:  
18th century theater  
and gender  
performance across  
haywood and...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Nearly two centuries later, Judith Butler would describe gender identity as “ a stylized repetition of acts...which are internally discontinuous...[so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (520). Female novelists such as Eliza Haywood and Jane Austen would incorporate elements of the 18th century English theater into their books. For English women at that time, identity formation within the literary structures of the novel was not just rooted in personal introspection, but the incorporation and subsequent performance of gender norms characteristic through both behavior and appearance befitting to each woman’s socioeconomic class. As Karl Heinz Goller writes: “ The subject of the novel was the immediate experience of average human beings in private life. It offered an ideal opportunity for women...to express their social needs and deeds” (96-97). In Eliza Haywood’s 1725 novel *Fantomina* and Jane Austen’s 1817 novel *Persuasion*, each of these authors confront the nature of gender performance as a theatrical construction of female identity, framing the plots and characters of their novels in accordance to their personal relationships to the English theater. Both Haywood and Austen examine the ways in which socioeconomic status affects the identities of their female protagonists through the reinforcement and subversion of cultural behavioral norms, mapping out the complex destabilization and transformation of traditional female identity in parallel with broader socioeconomic changes across the 18th century.

To understand the influence of dramas on these female authors, it's important to examine the state of the English theater at the time. Just a century prior, King Charles the II would open up the stage to female actresses, allowing them to perform roles once meant only for young boys and cross-dressing male actors (Anderson). While female actresses were simultaneously sexualized and shamed for their 'unladylike' visible presence on the stage by male viewers, female audience members were able to witness a new kind of theatrical representation they had not experienced before. Moving into the 18th century, female actresses remained profitable parts of the English theater, drawing audiences in through sexualized roles and scandalous costumes such as breeches, and as many of these accomplished women (oftentimes from lower class backgrounds) went on to earn not only a great deal of money, but obtained a certain celebrity status which allowed them to mingle with a once inaccessible aristocracy enraptured by their performances (Thomas). Within the theater, there were new possibilities not only to transgress boundaries of gender norms through these dramatic roles, but gain access to social mobility as they mixed with various social groups within the performance space. A tension also arose between the social expectation of female privacy and the highly public lives of these actresses. "The private morals of actors and actresses and the respectability of the profession as a whole were frequent subjects of discussion, debate, and scrutiny...Audiences, in short, were keenly aware how public and private 'character' either converged or diverged in performance (Freeman 38-39). While actors certainly experienced this criticism, it was women, who were expected to occupy domestic roles, who would bear the heaviest burdens of criticism. Actresses found themselves

<https://assignbuster.com/setting-the-stage-18th-century-theater-gender-performance-across-haywood-and-austen/>

occupying an unstable, in-between space of self-representation where they could entertain their patrons while maintaining an air of virtuousness to overcome social prejudice. If we are to consider Butler's claim that "the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts in theatrical contexts", then it comes as no surprise that Austen and Haywood would employ dramatic plot models and derive their characters from the very theater itself within their novels, structuring the performance of gender through their protagonists as one might prepare a role for the stage (521).

Eliza Haywood's 1725 novel, *Fantomina*, derives elements of its story from Haywood's own time spent as an actress in the 18th century London scene. Haywood was fascinated by the relationships between privilege, class, and gender within the theater space and she examines the complication of these social power dynamics through her protagonist, *Fantomina*. Actresses were generally treated with less respect than their male actors, subjected to gossip and oftentimes "many actresses were labelled [prostitutes] unfairly due to their profession or the character they played on stage" (DiGiovanni). Women risked their reputations in order to obtain economic freedom through this 'inappropriate' career and Haywood would have undoubtedly seen these feminine conflicts during her career as an actress. Although left her acting career behind in the 1720s, "the chameleon of English novelists" would bring elements of the theater, not just of dramas themselves but the performing arts industry as whole and the role of women within that system, into her various novels (MacCarthy 241). In *Fantomina*, Haywood concerns herself with the representation of female emotion through the strategic "self-conscious performance" of gender in *Fantomina*'s adoption of various

disguises to pursue Beauplaisir (Anderson 1). Through the novel's setting of the theater, Haywood is able to address the broader, complex social perceptions of female actresses across 18th century English society, and examine how these oppressive gender norms are both reinforced and destabilized across Fantomina's identity.

At the start of the novel, Fantomina is introduced to the reader as " a Young Lady of distinguished Birth, Beauty, Wit, and Spirit" (Haywood 258). From her position in a box seat, she is able to observe men mingling with prostitutes. Irritated at their immoral behavior, " she could not help testifying her Contempt of Men, who, regardless either of the Play, or Circle, threw away their Time in such a Manner" (Haywood 258). Yet, after watching them, Fantomina grows envious of their apparent freedom and attention they receive. It " was not long before she found her Disguise" in the form of drawing her hood over her face (Haywood 259). When she returns to the theater in this costume, she is met with " A Crowd of purchasers of all Degrees and Capacities" who believe her to be a prostitute, including Beauplaisir who later becomes the source of her desire. These opening moments establish the precarious world 18th-century actresses found themselves in. The association between acting and sexual impropriety was not just seen in the actresses themselves when they became the subject of scandal due to their provocative roles and on-stage exposure of their bodies, and the possibility of turning to prostitution should their career in the theater fail—as was the case for 18th century actress Nell Gwyn (Anderson).

Additionally, " the theater often served as a place for prostitutes and their customers", where they could meet under the cover of dimmed lights and

spectacle (Thomas). “ Orange girls” stood in the pit and sold oranges between acts (Anderson). Orange girls, the ladies Fantomina observes mingling with the gentlemen, not only acted as liaisons between actresses and audience members, but sold sex, oftentimes through a kind of performance of conversation with possible clients. This is seen when Beauplaisir approaches Fantomina in her disguise and he “ address’ed her at first with the usual Salutations of her pretended Profession” (Haywood 260). While upper class women, such as Fantomina, were expected to maintain an air of virtue and sexual innocence, Haywood paints Fantomina’s innocent behavior in a rather complicated light. Her initial repulsion fits with the norms of female virtuous character, yet Haywood quickly makes it clear that Fantomina also has sexual and romantic desire for Beauplaisir. Fantomina’s choice to disguise herself in her pursuit of a monogamous relationship might be interpreted as a kind of ‘ virtuousness’, due to her choice to shield her identity from the public, yet her brazen flirtation indicates that she is more than just a persecuted maiden as she attempts to navigate this precarious maze of love and seduction.

At this point, it’s important to look at the various disguises Fantomina puts on over the course of the novel’s plot, and what these disguises signify in Haywood’s literary view of female gender roles. After ‘ Fantomina’—the reader is never told the protagonist’s actual name—she adopts the character of Celia, a country maid, Mrs. Bloomer, a lost widow, and finally Iognita who’s use of masks can be traced back to the original Fantomina. One could go through each of these characters and discuss the individual symbolism of their costumes, but perhaps it is more valuable to view them as a collective

cast forming the various components of Fantomina's identity as an actress and her desires—or as Haywood Scholar Christine Blouch puts it, “ the whole Business of this representation” (541). Although Fantomina performs these roles across London, that she is able to cross the various boundaries of English social class is indicative both of her immense talent as an actress and the very nature of the theater space as a place where the individual can economically and culturally transform themselves. Haywood uses this plot of disguises to examine the complexities of gender roles themselves and the array of parts women are supposed to perform for their ‘ audience’ of male-dominated society through certain manners of dress and behavior.

Beauplaisir cannot recognize that she's changing her face each time they meet. This inability to recognize the ‘ real’ Fantomina under her costumes shows not only the audience's vulnerability of equating imaginary onstage characters with actresses' private personalities. Beauplaisir's belief allows Fantomina to repeatedly assert her own desire and sexual agency through a highly controlled masquerade. In 18th century theater, actors did not perform their roles ‘ naturally’. Whether the play was a drama or comedy, emotions were performed in an over-the-top manner, as though they were masks (Cook 219). Fantomina's acts can be interpreted as “ not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, the object of belief” (520). She transcends her body by becoming a romantic object comprised of different personas, and her multi-faceted personality is developed through these repeated attempts to adopt other feminine traits outside of her socioeconomic position, trying to find the ‘ right type of woman’ to reinvigorate Beauplaisir's fading desires.

The conclusion of Fantomina's narrative is a rather strange one, distorting the traditional moral lessons seen in other 18th century "fable[s] of feminine distress" (Schofield 10). Fantomina's elaborate series of performances does undone when Beauplaisir impregnates her and she is sent by her mother to a monastery, yet, as Emily Hodgson Anderson points out, "Fantomina's continued masquerade prevents the typical consequences of seduction—abandonment and scandal that would forestall any future performance" (4). The 'cautionary tale' Haywood presents is not that sexual desire will soil a woman's reputation (Fantomina's covert movement to the monastery protects her family's name), but that "a woman's impulsive behavior can undo her own performance" (Anderson 4). Fantomina's greatest transgression is not her strategic pursuit of desire through the manipulation of disguises, but that, in becoming these imaginary characters, she did not remain aware of her own bodily limitations as an actress. This risk of a woman losing control over her social position through non-normative acts of sexual agency marks Haywood's fascination with "the emotional tension generated by...contradictory tendencies to submission and aggression, subservience and independence brought about by the myth [of the virtuous woman] itself" (Schofield 10). Through Fantomina's dramatic structure, Haywood raises many questions about the condition of women in the 18th century as a kind of actress caught between performing her role as a traditional virtuous woman and the rise of new opportunities of socioeconomic mobility through precarious careers in the theater.

Austen's own relationship to the theater was one more of a spectator than an actress. In her letters, she appeared to be "steeped in theater",



frequently writing about performances she saw, oftentimes with her niece, and even tried her hand at writing short plays when she was a young woman (Byrne xi). The influence of the theater on Austen's life is certainly not as explicitly visible in her novels as with Haywood, but one can find this inspiration from 18th century dramas through Austen's vibrant characterization and highly organized plot structure in her final novel, *Persuasion*. "Women dramatists were highly popular in the 18th century", and Austen would have undoubtedly seen some of their pieces performed on the stage (Goller 92). In *Persuasion*, Austen positions herself as a kind of dramatist by casting the English home as a kind of 'domestic theater' and, through the narrative development of her protagonist Anne Elliot, Austen uses theatrical devices to examine shifts in English socioeconomic class in the late 18th century and the ways in which expectations of marriage and the instability of romance can transform the gender norms and subsequent selfhood of upper class women.

When the novel first opens, Austen introduces us to her cast of characters through Sir Walter Elliot. Sir Walter's frivolous nature and fascination with noble titles and the presentation of wealth borders on a satirical portrayal of upper class nobility. Yet, he's the necessary opening narrator to the novel's complex plot and his behavior gives the reader an early sense of the dynamics within the Elliot family (Anne as a strategic mother figure while her sister and father attempt to maintain their extravagant lifestyles) as they nearly fall into financial ruin. The movement of the Crofts into Kellynch Hall not only reflects economic tensions at the time, but acts as the catalyst for the novel's romantic drama with the reappearance of Captain Wentworth. To

speaking briefly on the state of the English upper class at the end of the 18th century, many of these wealthy families saw the rise of a 'new money' class under capitalism, threatening to overshadow their inherited power (Goller 98). While this class, comprised of merchant and military figures such as the Crofts and Wentworth himself, accrued wealth from trading and sailing across England's various colonies, noble heads-of-house such as Sir Walter remained at home, unaggressive in their economic pursuits while spending to maintain an appearance befitting the traditions of aristocracy. Austen uses this English class tension as a backdrop for Anne's reunion with Wentworth, and Anne's personal views.

When Captain Wentworth meets Anne again, he does not recognize because her aging face has been so "altered beyond his knowledge" (Austen 83). She appears to him as though in a disguise although the 'real' Anne begins to be slowly revealed throughout the novel as their relationship develops. Many of the characters in *Persuasion* wear different masks. Sir Walter and Elizabeth attempt to conceal their waning fortunes by spending all the family money on luxury goods, willing to sacrifice their own wealth for performing aristocracy. The Crofts demonstrate their wealth through their occupation of a noble's house, masking that fact that they did not inherit their wealth like other aristocrats. Wentworth's military dress distances him from his impoverished origins and is a marker of his successful career path. The intention of these characters is not entirely malicious, but rather to present a manipulated version of themselves to the world and control how they are perceived by others. Through Anne's point-of-view in the narrative, we frequently see the actions of her body mask her internal feelings. When she

meets Captain Wentworth again, she behaves calmly and cordially: “ Her eye half met Captain Wentworth’s, a bow, a curtsy passed; she heard his voice...but a few minutes ended it” (Austen 82). Just moments after the group leaves the room, Anne reveals her relief: “‘ It is over! It is over!’ she repeated to herself again and again, in nervous gratitude. ‘ The worst is over!’” (82). Austen’s fascination with performance lies in social gestures. Anne spends a great deal of time attempting to decipher the contradictions of (masculine) “ cold politeness” and friendlier gestures Wentworth expresses to her (Austen 101). One of the most important aspects of acting is not the recitation of dialogue, but the ability to convey a story through pantomiming (Cooke 220). Audiences sitting in the English theater in the 18th century did not have the luxury of modern microphone technology. They were not always able to hear the onstage character dialogue and, as a result, actors had to move their bodies in dramatic, unnatural ways to make the entirety of their message known to the spectator. Through the unspoken/spoken dynamic tension between Anne and Wentworth’s action and speech interacting with each other, Austen portrays how English upper-class society has internalized a specific vocabulary of performative gestures in social relationships, which is further divided across gendered lines. Furthermore, in considering the development of the novel, while the theater must make conflicts or characterization explicit through dialogue or movement, the novel allowed for greater complication of the understanding of the self. The thoughts of characters could now be fully expressed on the page and be contradictory to the actions a character might take or something they say aloud, providing a narrative disconnect between the individual’s internal and external selfhood.

<https://assignbuster.com/setting-the-stage-18th-century-theater-gender-performance-across-haywood-and-austen/>

One of the keys to a successful dramatic performance is in the timing. An actor misses his or her cue and a joke can fall flat, the buildup of dramatic tension can be lost, and the narrative illusion keeping the audience engaged can be lost. In *Persuasion*, Austen's sense of timing is her greatest literary strength. The origin of Anne and Wentworth's relationship in fact takes place 8 years prior to the events of *Persuasion*. It is through Austen's building of family history and the growing anticipation of the Crofts and Wentworth's arrival, that this history which exists somewhere beyond the timescape of the novel is slowly revealed to the reader. The resurfacing of these memories in the present day, as Anne remembers their early romance and failed relationship, adds a greater complexity to Wentworth and Anne's dynamic. When Lady Russell admits, at the end of the novel, that she had been wrong about the judgements she made of Wentworth's character (who had influenced Anne to reject Wentworth's first proposal), Austen suggests that human perception and identity are not fixed states of being. People and their behaviors can change over time, influenced by equally unstable social and economic conditions. While a piece of theatrical performance may reflect social questions or issues of its time, these pieces, through repeated performances, are subject to change, gaining or losing certain emotional and/or theatrical significance as it re-envisioned by later generations. Likewise, Austen's characters do not exist as static literary tropes. They are complex individuals whose behaviors can be influenced by the passage of time, who can mature into new identities and shed past prejudices. While English women at the time were being pressured to marry in their youth, Austen's depiction of the 27-year-old Anne Elliot shows that women are capable of gaining socioeconomic security later in life, contrary to the

<https://assignbuster.com/setting-the-stage-18th-century-theater-gender-performance-across-haywood-and-austen/>

gendered marital norms at the time. Anne's awareness of transforming social circumstances for women at the end of the 18th century is articulated most clearly in Anne's conversation with Captain Harville as she pens her letter to Wentworth: "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much a higher degree; the pen has been in their hands" (Austen 337). Anne's statement is a powerful assertion of her individual agency. While the education of women has historically viewed as unnecessary to their social development due to pre-determined gendered domestic roles, Austen, via Anne Elliot, acknowledges the rise in women's education, and envisions the potential of women's inferior position in English society as they regain control of their restricted lives through educational (and subsequent career) opportunities once inaccessible to them.

Both Eliza Haywood and Jane Austen consider the position of the 18th century woman in English society through literary lenses shaped by each author's personal relationship to the English theater. As a former actress, Haywood's description of the talented, shapeshifting Fantomina, Haywood brings awareness to the way in which the female body is sexualized and objectified by a male audience. The medley of roles Fantomina adopts in her romantic pursuits are emblematic of complexities of social expectation in female gender performance. Fantomina's cunning self-creation also demonstrates the possibility for women to express agency through the manufacturing of their social performances. Haywood's novel demonstrates the way 18th century women in the theater began to act against traditionally 'modest' classifications and marketed their performing bodies as commodities, risking their reputations to gain access to socioeconomic

wealth and stability. Austen's role as director/novelist allows her to carefully construct a romance plot which charts out the transformation of female selfhood through 18th century socioeconomic shifts in upper-class aristocracy. Austen's Anne Elliot, is a character who has matured over time through a kind of self-education of social and economic power structures. She is a complex individual who learns from her past mistakes, questions her identity in relationship to Wentworth, and uses decisive action to twist gendered social hierarchies to ultimately achieve her goals.

Through Haywood and Austen's literary forms, the 18th century novel begins to set the groundwork for a complex female subjectivity played out across the literature of later centuries. These female authors were already beginning to consider feminine gender identity as not only tied to historical convention, but a place where, through performance, new possibilities can be continually realized, predating Judith Butler's later notion that gender is something which one can put on and wear as a performative costume. The highly organized, theatrical space of the plotted novel allows the authors' protagonists to reflect on the very socioeconomic conditions which might shape their private sense of individual selfhood through performative strategies which can either reinforce or contradict society's cultural norms. The 18th century brought many changes to the literary and theatrical world. While actresses found footholds in dramatic spaces for the first time, female writers used the novel to move past socially constructed surface representations and examine the emotional depths of individual characters. The female-driven literary culture produced during this time can offer contemporary scholars of gender and sexual identity great insight into some

of English society's earliest models of complex, gendered identity formation through the 18th century woman's evolving roles as performer and director.

## Works Cited

Anderson, Emily Hodgson. "Performing the Passions in Eliza Haywood's 'Fantomina' and 'Miss Betsy Thoughtless.'" *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2005, pp. 1-15. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/41467959](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41467959).

Anderson, Melody. "Women in the Restoration Theatre". *Politics, Literary Culture, & Theatrical Media in London*. University of Massachusetts. Accessed 20 December 2017. [http://www.london.umb.edu/index.php/entry\\_detail/women\\_in\\_the\\_restoration\\_theatre/theatre\\_intro/](http://www.london.umb.edu/index.php/entry_detail/women_in_the_restoration_theatre/theatre_intro/)

Austen, Jane. *Persuasion*. ReadHowYouWant.com. Google Book. 14 March, 2009. [https://books.google.com/books/about/Persuasion.html?id=ud8lOU6JzjkC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp\\_read\\_button#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books/about/Persuasion.html?id=ud8lOU6JzjkC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Blouch, Christine. "Eliza Haywood and the Romance of Obscurity." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1991, pp. 535-552. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/450861](http://www.jstor.org/stable/450861).

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519-531. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/3207893](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893).

Byrne, Paula. *Jane Austen and the Theatre*. London: Hamledon and London. 2002.

<https://assignbuster.com/setting-the-stage-18th-century-theater-gender-performance-across-haywood-and-austen/>

Cooke, Anne M. "Eighteenth Century Acting Styles." *Phylon* (1940-1956), vol. 5, no. 3, 1944, pp. 219-224. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/271303](http://www.jstor.org/stable/271303).

DiGiovanni, Alicia. "Theater in the 18th century". *Women's Roles in the 18th Century Theater*. 13 April 2017. <https://sites.google.com/site/18thcenturytheatre/theatre-in-the-18th-century>

Freeman, Lisa A. *Character's Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. May 2013.

Goller, Heinz Karl. "The Emancipation of Women in Eighteenth-Century English Literature". 1983. [https://epub.uni-regensburg.de/26661/1/ubr13845\\_ocr.pdf](https://epub.uni-regensburg.de/26661/1/ubr13845_ocr.pdf)

Haywood, Eliza. *Fantomina: or, Love in a Maze*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1925. <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/haywood/fantomina/fantomina.html>

Schofield, Mary Anne. *Masking and Unmasking the Female Mind: Disguising Romances in Feminine Fiction, 1713-1799*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990.

Thomas, Melissa. "Theatre Culture of Early Modern England". Cedar Crest College. 2009. <http://www2.cedarcrest.edu/academic/eng/flfletcher/henry4/papers/mthomas.htm>

<https://assignbuster.com/setting-the-stage-18th-century-theater-gender-performance-across-haywood-and-austen/>