

Conclusion.

The objective of this work was to concentrate on eighteenth century female authors. Simultaneously popular and severely criticised during their time, the playwrights, short fiction writers and novelists succeeded in the establishing of the tradition of women's writing and established the foundations for the following generations. Nevertheless, they have usually been omitted from the canon. Only in the recent decades, with the increasing interest in the literary margins and gaps, have they been 'resurrected' and, to some extent, done justice to.

This paper in particular focuses on the talented playwright Hannah Cowley, the prolific and versatile, mostly prose-writer and journalist Eliza Haywood and the renowned critic and a novelist Elisabeth Inchbald and their works. All the three women authors can be said to be innovative and original. They overcame the obstacles of social prejudice and left a rich textual legacy to their adherents.

In particular, the paper attempted to analyse the masquerade scenes in Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem*, Haywood's *Masqueraders, or the Fateful Curiosity* and Inchbald's *Simple Story* to attest to the importance of the masquerade and to register its varied textual reflections. The masquerade as a social practice and a cultural event was highly fashionable in the eighteenth century. It appears that, in a way, the vogue was in fact a reaction to the 'Age of Reason' and the overall industrial and economic progress. The masked assemblies offered their attendants the possibility of the reversal of the usual order in a similar way the medieval and Renaissance cathartic carnival rituals did. Nevertheless, the eighteenth century masquerade balls were a mixture of diverse elements; they combined the traditionally English customs as well as the aspects of the continental carnival. As such, they were often criticised

for its foreign nature and seen as a threat to the nationalistic discourse. Not only that, as the nightly gathering enabled the crossing of the borders between classes and even gender, they were seen as destabilising and harmful. The connotations of sexual licence and danger, as well as of freedom and pleasure were often reflected in the newspapers but also in the fiction of the era.

For the female visitors, in particular, the disguise and the universal confusion represented the possibility of self-assertion and liberty normally impossible due to the influences of the patriarchal code of manners. The masquerade ball represented a space where the reversal of usual roles was feasible and where the women, paradoxically, could experience certain liberating and unveiling impulses, when wearing a mask.

In the literary works, the masquerade scenes with their connotations of protean identity, general bewilderment and pretence served as the emblematic summary of the most important themes. As far as the structure of the works is concerned, the masked assembly passages facilitated the meeting of all the characters in one place and at a specific time. The masquerade can be said to frequently function as the centre of the narrative or drama. Its atmosphere influences the overall style of the writing; it is the catalyst of action and an important means of characterisation due to its revelatory purpose. Furthermore, it frequently affects the final solution of the whole work.

Apart from that, the subversive nature of the nightly occasion resonates with the texts' questioning and re-writing with a difference of the dominant male discourse. The theories of Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler were applied in the interpretation of the works. The masquerade topic reinforced the expression of the ideas of mimicry and performative acts.

The social masquerade, the female masks and the masquerade ball were seen as interconnected and as parts of one discourse.