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Sartorial Subversion: Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina* and the Literary Tradition of Women's Community

Abstract: This article locates *Fantomina* in a literary tradition that proposes all-female communities, such as convents and monasteries, as liberating and empowering spaces. I argue that the novella implies a virtual community rather than an actual one, as the heroine collectively embodies many different women, all of distinct social ranks: the heroine is both one woman and a variety of women brought together under the auspices of a single body, much the way discrete individuals together compose a community. Then, too, Beauplaisir, the object of the heroine's desire, treats all the personae the same, no matter their social station. This emphasis on what women share is itself a gesture toward a symbolic community as it suggests that all women are part of a common class. Secondly, I argue that through the protagonist's disguises the novella also offers the freedoms and challenge to women's roles seen in the literary tradition of women's community: the clothes serve as a protective space from which a woman may step "outside traditional female roles" (D'Monte and Pohl, xiv); and, from within the costumes the heroine can experiment with behavior traditionally denied women.

Keywords: Women's Community; Eliza Haywood; *Fantomina*

It's little wonder that Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina* has been the subject of copious criticism: written in 1725—by a woman author, no less—the novella follows the exploits of a nameless female protagonist bent on satisfying her sexual desire for the provocatively named libertine, Beauplaisir. Within this large body of criticism about *Fantomina*, a great deal of attention has been given to the novella's abrupt conclusion, in which the heroine, whose adventures have been curtailed by the birth of an illegitimate daughter, is dispatched to a monastery by her mother. Some critics see the conclusion as a punishment, effectively condemning the heroine's sexually free behavior throughout the novella.¹ But others contend that being sent to a convent rewards the heroine's deviant conduct, as living in an all-female

¹ Charles H. Hinnant suggests that Haywood permits the heroine's mother to "reinscribe her within a conservative code of female conduct" (409). He goes on to say that "The conclusion of *Fantomina* certainly casts a pall over the heroine's adventures" (410). While, Alexander Petit claims that Haywood argues for "the necessity of 'rules' and 'customs' as safeguards against feminine error and, furthermore, believes that 'feminine distress' is averted when women act in conformity to custom and ensured when they do not" (147). His article takes to task those that read the novella and the ending as endorsing the heroine's behavior; he calls such readings of the ending "bizarre" and unsupported (153).

community could offer her further freedoms. Melissa Mowry writes, “banishment to the convent liberates her to the society of other like-minded and like-behaving women, seeking ‘unquestionable Authority over [themselves]’” (656). From a different angle, Catherine A. Craft also emphasizes the family of mother, heroine, and newborn at the end of the novella; she concludes: “A community of women is established at the end of Haywood’s text, and Fantomina’s trip ‘to a Monastery in *France*, the Abbess of which had been a particular Friend’ (p. 291), far from being a punishment, is rather a continuation of that female society” (“Reworking Male Models” 832). And Helen Thompson similarly argues that the novella ends with “the specter of matrilineality” (208), another mode of female self-governance.

Whether they do so overtly or not, such critics are responding to a literary tradition that holds up women’s communities as sites of female liberation.² Rebecca D’Monte’s and Nicole Pohl’s genre-defining collection of essays, *Female Communities, 1600-1800: Literary Visions and Cultural Realities*, shows empowering all-female communities to be an important and consistent theme of English women’s literature from 1600-1800. Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess* (1749) and Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall* (1762) all imagine all-female

² In her groundbreaking study on women’s community, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (1978), Nina Auerbach shows that works about women living together is a significant trope; of these spaces, she explains that, “As a recurrent literary image, a community of women is a rebuke to the conventional ideal of a solitary woman living for and through men” (5). Because these communities provide an alternative to the traditional life available to women, they are “emblems of female self-sufficiency” (5). Although Auerbach is only concerned with Nineteenth-Century authors, later scholars have shown women’s community to be a trope that can be found in texts as early as the early modern period. In her article “A Refuge from Men: The Idea of a Protestant Nunnery” (1987) Bridget Hill explains that the concept of the Protestant nunnery is a trope that persistently recurs in works by women where it is used to question the status quo of women’s lives and to advocate for women’s education and independence. Hill demonstrates that the understanding of the convent as liberatory space is at the core of all works about women’s community from Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* to Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall*. More recently, Rebecca D’Monte and Nicole Pohl (2000) have added to our understanding of women’s community; their anthology argues that despite the many variations among these texts, authors writing about women’s communities consistently “explore the restraints of gender in their respective societies, and the possibility of circumventing those constraints by creating distinct alternatives for women, namely female communities” (2).

communities that offer freedom from societal constraints on women's behavior. In this genre, women's communities "ranging from convents and monasteries, through boarding schools and academies, to social networks such as literary circles and separatist households" (D'Monte and Pohl 5) appear as a strategy of critique and empowerment that allow women to contest and renegotiate traditional gender roles. What these freedoms look like vary from author to author: for example, the women living in these imagined all-female spaces might have access to education, economic independence, or escape from marriage. In all cases, however, these communities reject limitations placed on women and open up other possibilities for women's lives by providing access to roles traditionally denied to them. It is this kind of subversive community that some critics of *Fantomina* imagine the heroine joining when her adventures finally land her in a convent, one of the spaces in which these kinds of communities often occurred.

But, as Charles Hinnant points out, "retirement to a monastery or convent performs different functions in different novels" (408-409), and in fact, Ana Acosta identifies a sub-genre of texts, "convent novels," in which women are forcibly imprisoned in convents (621).³ Moreover, *Fantomina*'s hasty conclusion does not offer enough evidence to support the argument that the novella rewards the heroine's sexually free behavior: life in the convent is not described and readers never see the heroine's reaction to being sent there.

Despite the variety of readings of the ending, a vision of women's community permeates the entire novella, allowing us to read it, and the conclusion, within the tradition of women's

³ Similarly, Barbara R. Woshinsky in *Imagining Women's Conventual Spaces in France, 1600-1800: The Cloister Disclosed*, explains that "the stereotype of convent-as-jail is not without historical foundation," and goes on to say that "the practice of women's conventual incarceration was legal and difficult to reverse" (161). She also notes that convents were used "as a container for individual transgressors or undesirables" (162). And D'Monte and Pohl make the point that female communities can be oppressive and write that "the figure of the 'phallic mother' can echo and reinforce the absent paternal supremacy" (6).

community. Specifically, *Fantomina* offers an idealized all-female space through a virtual community that emerges throughout the novella, a community that is all-female in that it consists of the heroine (and her personae) alone. This implied community functions as a critique of the social distinctions that limit women's behavior and stand in the way of female solidarity and community. Moreover, through the protagonist's disguises the novella also offers the freedoms and challenge to women's roles seen in the literary tradition of women's community discussed above.

Fantomina appears after what are largely regarded as the progenitors of this literary tradition, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) by Mary Astell and Margaret Cavendish's play *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668). Astell's much-read and -imitated manifesto calls for women to live in all-female monasteries where they can earn an education; Cavendish's play features a protagonist, Lady Happy, who refuses to marry, instead using her inheritance to establish a convent where women take on all roles, including those usually assigned to men (women even stand in as suitors for one another). Although Haywood may not have been deliberately responding to these texts, she would have been influenced by what Bridget Hill shows was a widespread cultural understanding of convents spaces that were, "self-sufficient and challenged the whole role that women were expected to play" (119).

Striking similarities between Haywood's novella and these two foundational texts encourage reading *Fantomina* as part of this literary tradition, and are important to explore as groundwork for my argument. Though Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* proposes the convent as a way of expanding women's minds and Haywood's heroine is decidedly focused on carnal satisfaction, both texts seek access to freedoms usually reserved for men; in both cases,

furthermore, they do so by disconnecting women from society (*Fantomina*'s heroine enacts this disconnection through the use of disguise). Moreover, the central impulse of each text is to manage men's short attention spans: Astell urges women to live in convents and seek an education because husbands will soon bore of "external accomplishments" (111). An education would extend husbands' interest, but more importantly, it would give women an intellectual life that can sustain them as their husbands' interest wanes. While *Fantomina*'s heroine is not concerned with finding a rewarding intellectual life, she repeatedly disguises herself for the sole purpose of maintaining, or reigniting, Beauplaisir's interest. She concludes that "the most violent Passion...in Time will wither" (65).

Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* also exhibits particularly compelling and relevant similarities to Haywood's text. In Cavendish's community, costume serves as an essential tool for transcending gender roles: the women living in Lady Happy's all-female community "accoustre Themselves in Masculine-Habits, and act Lovers-parts" (111), and men dress up as women to infiltrate the enclosed society—in fact, the prince that eventually marries Lady Happy disguises himself as a woman playing a man. While this tale ends in a traditional marriage, it does so only after scrutinizing "traditional ideological constructions of 'woman'" (Bowerbank and Mendelson 21). The heroine of *Fantomina* practices class cross-dressing instead of gender cross-dressing, but for her, too, the costumes allow her to challenge said gender constructs: by disguising herself as women of different ranks, Haywood's protagonist becomes a true rake, tricking Beauplaisir into satisfying her desire. Thus, class cross-dressing works like gender cross-dressing in that it allows the heroine to step into a masculine role, and it constitutes a critique of social hierarchies and roles. But class cross-dressing works on a second level as well as it challenges the social divisions among women. Interestingly, class cross-dressing makes an

appearance in Cavendish's text, as well. The women of the convent perform a play that depicts women up and down the social ladder enduring the evils of marriage. This play within a play closes with the lines, "Marriage is a Curse we find,/Especially to Women kind:/From the Cocker's Wife we see,/To Ladies, they unhappie be" (117). Like *Fantomina*, then, Cavendish's play uses clothes to imagine "a female bonding on the basis of a suffering that transcended class" (D'Monte and Pohl xiv).

These similarities between *Fantomina* and the tradition's foundational texts merely buttress my observation that a vision of women's community permeates Haywood's novella. The text works to do this, primarily, by suggesting a virtual all-female community throughout the story—one that is created in the reader's mind. Other critics, such as Craft, have noted only "hints of female unity" (*Masquerade and Gender* 72)—the landlady of the inn where the heroine has her first sexual encounter helps without a bribe, for example, and both the heroine and her mother refuse to put the baby in the care of Beauplaisir—but I argue that the novella implies a virtual community, rather than an actual one, as the heroine collectively embodies many different women, all of distinct social ranks. Not only does the reader see how easily the heroine steps in and out of these roles, exposing the distinctions of rank as artificial, she sees that while Beauplaisir may alter his tactics according to station (a lady prompts a gentler hand than a maid, for instance), he ultimately treats them all the same: he abandons each once he grows bored. Following the adventures of a protagonist whose clothes put her in different classes, the reader understands that these personae represent different social stations, and yet they form a common class. Then too, the novella suggests that a single woman contains multiple female identities—from within our genteel young protagonist emerges a prostitute, maid, a middle-class widow, and aristocrat—making the heroine, in a sense, a female community of one.

Fantomina works with the tradition of women's communities in another way, too.

Costume and disguise provide freedom in the precise manner that women's communities do: they serve as a protective space from within which a woman may step "outside traditional female roles" (D'Monte and Pohl xiv). *Fantomina*'s costumes, like women's communities, "open up political, intellectual, and sexual possibilities for women" (D'Monte and Pohl 15). Certainly many scholars discuss the function of the disguises in facilitating the heroine's norm-flouting behavior, destabilizing female roles, and providing agency.⁴ Catherine Craft and Juliette Merrit argue that costumes allow the heroine to evade the male gaze, while Thompson suggests that the heroine is able to "reinsert herself into a plot that according to patriarchal mechanics should allow her to participate one time only.... [H]er performative talents allow her to perpetuate a marvelously renovated romantic economy, whereby ruined women might indefinitely reconstitute themselves as whole bodies" (207). I would add to these arguments that this is another link to the trope of women's communities: just as communities shielded women from society's oppressive gaze, allowing behaviors and freedoms typically reserved for men, the

⁴ Catherine A. Craft suggests that the heroine "effects self-transformations that move her downward in social rank and thereby allow her successfully to defy the behavioural restrictions imposed on aristocratic women. Her masquerade, rather than a submission to the dominant moral and social codes, is a resistance to them" (830). Craft-Fairchild, in her larger study, *Masquerade and Gender: Disguises and Female Identity in Eighteenth-Century Fictions by Women* (1993) and Juliette Merritt, in *Beyond Spectacle: Eliza Haywood's Female Spectators* (2004) argue that the masquerading disturbs the power dynamics between the anonymous protagonist and the hero by destabilizing the male gaze. According to Craft-Fairchild the heroine's intentional use of masquerade creates "the gap or distance between *Fantomina*'s real self and her constructed image necessary for the emergence of her subjectivity" (*Masquerade and Gender* 61). And this "detachment from her representations" permits the heroine to avoid exploitation and grants her the freedom to act "upon her own desires" (*Masquerade and Gender* 62). Similarly, for Merritt the heroine "subverts the conventional voyeuristic scenario" where men are the spectators and women the spectacle (48); she "transcend[s] her role as spectacle and achieve[s] the position of the one who sees" (60). As a result, for Merritt, the performance of female identity leads to "The construction of a place/space other than that which is culturally assigned to woman, other than the place of their objectification" (69). Helen Thompson takes a different approach; relying on a "materialist philosophy of the person" (196), she argues that the disguises do not provide agency because they provide "'distance' that protects the integrity of her psyche" (205) but because with each new disguise the heroine becomes a different "whole body" and is thus "a succession of different objects" (202). As a result, for Thompson the heroine ultimately "remains unenjoyed by Beauplaisir [and] produces a daughter with no father" (208). This is another way of challenging and rewriting the traditional roles assigned to women.

disguises in *Fantomina* provide a protective space from which the heroine defies the limitations society places on women's desire; through her personae, she experiments with behavior that redefines her role vis-a-vis Beauplaisir, creating a fantasy that posits new subversive possibilities for female sexual conduct.

From the moment it opens, Eliza Haywood's novella focuses the reader's attention on the ostensible divisions between women of different social rank, and their associated levels of virtue, all perceived through dress. The genteel young heroine attends a theater performance, where she sits with other "Ladies"; she observes, from her perch in the box, a prostitute down below freely enjoying the attentions of a group of well-to-do men. When she remarks on this, the women near her take "but little Notice of it" (41). Their lack of interest in the prostitute suggests that the pit and prostitute are not part of their domain; this distinction is further emphasized by the central character's surprise at the prostitute's flirtatious behavior and the men's responses to it—both are clearly alien to her as a "lady." Even the physical placement of the prostitute and ladies mirrors the social hierarchy: the sexually free woman is below in the pit, while genteel (and by extension, more virtuous) women sit up higher in the box. As the story progresses, however, and the unnamed heroine dons a series of disguises, impersonating women of different social stations in order to satisfy her desire for Beauplaisir, the categorical divisions highlighted at the novella's start are disrupted, and the suggestion of a virtual community across these divisions emerges.

In order to understand how the text implies a community through the heroine's masquerading, it is important to first understand how the subversive use of clothes destabilizes hegemonic ideology. Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) provides a framework for understanding how the heroine's disguises contest the cultural assumption of the

day seen in *Fantomina*'s opening, that women of higher status are inherently more virtuous. Hebdige argues that through the use of clothes, subcultures reveal the artificiality of social station and therefore disturb the dominant culture. Specifically, when subcultures appropriate garments associated with roles that are thought to be immutable, they demonstrate that clothes are merely codes that can be manipulated (101). The heroine's use of the signifiers associated with women of varying ranks has the same effect on the reader that subcultural style has on the dominant culture that observes it—that is, the heroine's re-costuming and role-playing shows the artificiality of social norms and ideas surrounding women's virtue in relation to status. Once such assumptions are shown to be problematic, the reader then sees the commonality among the different women: she sees both that all these women from different strata are in reality a single woman (the protagonist), and that a maid and an aristocrat are ultimately treated the same way by Beauplaisir. A solidarity, both real—in the form of the single, solid woman—and symbolic—in the commonality among the differently ranked personae—suggests a community of women to the reader.

The novella rejects the convention of assigning women qualities according to their dress and associated rank. The process begins almost immediately when the heroine poses as Fantomina, a woman-for-hire. The men in the pit note: “*she is mighty like my fine Lady Such-a-one,—naming her own Name*” (42). And yet, even though Beauplaisir observes the uncanny resemblance between the heroine and the prostitute before him, he concludes that “the vast Disparity there appear'd between their Characters, prevented him from entertaining even the most distant Thought that they cou'd be the same” (42-43). Mowry notes, “So calcified is their sense of their interpretive authority that the sparks disbelieve even their own supposition that Fantomina is, indeed, who she appears to be” (653). Even as Beauplaisir seduces the various

personae, the reader sees that his blind faith in clothes as signifiers of a woman's class identity is misplaced and makes him vulnerable to being deceived. In essence the social agenda that aims to control women is reversed in *Fantomina*, since, instead of boxing each persona into a prescribed sexual code, here the accoutrements of rank keep Beauplaisir from recognizing the heroine, which in turn lets her have her way with him. This shows the reader that, in the words of Hebdige, social "codes are there to be used and abused" (101). Seeing Beauplaisir and the other men fooled, the reader must question the reliability of clothes assignifiers of rank and virtue.

The masquerading also forces the reader to question just how different women of different social ranks really are.⁵ The ease with which the heroine slips into the prostitute role, a role presumed to be alien to her, by simply changing her attire and "practising as much as she had observ'd, at that Distance, the Behaviour of that Woman" (42) begins to challenge distinctions between women of different strata. Additionally, parallels between the prostitute and heroine are suggested through the heroine's manner of re-securing Beauplaisir's affection: with each new persona, the heroine dresses up and places herself in his way in order to be accosted and seduced; this mirrors the conduct of the prostitute, who goes to the theater "for no other Purpose, than to create Acquaintance" (41) with men—in essence, the heroine is conflated with the prostitute. In embodying the prostitute and the other characters, the heroine begins to suggest community among women whose distinctions from one another are rendered illegitimate by the fact that they exist in a single person.

The way that Beauplaisir tailors his seductions to social status also helps to reinforce a vision of women's community in *Fantomina*. Beauplaisir seduces each persona according to her

⁵ Noting that the maid persona must accept the money Beauplaisir offers her in order to stay in character, while, ironically, the prostitute rejects his money, Merritt asks "in which role is she a prostitute—Celia or Fantomina? Is there a significant difference?" (56). This questioning of the differences among the women from different estates also occurs because of the way the one woman can pass for so many.

rank—he is bawdy and to-the-point with the maid, more careful and strategic with the widow, for example—but he treats them all the same in the end, abandoning each when he grows bored. More importantly, he believes they are fundamentally the same: as he thinks about how he will convince the aristocratic Incognita to unmask herself and reveal her true identity, Beauplaisir decides that she can't possibly vary “so much from the Generality of her Sex, as to be able to refuse the Knowledge of any Thing to the Man she lov'd” (64). In seeing “Generality,” among distinct women, Beauplaisir himself suggests a community among them, albeit one that is defined by his disregard. The heroine through her active manipulation of costume, suggests the possibility of an empowered community.

But Beauplaisir's identical treatment of the women also leads the reader to link the episodes, and therefore the women, together. With each affair the narrator compares the new woman's fate with the previous one's. For instance, after Beauplaisir tires of the third persona the narrator says, “at length her Sway was at an End, and she sunk in this Character, to the same Degree of Tastelessness, as she had done before in that of *Fantomina* and *Celia*.—She presently perceiv'd it, but bore it as she had always done; it being but what she expected”(60). Words like “same,” “before,” “always,” “expected” draw attention to the pattern of treatment; the similarity in the women's experiences becomes what is most prominent and easily remembered about them. As a result, the different personae become connected in the reader's mind. D'Monte and Pohl, explain that “female communities are, as much as all communities, imagined social units. They are imagined as geosocial units of women who are united through a mutual sociopsychological experience of gender” (6). Similarly, this is an “imagined social unit”—here imagined by the reader—because all the personae share the same experience with Beauplaisir.

Then, too, the reader follows the adventures of a solitary woman who is simultaneously several. Here Thompson's work is helpful. She points out that with each new disguise the heroine "does not simply dress like someone else, but *embodies* someone else" (204), even as we continue to see the same woman. Similarly, discussing the moment when the heroine simultaneously receives letters for two of her personae, Thompson also notes that the heroine "materializes both as an indefinite number of lovers and as always only one reader" and that she "occupies the apparently incompatible states of redundancy and novelty at once" (203). Thompson underscores how the reader sees both one woman and a variety of women that are brought together under the auspices of a single body, much the way discrete individuals together compose a community. It is for this reason that the reader can read the heroine and her escapades on two levels. That is, the reader can understand each persona as a different kind of woman and can see a connection among the various types, even as they understand that it is really one woman having the same experience each time.

Unlike texts offering images of concrete (as opposed to virtual) women's communities, *Fantomina* never directly challenges society's views of women: Beauplaisir never comes to see his own callousness or false belief in the relationship between rank and virtue; nor does the heroine investigate or criticize that belief—she merely works around it. But it becomes apparent to the reader that such categories are a contested ideological space and not a state of nature, which is precisely Astell's point: the limitations women experience are not a product of innate qualities but rather assigned roles. In Craft's terms, the text "undermines those invisible 'commonsense' hierarchical oppositions that constitute the ideology of the feminine" (*Masquerade and Gender* 64). This destabilizing opens up a space for community. As D'Monte and Pohl explain, "Destabilizing sexual as well as class identity seems to open up a space for

female community in the early modern period” (xiv). In the texts that make up this literary tradition, the destabilizing happens when women come to live together under one roof, while in *Fantomina* the assumption that women’s virtue is determined by rank is dismantled through the masquerading which also works to suggest community. The anonymous heroine can only hide her identity and successfully pursue Beauplaisir and her desire for him because of the finances that allow her to establish multiple residences, hire transportation, buy multiple disguises, and bribe accomplices. And, presumably, the convent at the conclusion is only an option because of her mother’s class and social connections. Such privileging of upper station women echoes the women’s community literature, since those all-female spaces were mostly imagined as an option for upper-class women who could pay to be there.⁶ Even Cavendish’s convent, in which the inhabitants put on a play that hints at a larger female community based on women’s suffering as a result of men, is intended for wealthy women from the upper ranks. Nevertheless, in *Fantomina* women from up and down the social ladder are momentarily and metaphorically united in the person of the heroine. This image begins to expand the work of authors like Cavendish who took the first tentative steps toward drawing connections between women of different social backgrounds by acknowledging a common experience and identity. Though it is through an implied, virtual community, or perhaps because it is done in this less realistic way, Haywood’s text is able to go further than Astell whose convent is for women of means, and further than later works like *Millenium Hall* which wrestles with class differences but does not get rid of it.

⁶ D’Monte and Pohl write, “the communities depicted by Cavendish and Scott...are clearly class-exclusive” (6). And in her book, *Women, Space and Utopia*, Pohl says of Astell’s society, “it is clearly aimed at an affluent part of the female population” (113). Bridget Hill also makes the point that the price of joining Astell’s community, limits the community to “Persons of Quality” since “only they would have been able to afford the fees” (108).

I have argued that the use of costume and disguise work to suggest a virtual women's community that helps place *Fantomina* in the literary tradition that exalts all-female spaces as emancipatory. The novella locates itself in this tradition in another way, as well: the mechanism by which disguise works to liberate our heroine mirrors that which frees women in convents. The disguises enclose and protect the heroine and therefore allow her to operate unseen and free from the social norms applied to women. Withdrawing into the costumes allows the heroine to challenge the feminine role as it is understood in relationship to a masculine identity by allowing her to access with impunity the sexual freedoms granted by society only to men. D'Monte and Pohl explain that in women's communities "Women put on the prerogative of royalty, military adventure, the seduction of women, religious authority, travel, the conversion of souls – and much more" (xiv). Critics have discussed the transgressive effect of the costumes, and both Merritt and Craft note that the use of disguises protects the heroine's identity while she gains the masculine power of seeing and satisfying desire. According to Merritt, the heroine "protects the integrity of her own identity, appropriates the position of 'Looker-on,' and at the same time conceals her power to see behind her masks" (60), while Craft argues that the heroine "eludes the male gaze while retaining her own 'Power of seeing'" (*Masquerade and Gender* 65). My argument builds on these astute observations but goes on to emphasize that the costumes function like communities in that they protect and liberate the heroine; similarly, communities gave their inhabitants a safe space from which they could access freedoms denied by society.

For authors such as Astell and Cavendish, women's communities offered an escape from oppression and the stigma of being unmarried, or living unconventional lives. As Astell argues, "Retirement" is important because "it helps us mate Custom and delivers us from its Tyranny" (94). She goes on to say that "Custom has usurpt such an unaccountable Authority," that women

attempting to “stop its Arbitrary Sway” are censured; she concludes, “The only way then is to retire from the World” (94-95). *Fantomina*’s protagonist similarly conceals herself from the world’s judgment and censure in order to flout “Custom.” She says, “the Intreague being a Secret, my Disgrace will be so too: —I shall hear no Whispers as I pass” (49). In the end, her mother sends her to a monastery at the novella’s conclusion for the same purpose, to shield her daughter from possible censure.

In the women’s communities imagined by Cavendish and Astell, separation from society allows women to take on roles prohibited to them in society and defy gender boundaries; such works question culturally “natural” roles for women and suggest the possibility of agency. It should be noted that *Fantomina*’s heroine’s form of rebellion is the inverse of what most women’s communities sought: a space that excludes men. *Fantomina*’s protagonist removes herself from societal judgment and oppression for precisely the opposite reason, to access the physical male body. However, what is notable for me is that *Fantomina*’s heroine’s transgressions offer a momentary fantasy of women’s sexual agency that hints at other possibilities for what a woman’s life might look like: the heroine has control over herself, her body, and Beauplaisir. Although her performances allow Beauplaisir to conquer new women and abandon them, the heroine not only directs her own behavior and exercises sexual freedom, she manipulates Beauplaisir into giving her what she wants, sustained sexual interest; she out-cads the cad. In this way, like women in female communities, she usurps male prerogatives and “transgress[es] the boundaries of conventional female subjectivity” (D’Monte and Pohl xv).

Masquerading permits the heroine to access the kind of sexual freedom Beauplaisir enjoys by allowing her to divorce her social status from sexual behavior, albeit for a limited time. Like her male counterpart, the heroine can secretly conduct her affair and then go out into

society: “Slippers, and a Night-Gown loosely flowing, has been the Garb in which he has left the languishing *Fantomina*;—Lac’d, and adorn’d with all the Blaze of Jewels, has he, in less than an Hour after, beheld at the Royal Chapel, the Palace Gardens, Drawing Room, Opera, or Play, the Haughty Awe-inspiring Lady” (50). The costumes protect the heroine’s reputation and allow her to move freely between various locations and social classes. Moreover, like Beauplaisir, who can be both a gentleman and a rake; she can be an esteemed lady and similarly rakish. The disguises the heroine dons also offer her the traditionally male power to seduce and to manipulate, and therefore to control by forcing the affair to continue. Beauplaisir is “tir’d of her Conversation” and wants to “be at liberty to pursue new Conquests” (51), but the heroine uses the disguises to stymie his plan, pointing out, “I have outwitted even the most Subtle of the deceiving Kind, and while he thinks to fool me, is himself the only beguiled Person” (59). Beauplaisir lies to soothe the woman and control the terms of his affair; she similarly lies for her sexual benefit. As Margaret Case Croskery and Anna C. Patchias point out, “she makes it impossible for Beauplaisir to break his vows to her, seducing him over and over again” (23). If we follow their argument, then her ability to become the aggressor in the relationship empowers her and makes a claim of equity that challenges the dominant notion that women’s sexuality is always, and innately, vastly different from men’s. The heroine’s sexual behavior goes well beyond the transgressive behavior seen in the typical texts on women’s communities, but when the heroine gains a seductive agency analogous to Beauplaisir’s the novella depicts “[r]eversals of traditional sexual identities” and “destabilize[s] conventional gender positions” (D’Monte and Pohl xiv-xv)—the same goals pursued by authors depicting women’s communities. Moreover, because she seduces Beauplaisir by deceiving him, the heroine’s behavior rewrites the common narrative of the naïve and therefore easily fooled and seduced woman. Astell wishes to cultivate the

female mind to protect women from the kind of deception Beauplaisir falls prey to; but, here, as the woman turns deceiver, it is the male that is instead easily “beguiled” and seduced because of his folly.

Finally, I wish to suggest that the heroine’s disguises provide distance from society that alter the subject(s) views—rather like a convent does. In her famous manifesto, Astell tells women that in a community, “the world will be plac’d at our feet, at such a distance from us, that the steams of its corruptions shall not obscure our eye-sight; we shall have a right prospect of it, and clearly discern that all its Allurements, all those Gaities and Pageantries, which at present we admire so much are no better than insignificant Toys, which have no value but what our perverse Opinon imposes on them” (97). Although *Fantomina*’s anonymous heroine is not removed from society, she is separate in the sense that her real identity remains unseen. The people she interacts with, Beauplaisir and others, do not know or recognize her, which allows her a clearer view of Beauplaisir, and by extension of men and the society they dominate. When she receives letters addressed to two of her personae at the same time, she notes the lies he tells to Fantomina while he ardently pursues the Widow. She proclaims: “So had I been deceiv’d and cheated, had I like the rest believ’d, and sat down mourning in Absence, and vainly waiting recover’d Tenderness” (239). The quotation suggests that she has gained an understanding of men and society through the distance provided by her sartorial cloistering, an understanding that she would not otherwise have had. Moreover, I would add that in this moment the heroine understands that despite exterior differences, Fantomina, the widow, and she herself (the anonymous heroine) are engaged in a struggle for men’s loyalty that all women seem to face and understands the disregard she suffers as one shared by all women. This is in contrast to the

opening which emphasizes the separation rather than the ties among women and is therefore another insight her distance allows her to gain.

Nevertheless, the heroine's agency is momentary and her knowledge is ultimately inadequate; she is thwarted by biology when pregnancy robs her of her freedom and forces her to confess. In fact, the text undercuts the agency achieved by the heroine in multiple ways. While her many guises give her the seclusion, protection, and agency of a community, the nature of what she accomplishes or suggests women can be is contradictory. She may match Beauplaisir's rakishness and wit but the goal of her transgressive behavior is to maintain the attentions of one man, and thus on one level she's a "good" traditional woman. Moreover, although she maintains Beauplaisir as a lover and prevents him from abandoning her, her attraction to him is problematic, especially if, as Margaret Crookery argues, the initial seduction is a rape (82). We are told that even though she resisted, the first time, "he would not be denied" and that at that moment even the truth would not have "change[d] the Form of his Addresses. In fine, she was undone" (46). If the initial sexual encounter is a rape, then the serial "seductions" are repetitions of a moment of powerlessness, even as she becomes the aggressor that won't be "denied"—meaning, she is now making him act against his will, forcing him to keep seducing the same person when what he really desires is novelty. Haywood refuses to provide clear answers to these questions; she does not sustain the vision of a woman practicing the sexual liberties of a man without repercussions, nor does she clearly punish the heroine by sending her to the convent, since that is a site that can provide further freedom. However, even the undercutting of the heroine's agency is common in the genre of women's community. As Erin Lang Bonin notes, in Margaret Cavendish's plays, including *The Convent of Pleasure*, community—and consequently the freedoms granted the women within the community—is brought to an end with the marriage

of the main character and the dissolution of the women's community (352). Therefore, even the incompleteness of Haywood's vision aligns her novella with other texts that imagine women's communities as liberating spaces.

Recognizing the many connections between *Fantomina* and those that imagine convents as sites of liberation, and seeing how pervasive the motif of women's community is throughout the novella, allows us to place Haywood's text in this literary tradition, which she borrows from as well as develops in innovative ways. We can assume, then, that the ending is a continuation of this engagement of the tradition and that the heroine is indeed being sent to a space where she can find some measure of freedom and that her banishment is not a punishment for her sexual adventuring. Craft imagines that the heroine finds "female society" and that in this convent "Fantomina's pleasures and freedom will suffer no abatement" ("Reworking Male Models" 832); similarly, Croskery argues, "banishment to convent or monastery was no guarantee of moral transformation,... This story's ending suggests not a conclusion, but a sequel" (92). As Margaret Croskery and Anna C. Patchias point out, "titillating stories about nuns" was a popular "early modern literary mode," allowing convents to be read as a place where the heroine's sexual adventures might continue (24). The reader is not privy to the heroine's life in the convent, but what is clear, given the text's other connections to the idea of women's community, is that the ending is not meant to suggest confinement; it is also not known what the heroine will find in the community once she gets there, but the ending is clearly meant to suggest the promise of alternatives that is part of all women's communities. Though neither the virtual community nor the real monastery mentioned in the novella's conclusion are a complete vision of women's community, they work hand-in-hand to make sense of an ending that has long troubled critics.

While writers such as Mary Astell and Margaret Cavendish wrote works that depicted literal women's societies, Haywood helps re-imagine the communal space, through her heroine's sartorial adventuring up and down the social hierarchy which works to imply a virtual community. Moreover, Haywood is able to successfully suggest unity among women with different social statuses; in doing so she calls attention to the limitations of those all-female communities in which women of the same class sequester themselves from the world. The text begins by highlighting such divisions and exclusions among women and then works to move beyond them by imagining that a single woman can pretend to be many different women from different social milieus. Reading the novella in this manner expands the definition of female community in literature to include not only concrete, literal spaces but also those implied and created through shared experiences; it also expands the community of women authors who proposed all-female communities as potential sites of liberation from oppressive societal gender norms. By exploring *Fantomina's* concern with this sub-genre, this essay adds to the understanding of Haywood as an author conversant with the feminist trope of women's community, a literary tradition she utilizes but also transforms.

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