**ENGH: SEM 4: Paper HCC-T-8: HAYWOOD**

Contributor: Partha Pratim Bandyopadhyay

Haywood’s Fantomina: a summary

A young lady – beautiful, witty and of a good provincial family – has come to stay in London, and wishing to see London society, sits in a box at a theatre. Looking around, she finds that though there are many ladies, the men jostle around one in a corner. From her dress and behavior this lady seems to be a prostitute. There is also a general stream of flirtations going on, which our lady finds contemptible and disgusting. She wonders how socially accepted wits behave so shamelessly, and feels a curiosity to know how the men flirt and ladies treat them. She is young, adventurous, crafty and practically free to act with enough money; so she follows the whim and makes herself up in imitation of the loose theatre women and poses appropriately to attract men’s attention. Practicing like the prostitute she saw on the first night, she is immediately surrounded by greedy men who take her for a prostitute and offer prices for her company. She listens to their false, exaggerated praises of her charms, and is amused and pleased to turn down offers that bloat her pride. Some of the men remark on this prostitute’s likeness to a certain respectable lady – who is actually herself in her normal appearance. Praise of her own beauty, raised to ridiculous heights in the hope of getting her, and heard from behind a false identity, naturally pleases her. She enjoys the power her beauty gives her over the males, and begins developing an intoxicating and new experience. She goes on in this manner until Beauplaisir, the most attractive of men, approaches her.

She had seen and spoken to Beauplaisir in social gatherings before, and felt secretly attracted, but her respectable, virtuous image then had prevented the closeness she desired. Now that the mask of honour is cast off by the prostitute’s garb, her sexual instinct becomes frank and she wishes he would advance. He looks at her and feels he knows the face, but the vast difference of appearance leads him away, and he addresses her in words one uses with a loose woman. He soon finds that she has wit and gentility unlike low harlots, and changes his form of courtship to the stylized decorum practiced among the upper classes. His open declarations of her sexual charms thrill her through the play, but when he proposes to go to a private place to fulfill his engagement with this prostitute, she reels at this yet unseen, but natural, possibility. Faced with the loss of honor and virginity, she is afraid and confused – she thinks of exposing her real self at the cost of public scandal. But she finally saves the situation by telling him she has another engagement this night, and will satisfy him the next evening. Upon this promise they part, and she returns half in fear and anxiety, and half in happy anticipation of meeting the man she wants. It is a vital moment of decision for her – she is torn between the dictates of social and private morality, and the natural surge of youthful sexuality. To listen to her body and soul was to start on a dangerous road, and involved a moral fall with unknown consequences, but denying the desire of the heart for a distant cold dignity is not the nature of youth. So, the next evening she goes out early to rent a place to receive him in, thinking she would have better control of things in her rooms rather than his.

They meet at the playhouse, and she is delighted to find him more urging due to the unfulfilled desire of the last night. Secretly pleased and satisfied of her arrangement, she takes him there for the night. As customary, he goes to order a supper, but she prevents him and provides a lavish supper at her cost, as it is her lodging. This surprises him a little because prostitutes do not do so, and he wonders that her charges must be very high, but thinks no more and plunges in the pleasure. After supper, the hour of physical intimacy comes, and she feels nervous and tries to defer, but is weakened by her liking for him. The fear of losing virginity rises to a climax and she is at the point of revealing her true standing, but is held back again by the shame of exposure and the unashamed physical license she has given him. She makes the partial confession that she is a virgin yet, and had assumed this disguise to attract him only. But the man by now was wild with lust and no words could hold the consummation back. When it is over, she cries and looks distracted. He feels surprised that a prostitute should cry over her trade, and wonders why her actions and emotions are so contrary. Being of generous nature, he tries to comfort her, and thinking that her queer behavior was a design to rouse in him a pity that makes him pay more, he brings out a purse of gold and offers it with loud proclamations of his love. At this treatment common to a paid woman, her self-respect is struck and she abruptly bursts into a sentimental lament of her lost honor, forgetting the role she had put herself into. He is amazed to hear such nonsense in the mouth of a prostitute. Finally, when her temper cools, she patches up saying that his constant love would recompense all her losses. Beauplaisir understands that this sentimentally excited moment is a good opportunity to bring out her secret identity, and after many shows and promises of his affection, asks her who she is and why she has taken this strange way to reach him. She confesses that it was her curiosity about how mistresses are treated that led her to this ruse, but keeps her real name and whereabouts away so that he may not boast at her expense, and only tells him that she has come from the country to buy some clothes, and her name is Fantomina. He believes the story and feels pity that fate would consign her to the role of prostitute in the end, but says nothing. They promise to meet again next afternoon. When he is gone, she calls up the woman of this rented house and bribes her on condition she gives Beauplaisir the information and impression Fantomina desires, and the woman agrees.

Returning to her real home in the morning, she lies to her aunt about her night stay. She says she had accompanied a lord and lady on a boat journey to a distant place, and the boatman falling sick suddenly, they were held up for the night. Thus she protects her public reputation using her pluck and intelligence, and cares nothing for her lost virtue, being enchanted by romantic dreams enkindled by the relationship. If he is an ardent and faithful lover, she should be transported to a sensual heaven, if he is inconstant like other men, she would at least save her public face – thus she reasoned to herself. She takes pride in her own tricky conduct of the affair, and in the maintenance of her double identity which she continues assiduously. She appears in both incarnations, swiftly alternating, before him, and even excites his desire by provoking subconscious comparisons between the two. Her ecstatic flight between the two selves gives an eerie, phantom-like quality to her character, suggesting the name Fantomina.

With time Beauplaisir’s desire for her begins to wane, and she feels he is tired of her conversations and embraces, but unlike other women who would lament and plead, she decides to take leave with a normal show of pain at separation. Wisely she understands the impatience of the man with the whining woman he no more desires, and conceals her tears at rejection under a plan to follow him under a newer disguise. When he decides to go to Bath without her, she knows he is looking for new company, and takes the challenge of beguiling the inconstant man. She reaches before him at the lodging he is to stay in at Bath, having transformed herself into a country girl complete with provocative costume, blackened hair and a rustic accent, and takes up the job of attending maid for gentlemen. She is driven now by an injured love out to avenge itself, out to break all taboos and inhibitions to get her man back. Situations help her and she always gets what she needs. There is no other gentleman than Beauplaisir at the moment at the lodgings, except an old rheumatic man, making her free of the hazard of having to attend others. Her ploys of provocation work wondrously – he, guided by the common man’s notion that chambermaids have easy virtues, grabs her at first sight and satisfies his renewed lust. Her disguise and words are so perfectly altered that he fails to recognize his Fantomina, and offers her gold for the body she has allowed to enjoy. Under the name of the maid Celia, she must take the gold now with a silly surprise, and a promise to attend him for the night. Over the pain of seeing her beloved man philandering with a cheap maid, she has the mental and physical gratification of regaining his flaming lustful submission, and that animates her revengeful egotism. In a month his stay at Bath comes to end, and he loses his urge for Celia. She perceives this coldness again and withdraws discreetly, awaiting his day of return to London, and preparing her third disguise.

This time she dresses as a widow in fresh mourning, straightens her hair, and goes before Beauplaisir to an inn on the road to London, and waits for him to come by. She has planned to engage him in yet another snare, to play upon his lust in the guise of an unprotected respectable woman of virtue. When he arrives, she pleads him to take her on his coach to London, making up a story that after her recent widowhood in Bristol she is forced to travel to London in a hurry to get hold of her husband’s legacy, now in possession of a brother-in-law who is about to leave for Holland. She desires to hold up the image of a sorrowful, virtuous widow in distress, and examine what path his lust takes, obstructed by the compulsions of courtesy. Beauplaisir professes his heartiest sympathies for the distressed and picks her up, and begins using all his tender art of conversation to bring her out of the mourning mood, suggesting that it would spoil her beauty and health. She enjoys his insinuations, plainly seeing the motive behind, and to prolong her pleasure at being courted with such difficulty she puts off all his advances with tears devoted to her perfect deceased husband. Getting impatient and forced by her fortress of virtue, he broaches finally the subject of love, and discovers that she is much given to speaking ecstatically on the happiness and spiritual bliss that passion gives when mutual dedication exists. While she says these intending to morally satirize Beauplaisir, he derives that behind the widow’s veil the fires of sexual love are burning still. When they rest for the night at an inn, he makes gradual physical advances under pretext of wiping her sorrow, and she makes cautious allowances in keeping with her pretended virtue. When he finally embraces her, she, divided between ostentatious chastity and inward desire, saves both by pretending to faint, and falls on his chest and lingers there while he lays her to bed. They return to London in mutual harmony, and gloating over their private victories, and on arrival Mrs. Bloomer (she takes this name) parts with promises and arrangements of meeting and writing to him.

Arriving at a mature phase in her stratagem and having seen the deceitful heart of man, she now writes two letters to him – one as the widow asking him to meet her, and one as Fantomina complaining of his neglect – and sending them both, makes lodging arrangements in both capacities. She receives quick answers - he would meet the widow Bloomer at five in the evening, and he had forgotten the name of the woman to whom Fantomina’s letters were to be directed and therefore the unfortunate delay. The replies infuriate her with their falsehood, but she consoles herself by thinking that she has been the real deceiver, a victor over the male kind, and as yet safe and sensually gratified. Receiving him the next day as Bloomer, she finds in him the same passionate lover, but as Fantomina a cold, weary lip-server. There being no substantial difference in the two women, he comes to ardently love only the widow, just because she is his last conquest. Even then, being more generous and good-natured than many men, he continues his visits to Fantomina to value her love. Then the widow Bloomer falls from favor in her turn, and bears it as on earlier occasions. She has another, more elaborate test in mind for him, for which she now begins to arrange. This plan needs to involve other persons and yet maintain secrecy of identity, so it has to be more cautiously built. She goes out to a park where she knows she will find men suitable to her purpose – men that look about for money and may be used for little services. She selects two such men and, sympathizing first with their ill-fate (poverty), offers them money for a job she will reveal if they agree to complete secrecy. When the men agree to do anything she orders, she employs them as servants for a great aristocratic lady she would impersonate, and goes on to hire a palace fit for such a lady. Then she writes a letter to Beauplaisir praising his masculine charms, posing as a woman of quality who has been his admirer for long and who now invites him to a secret meeting on condition that he will not know her name and see her face. She also expresses her longing for him rather temptingly, and assures him that though he will not see the face, the rest of her body shall not fail to satisfy him, and has been the dream of the greatest men in the kingdom. She signs the letter as Incognita, and sends one of the men to deliver it, with strict orders that he must not divulge anything in reply to questions Beauplaisir would ask. Upon receiving it, Beauplaisir dies with curiosity to know who she is, but fails and writes a reply accepting the terms and the invitation. His male pride is so bloated by this mysterious lady’s sexual submission that he feels it certain that once they meet, his male force shall pry open her name and face.

When she reads the reply and hears of his frantic queries, she laughs at the success of her strategy and congratulates herself about her genius and resolution. She has used the weaknesses of her sex to her strength, and made her man’s inconstancy the means to rejuvenate the passionate nature of love. She realizes that constancy to Fantomina, or Celia, or Bloomer would have been insipid and against the nature of male sexual desire which ever seeks new objects. She is also proud that she has led her man by the noose, always letting him think he is conquering new women and thus puffing his ego, while it is always the same woman he has had to return. Intoxicated with her ingenuity, she prepares to receive him in the manner of an aristocratic lady. She treats him to a great dinner, and gives herself to him without the coyness of previous identities, because she had been the first to desire now. As he is charmed by her perfect body and grows wild to see her face, she however tells him sternly that asking for the forbidden would end their love forever. He fails to convince her in opening up, and finally urges to stay for the night in her embraces with the sly intention of discovering her face in the morning light. She feels his intention, but allows him out of her thirst for the night’s pleasures. He is shown to bed, and she comes to him but in complete darkness, so that the face is unseen. He is disappointed and waits for daylight, but when it comes the bedchamber is darkened because she has made her servants cover up all windows so that not a chink of sunlight may enter. On his waking, she jumps from bed and rushes to another room before he can catch her. The servants come in to dress and serve him breakfast, the mistress is vanished. Angry with his failure, he tells the lady he will come no more, accuses her of putting so little trust on him, but nothing move her from her iron resolve. He goes out vowing never to return, and she lets him go hoping he would rethink. She keeps her rented palace for a fortnight, and writes to him as Fantomina and Bloomer, but finds from his visits to them that he has grown cold to both.

She has begun to think how she may drop her earlier identities when her mother arrives from a foreign tour. The old lady hears of her daughter’s carefree conduct in her absence, and displeased with them decides to return to their country home. Before they depart, Fantomina discovers that she has fallen pregnant, and tries hard to conceal her growing belly and thinks of ways to dispose of it somewhere in secret. But the mother takes her to a Ball at Court before leaving London, and there she is seized with a convulsive fit symptomatic of pregnancy. The alarmed mother takes her home and calls a doctor in, who confirms the pregnancy. The mother is now shocked and indignant – she demands of her daughter the name of the culprit. After long efforts at silence, she is forced to reveal the name of Beauplaisir. The old lady summons him, but when he is told of his being the father he is astounded. He vehemently declares that he knew the daughter and had spoken to her in public occasions, but had no other design on her. The pregnant daughter in the meantime delivers a baby girl, and when Beauplaisir is brought to her bedside she cries out in shame. But the mother compels her to identify Beauplaisir as the child’s father, and she, in the throes of bodily pain and mental anguish, does so. The man is outraged, and the mother presses on to know how, and Fantomina relates the whole story which leaves both the mother and the man confounded. The mother then begs pardon of him, and expects but does not demand that he marry her, which he however does not pronounce. He offers to take care of the baby if they so desire, and pays visits to them afterwards, until the mother stops him, fearing a revival of their love. As soon as her daughter is in condition to move, she sends her off to a monastery in France, to live the rest of her life in penance.