The uniquely 18th century phenomenon of the masquerade was not only one filled with secrecy and fantasy but also an environment where one can transform into anything imaginable. One prolific author of this time period, Eliza Haywood, capitalized on this spectacle in her early works as a way for her female protagonists to remove the fetters of traditional femininity to pursue their personal sexual desires. By taking advantage of the secretive elements of the masquerade, these heroines activate a previously hidden sexual license by harnessing the power of the gaze, a privilege typically held by men.

In this essay, I examine two of Haywood’s works that center on the masquerade and disguises: *The Masqueraders* and *Fantomina*, both published in 1724. Within both of these novellas, Haywood constructs how gender is actually performed quite literally at the masquerade and how that performance translates into these heroines’ attempts to achieve their sexual conquests. Despite the successes of these characters in their amorous pursuits, the novellas end quite tragically, and the heroines return to a diminished state and lose the power they previously gained with their disguises. Though some critics read these disastrous conclusions as a moral lesson to women who seek sexual liberation, a more nuanced understanding will reveal that Haywood ends her narratives on a sour note to demonstrate how the patriarchal structures still exist outside of the masquerade and will relentlessly and unfairly punish these women for their supposed transgressions. As a whole, these masquerade novels assert a feminist claim that women can and are able to boldly chase their passions when they unshackle themselves from the trope of the demure woman and don a mask.