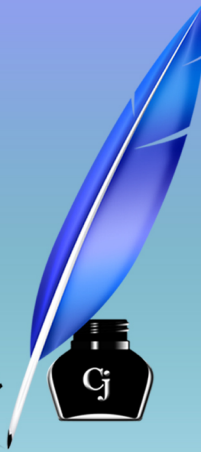


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Masquerade as a Strategy: Eliza Haywood's *The Masqueraders or The Fatal Curiosity: Being the Secret History of a Late Amour*

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Eliza Haywood, the “Great Arbitress of Passion”, attempts to establish a degree of female agency and a form of female empowerment through the masquerades, disguises and semi-epistolary narrative form of her proto-feminist, amatory fiction *The Masqueraders; or Fatal Curiosity: being the secret history of a late amour*. Haywood was writing for a specific readership in a specific literary scenario, which involved proliferation of women readers and increasing opportunities of both middle class and lower class women. Keeping the changing literary scenario in her mind, Haywood, for the first time, presents the notion of a radical, pro-active heroine, who decides to circulate her sexuality as a form of empowerment and accepts the consequences of her desperate venture with bravery, showing no sign of shame. Thus, *The Masqueraders* much before the rise of the term ‘feminism’, in its representation of woman as the engineer and weaver of the plot and the game of seduction, revolts against the patriarchal convention of the fiction of seduction, diminishes the claustrophobic notions of femininity, and attains the status of a proto-feminist text. By criss-crossing the hypersexualised, titillating language of desire with the language of power and control, Haywood is creating for her burgeoning female readers a utopia of power and a zone, where women could have agency to invert the gender hierarchies of the patriarchal mindset. Such hypersensitive narratives as *The Masqueraders* meet not only their superficial goals of titillation and profitable amusement, but most significantly throw a challenge to the androcentrism of literary discourse, that endeavoured to keep language formalised, spheres separate and women’s position liminal.

Haywood’s deployment of the trope of masquerade is minutely manifested in her amatory fiction *The Masqueraders; or Fatal Curiosity: being the secret history of a late amour*. In the amatory fictions of Haywood the trope of masquerade emerges as a mode for empowering the women or specifically the heroines of her novels. Through the feminist strain of her novel Haywood endeavours to bestow her heroines the female ‘agency’ through the form of masquerade. Masquerade provides the independent heroines of Haywood the avenue to circulate their sexuality at their wish without any fear of infamy. Through the seductive pen of Haywood masquerade becomes the site for blurring of the erotic desire of the persons of the both sexes. In her amatory fiction masquerade acts as a vehicle for empowering women with the status of the engineer and the regulator of the plot of seduction under the veil of femininity. For such ingenious use of the technique of masquerade in the masquerade novels of Haywood Ros Ballaster comments in *Seductive Forms: Women’s Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740* :

... I would suggest that in this early fiction, Haywood glimpses a means of empowering the female within amatory conflict, of making her a weaver and dilator of her own amatory plot, through the elaboration of a familiar concept-metaphor of the early eighteenth century, that of the masquerade. Here the masquerade functions as a

site in which gender inversion and amatory activity is licensed under the sanction of organised 'secrecy'. (179)

In this masquerade novel of Haywood the female protagonist triumphs in the gender conflict by attaining the controlling power of the game of seduction. About the significant role of masquerade in the English fiction Terry Castle writes :

. . . the masquerade was also an indispensable plot catalyst, the mysterious scene out of which the essential drama of the fiction emerged. All the ambivalence that the masquerade aroused in English public life – where it was at once the sign of depravity and freedom, corruption and delight – was thus replicated in its fictional representation.(ix)

Through the seductive pen of Haywood masquerade becomes the site for blurring of the erotic desire of the persons of the both sexes. Actually masquerade in the eighteenth- century context is a privileged place for transgressing all the barriers of sexual, gender and class distinction. At the hand of Haywood Masquerade also becomes a utopian zone for providing her headstrong heroines the female 'agency'. Under the veil of masquerade the heroines can control the game of seduction in this proto-feminist novel of Haywood.

Her amatory fiction *The Masqueraders; or Fatal Curiosity: being the secret history of a late amour* opens with a generalised comment on masquerade:

Great Britain has no Assembly which affords such variety of Characters as the Masquerade; there are scarce any Degrees of People, of what Religion, or Principle soever , that sometime or other are not willing to embrace an opportunity of partaking this Diversion. But among the number of those who pretty often frequented it, was a Gentleman, whose real Name, for some reasons, I shall conceal under that of Dorimenus. He is young handsome, gay, gallant, has an affluence of Fortune and of Wit, is a passionate Lover of Intrigue, and 'tis not to be doubted but that with all these Accomplishments, he found a great many among the Fair sex to encourage that disposition : He seldom went there without his appointment . . . (1-2)

In this context Ros Ballaster remarks in *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740* :

The Masqueraders (1724;SH iv. separately numbered) employs the masquerade as a controlled space of mimicry of amatory conventions, revealing in its course the extent to which representation, far from being the adjunct to desire,

is its source. This novel, I will argue, along with her *Fantomina* (*SH* iii. 257-92), published a year after it, marks Haywood's attempt to 'plot' a way out of the negative opposition of the unfortunate mistress and the mistress of artifice, proffering in its place the model of a female experimentation with amatory codes in order to defer closure of heterosexual romance without falling into hysteria. The novel opens by establishing the masquerade as, like sexual passion, a universal and levelling experience . . . (181-82)

During such a masquerade Dorimemus encounters the young widow Dalinda, who had concealed her identity under the costume of a shepherdess. But suddenly she gets fainted and Dorimemus gets the opportunity of visualising her face removing the mask. Dalinda's first sight overwhelmed his male gaze :

Nature never form'd Features more completely lovely than those of this Fair indisposed,- all the Graces seem'd assembled in her Countenance,- a thousand dimpled Charms play'd round her lovely Mouth,- a thousand little Loves laughed in her shining eyes,- the Delicacy of her Complexion exceeded all comparison,- her Neck, her Breasts, her fine proportion'd Hands and Arms,- there was no part of her exposed to view, that did not discover a Beauty peculiar to itself . . . but Dorimemus whose Heart was easily set on fire by the sight of the least kindling Beauty, cou'd not behold Perfection, such as hers, without feeling an excess of that passion it was created to inspire . . . (3-4)

As Dorimemus was a trained rake in the art of flirting, he mesmerised this lady with his passionate male gaze:

He entreated her with so much Wit and Gallantry, and the appearance of so violent a Passion, that she, who was by nature pretty, amorous and easy to receive an impression, cou'd not fail a susceptibility of Charms, which there are very few in the world to equalize. She had often heard of Dorimemus, had seen him at a distance, and 'tis probable wish'd to be address'd by him in the manner she now was: she had not artifice enough to disguise the pleasure she took in his Conversation, from a penetration to nice , and so experienced as his. (4-5)

After coming to her home Dorimemus and Dalinda both are captivated by each other's magnetism:

'Tis certain that for a time they had for each other, Charms which they imagined were not to be found elsewhere; she really doated on him with a Transcendency of passion, and he, tho' ever accounted the most roving and inconstant of his sex, prefer'd the Conquest of her Heart to all the others he had made, not only because it was the last, but also that when he consulted his judgment, he knew of none that had the thousandth part of her merit . . .(7-8)

By their mutual love they consummate their relationship. Dalinda cannot but tell the story of seduction to her friend Philecta. Dalinda's female erotic impulses are revealed here in her narration:

. . . she no sooner parted from his Embraces, than she flew to her fair Friend, gave her the whole History of what had pass'd between them – repeated every tender word he spoke - not the least fond endearment was forgot – described his Looks- his melting pressures- his Ardours! – his Impatiencies!- his Extasies- his languishments! - endeavour'd to make her sensible how different he was from other Lovers!- how much beyond his Sex!- with what a Godlike sublimity of Passion he ador'd her – and, what was more prodigious than the rest, assured her, that each Enjoyment but increased Desire.(8-9)

Here Haywood's characteristic rhetoric of desire, expressed through the voice of Dalinda enkindles the latent desire of Philecta. As Philecta was previously betrayed by her lover, she could never think of constancy of man. So Philecta made a stratagem to test the constancy of Dorimeneus. She told Dalinda to wear the costume of an Indian slave for the next masquerade, and she herself goes to the masquerade replicating the same costume of Dalinda. Being deceived by her stratagem Dorimeneus runs after Philecta . But by unmasking her face he discovers another face than Dalinda. In the meantime Dalinda too appears on the scene and Philecta quits the place increasing Dorimeneus's sexual curiosity. Now Dorimeneus, who considered himself as the master of the amatory codes of the masquerade, is befooled by the female agency of Philecta, that the masquerade provided her.

On the part of Philecta returning to her home she ruminated over her latest victory over Dorimeneus. But going to beguile him she herself was enamoured by his charm: . . . In fine, she was in Love,- was charm'd with him to an infinite degree, without being sensible that she was so, - and while she languished for a second Interview, believ'd the Uneasiness she felt, no more than the effect of a Curiosity ungratified- Small was the repose she took that Night, and to add to the Perturbations of her Mind . . .(17)

Being smitten by Dorimeneus's charm Philecta tried to replicate the scene of affection. So she again invented the stratagem of forging the handwriting of Dalinda in order to arrange for the rendezvous with him again. Deceiving Dorimeneus again with the forged handwriting Philecta beckons him to convene at the appointed place for a tryst. Here Haywood again uses her characteristic rhetoric of the fashion-magazine glamour in order to describe Philecta, arming herself with the ammunitions of her cosmetics as the crafty seductress:

. . . – a thousand and a thousand times were the Patches plac'd, alter'd, and replac'd,- the Position of the curls as often chang'd ,- now this, anon that Fashion she thought most becoming- sometimes one sort of Glance, then its contrary seemed the likeliest to attract – and she remain'd unfix'd in Determination, how she shou'd Look, or Speak, or Act when she was told he was enquiring for her.(20)

Her sexual conquest of Dorimeneus provides her the erotic pleasure. But still now Philecta was using her female agency for seducing the lover under the veil of the identity of her friend Dalinda. But during the scene of seduction Philecta has the upper hand over her male partner and here she strikingly differs from Dalinda. Hence the narrator comments over this female dominance, “ But Dorimeneus was not always to triumph at first sight, he could not find a Dalinda in Philecta: as she knew better how to love, she also knew better how to govern it . . . ”(24). In this proto-feminist fiction of Haywood seduction becomes another name for the gender struggle. And during this gender scuffle the self-willed heroine Philecta triumphs over her male partner.

But this encounter with Dorimeneus heightens Philecta's female desire. In this proto-feminist amatory fiction Haywood employs her characteristic rhetoric of desire to describe her female passion, which is explicitly erotic, impulsive and vocal like her male partner:

She found she lov'd him with an extravagance of Dotage,- lov'd him to a degree beyond what she had felt before, even tho' the breaking it off had very near cost her her Life, and trembled to think what the consequences might be of this second, and more violent Inclination- she was not sure she should always be able to refuse the melting pressures of this dangerous Charmer. – She fear'd the Effects of a Desire so wild and ungovernable – and justly doubted the Force of Reason. (25)

After this ambiguous tryst, realizing her growing passion for Dorimeneus, Philecta resolves that she will not meet him in future. Here Philecta's overt expression of her desire for the opposite sex is not only unique but also novel feminist venture in respect of the traditional, androcentric literary tradition :

She at last determined never to see him more – No, said she to herself, all charming as he is, tho' my eyes can know no Joy but looking on him, nor my Ears but in Attention to his harmonious Tongue; tho' every sense is full of his perfections

and have no taste for any other pleasure , they shall no more be trusted with the fatal Transport.- Virtue, Honour, Religion, Reputation are at stake, and all cry out, No more indulge the ruinous Desire!- Fly the destructive Graces of the lovely, the too engaging Dorimenus – rather let me die than give a loose to a passion so pernicious to everything that ought to be dear or valuable.(25)

When Dorimenus came to her house in the next day to enquire after her, her servant told him that she was abroad. Now Dorimenus came to know the real identity of Philecta, and was very much depressed with the apprehension of losing his new conquest Philecta. Dorimenus wrote several letters to Philecta for the purpose of meeting once again. Then Philecta visited Dalinda and told her of her fraudulence to win Dorimenus. She even persuaded Dalinda to win him back for herself, and promised to avoid him further.

When Dalinda wrote to Dorimenus for seeing him, he artfully denied her request. Then Dalinda wrote him everything, that Philecta told her and despatched him his own letter to Philecta as a proof. Being betrayed and deserted by Philecta he decided to meet again Dalinda. And from this innocent lady he once again came to know of Philecta's overwhelming passion for him. Dorimenus was swayed over by the spirit of reciprocal love:

All the charms of Philecta now rise to his Idea, with greater force than ever – he could not help loving her, for the force of Passion for him; but he perfectly ador'd her, for the strength of a resolution so uncommon – he found Charms in her refusals . . .(40)

Indeed Haywood here manifests her mastery of the art of seduction. Her amatory fiction here inscribes her bold admittance of the reciprocity of love and sexual desire in the both of the sexes. Dorimenus had made a stratagem, and broke into Philecta's bedroom in the early morning of the next day. Then he found her in the dream-state typical of Haywood's hysterical suffering virgins:

. . . She was not yet risen, and had but that moment waked from a most pleasing Dream, of which he was the Subject : Imagination, always a Friend to Love, had given her, in Sleep a full iIdea of those Joys, which, when Awake, she durst not allow herself to think of. . . the agreeable Posture in which she lay, and which disclosed to him the Beauties, which her Dress had conceal'd, gave him Agitations too violent to permit him to continue long at the distance he then was,- he made but one step to the Bed-side , and throwing himself on his knees, by that beseeching Posture endeavour'd to assure her he came not on any dishonourable Design . . .(41)

Here Haywood employs her characteristic rhetoric to manifest Philecta's female desire dissolving it on the border of dream and wakefulness. The dream becomes true when she opens her eyes and the real world becomes dreamy under the charm of love. In the amatory

fiction of Haywood dream becomes an important instrument for expression of the latent sexual desire of the female psyche. Dream becomes the female utopian zone for liberal expression of female libido. Here Philecta was so overwhelmed with desire in her dream that her latent desire mingled with him when she opened her eyes:

. . . – she cou'd not hinder him from kissing and embracing her, - from feasting his impatient Eyes with every naked Charm about her,- from roving o'er them with his glowing Hands, with all the unlimited Freedom of Luxurious fondness, and at amidst delight and pain, a rack of ecstasy on both sides, she more faintly denying, he more vigorously pressing, half yielding, half reluctant, she was wholly lost,- all her boasted Reason,- all her forceful Resolution,- all the precautions of so many days, in one tumultuous Moment were overcome,- Love triumph'd over all, . . .(42-43)

Philecta ultimately came out of her psychological dilemma and they consummated their relationship. Even amidst the constricted condition of the eighteenth-century patriarchal society, Haywood ventured to create such an egalitarian aspect of seduction, where the female protagonist retains her female 'agency' from the beginning to the end. Philecta's submission to Dorimeneus does not symbolise Dorimeneus's triumph, but it is the triumph of "love" in the words of Haywood. Here Haywood could triumph over the contemporary constrained notion of femininity by her manifestation of the female sexual liberation in her proto-feminist literary domain. After their fructification of love they were so much immersed within each other that " Dorimeneus cou'd not live without Philecta, nor Philecta without Dorimeneus; both abandon'd all other Conversation, and found nothing Agreeable, nothing Charming, but in each other . . ." (44)

Haywood's amatory fiction is also characterised by her employment of the narrative technique of voyeuristic gaze. Hence the poor, deserted Dalinda now appears as the voyeur of the amorous scenes of Philecta and Dorimeneus :

. . . they were in a place so remote from any other Company ; she now found them in an Arbour, he lying carelessly down on a Carpet spread on the Floor, with his Head on her Lap as she was sitting by him, she had one of her hands fast grasped in his, and with the other she seem'd to toy, and stroke his Face and breast. . . . The lovers lost in the pleasing contemplation of each other's Charms, nor saw, nor heard her . . . (45)

This narrative technique of voyeuristic intervention within the private, secluded domain of the lovers provides the readers the pleasure to be the privileged onlookers in accepting the narrator's invitation to observe, and to feel the voyeuristic thrill of some secret scene.

As a result of this relationship Philecta becomes pregnant, and becomes the butt of universal disdain. But Dorimeneus does not differ much from the other heroes of Haywood's

novels. Due to the general tendency of inconsistency of his sex Dorimenes ultimately abandons both women to marry a wealthy heiress, Lysimena. Pregnancy as an irrefutable sign for her secret sexual desire brings a halt to her masquerading adventures. Thus Philecta's fatal curiosity ruined her. Out of the sense of utter grief, shame and desolation Philecta dies. Here the corporeal death of Philecta does not suggest her defeat. It symbolises very significantly a transcendental vision of amatory fiction. The concept of "dying" has certain erotic connotation in the context of the eighteenth-century literary scenario. Haywood here bases her argument on the pun of "die", which meant in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to experience the consummation of the act of love. According to that idea orgasm meant temporal death of lovers because of the loss of vitality and energy. Hence the self-willed heroine of Haywood also dies physically after experiencing the sexual death through her sexual consummation with Dorimenes. Her death here has the erotic connotation of copulation. By Philecta's symbolic death Haywood wants to suggest that the female desire consumes herself. The self-annihilating aspect of the female desire ruins Philecta. Ros Ballaster comments on this context in *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740* :

Applied to my reading of *The Masqueraders*, Riviere's comments would suggest that Philecta's ruin is not brought about by the transformation of her masquerade performance into 'genuine womanliness', so much as her inability to perceive the latter as nothing more than another fictional identity that she can turn to serve her purpose. Riviere adds that the 'weak point' of her subject's masquerade activity was the 'megalomaniac character, under all the disguises, of the necessity for supremacy. When this supremacy was seriously disturbed during analysis, she fell into an abyss of anxiety, rage and abject depression . . .'(42). This returns us to Haywood's repeated commentary on the difficulties for the intellectual woman of admitting defeat in amatory conflict. Such conflict is, it is clear, a struggle for power.

It is the inability to see beyond the dichotomy of victor and victim that entraps Philecta. When her creative resources dry up, she succumbs to the position of hysteric, the 'abyss of anxiety, rage and abject depression'. (186-87)

Thus the death of Philecta brings out a sense of 'catharsis' within the female readers, who identify themselves with the troubled heroine of Haywood. Haywood's amatory tale is different from any other tale of patriarchal mindset due to her innovative treatment of the traditional theme. In her amatory fiction masquerade acts as a vehicle for empowering women with the status of the engineer and the regulator of the plot of seduction under the veil of femininity. In this context Joan Riviere's comment in her famous article "Womanliness as a Masquerade" is applicable. Riviere here analyses the strategy of the professional women to conceal their "masculine" desire of holding the "agency" under the veil of "womanliness". Here Riviere highlights the fact that the intellectual women, the professional women and

above all any woman with her masculine desire to attain the “agency”, were always tagged with the label of masculinity. Hence they have had tried to conceal their masculine desire ‘to act and control’ by outwardly following the model of the traditional concept of womanliness. Riviere writes in “Womanliness as a Masquerade” :

It is with a particular type of intellectual woman that I have to deal. Not long ago intellectual pursuits for women were associated almost exclusively with an overtly masculine type of woman, who in pronounced cases made no secret of her wish or claim to be a man. This has now changed. Of all the women engaged in professional work today, it would be hard to say whether the greater number are more feminine than masculine in their mode of life and character . . . I shall attempt to show that women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men. (35)

Later on Riviere provides the psycho-sexual explanation to show the reason, that creates anxiety within the mind of the female, who wants to be equal with the men in the capacity of their performance :

. . . Analyses then revealed that the explanation of her compulsive ogling and coquetting – which actually she was herself hardly aware of till analyses made it manifest – was as follows : it was an unconscious attempt to ward off the anxiety which would ensue on account of the reprisals she anticipated from the father-figures after her intellectual performance. The exhibition in public of her intellectual proficiency , which was in itself carried through successfully, signified an exhibition of herself in possession of the father’s penis, having castrated him.(37)

Riviere suggests that the professional or the intellectual woman gains the masculine ‘agency’ by ‘castrating’ the symbolic ‘father-figure’. But in order to hide her act of emasculation she wears the mask of feminine subjugation. In the novel *The Masqueraders; or Fatal Curiosity: being the secret history of a late amour* Haywood also uses masquerade as the strategy for attaining the female “agency”. Masquerade is used here as the veil of “womanliness” that conceals the heroine’s masculine desire to gain the “agency” of seduction. Philecta, who is stimulated here with the ‘masculine’ role of sexual aggressiveness, is trying to satisfy their masculine sexual desire by arranging for every means of the seduction, and also by controlling it. But Philecta like those of the professional women is trying to conceal her ‘male’ desire. So she adopts the veil of submissive femininity under the shade of masquerade, and thus she disguises her active masculine eroticism. After analysing the professional

women's fear of male derision Riviere goes on to analyse how she can wear the mask of womanliness :

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it – much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods . . . As the primal scene the talisman which both parents possess and which she lacks is the father's penis; hence her rage, also her dread and helplessness. By depriving the father of it and possessing it herself she obtains the talisman – the invincible sword, the “organ of sadism”; he becomes powerless and helpless (her gentle husband), but she still guards herself from attack by wearing towards his the mask of womanly subservience, and under the screen, performing many of his masculine functions herself – ‘for him’ – (her practical ability and management) . . .(38-42)

Here Riviere's analysis illustrates the condition of the female sexuality in Haywood's amatory fiction. Hence Philecta beguiles Dorimeneus by assuming the identity of her friend Dalinda under the cover of the masquerade. Riviere opines that due to such active participation in the ‘masculine’ activities these women always suffer from the anxiety of being blamed of castrating their father-figure. Hence from a sadistic need she adopts this mask of womanliness more effectively with the desire to triumph over both sexes. But the ultimate fate of Philecta as a hysteric woman can be explained through the psycho-sexual analysis of Stephen Heath in his essay “Joan Riviere and the Masquerade” :

Hysteria is what? Failed masquerade. The hysteric will not play the game, misses her identity as a woman. . . the masquerade is a representation of femininity but then femininity is representation, the representation of the woman : ‘images and symbols of the woman's cannot be isolated from images and symbols of the woman’ . . . (51-53)

Thus in Eliza Haywood's amatory fiction masquerade acts as a vehicle for empowering women with the status of the engineer and the regulator of the plot of seduction under the veil of femininity. Actually masquerade in the eighteenth-century context is a privileged place for transgressing all the barriers of sexual, gender and class distinction. At the hand of Haywood Masquerade also becomes a utopian zone for providing her headstrong heroines the female ‘agency’. Masquerade not only erases the distinction of class hierarchy, but also demolishes the gap between male and female desire. In this process of attaining the ‘agency’ of courtship of ‘masculine’ status Philecta uses her ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade’ like the concept of Joan Riviere by beguiling Dorimeneus with the illusion. This egalitarian site of masquerade

provides the heroines the means to control the game of seduction in this proto-feminist text of Haywood. Haywood here appears as the pioneer proto-feminist writer, who dared to depict the candid expression of the sexual passion of her female protagonists amidst the contemporary torpid concept of femininity. This amatory fiction of Haywood is really remarkable for providing her heroines as well as her female readers this voice for manifestation of their libido, that was repressed for so long time by the patriarchal literary tradition.

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