Britain’s eighteenth-century masquerades were a substantial component of society, since they were “a social phenomenon of expansive proportions” (Castle 1986, 2) and therefore, gained huge popularity within the socio-cultural sphere of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, masquerades were not exclusively held for pure leisure. They created an unrestricted scope, where social boundaries and limitations were temporarily subsumed: “It produced a kind of comic enlightenment, imparting knowledge about the real world while giving access to a numinous realm of dream and taboo” (Castle 1986, 87). Especially for women, the masquerade was a place in which they were able to resist societal boundaries and “had the unprecedented right to start random conversation with an unknown man without necessarily ruining their reputation” (Castle 1986, 34). Therefore, masquerades allowed interchangeability of all kinds, through which women formed new identities, which will be demonstrated in two works by Eliza Haywood.

Disguising is also an important part of Eliza Haywood’s works because she repeatedly uses the topos of the masquerade for her female heroines to create avant-garde characters who liberate themselves by using disguises. In order to do so, Haywood explores the power constructions of the socio-historical context of the eighteenth-century, which was predominantly shaped by patriarchal power and female obedience, traditional gender roles as well as distinct social classes. Since the possibility to disguise was important for the development of a culture of femininity, women could be freer at masquerades and were allowed to attend them without guidance (Castle 1986, 44). Hence, women were enabled to create own wishes and desire that were out of eighteenth-century social boundaries. Eliza Haywood uses the open- as well as innovativeness of the masquerade trope for her works, in order to show a state-of-the-art way of femininity.

Superficially, “The Masqueraders, or Fatal Curiosity” seems to be a male-centred story in which Dorimenus conquers different women at the London masquerade balls. Nevertheless, the whole plot is managed by women who pursue their own objectives towards sexuality and desire. The way how desire and sexuality are represented in “The Masqueraders, or Fatal Curiosity” influences the establishment of non-stereotypical gender roles. New female identities are constructed while, simultaneously, archaic male perspectives are superimposed. In “Fantomina; or, Love in a Maze”, an inversion of typical gender roles, concerning stereotypical sexuality, is created. Fantomina manages her sexual affairs herself and, therefore, is the active part of the relationship between her and Beauplaisir, her love interest. While Beauplaisir is objectified and
reduced to his outward appearance, Fantomina is superordinate to him. She develops her own sexual agency regarding sexual lust, which creates a different identity. The usage of multiple disguises, hence, creates a detachment of her original identity and her true self.

Furthermore, both works use the concept of scopophilia, which is deconstructed, and a female gaze is developed. Laura Mulvey uses the concept of scopophilia in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" to describe how the act of looking creates pleasure. The object, which the pleasure is directed on is usually a woman (Mulvey 1999, 837). The concept of scopophilia describes looking as "a source of pleasure" (Mulvey 1999, 835) itself, while simultaneously objectifying the person who is looked at. While "The Masqueraders, or Fatal Curiosity" focuses on the masquerade as an event where scopophilic actions happen pseudo-secretly, "Fantomina; or, Love in a Maze", focuses on the extraction of desire by creating scopophilic situations. Lastly, both works enable women to be the active part, in which they create a desire to be looked at, while simultaneously looking at someone.

Concludingly, in Eliza Haywood’s works, masquerade and disguise provide a framework in which alternative behaviour is permitted. Through the means of disguises, masquerades became a place of inviolability for eighteenth-century society and therefore, created a social sphere which was detached from actual social principles. Haywood demonstrates that, especially for women, masquerades and the usage of different disguises create the opportunity to act out taboos. Since women were not allowed to decide for themselves and, therefore, did not have their own agency, masquerades enabled women to create their own femininity.

Literatur


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