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# Genius and the Construction of “the inferior female creator”: The Case of Eliza Haywood

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**Abstract**
This article is based on the idea that the Romantic ideology of genius brought with it a gendered antagonist category: that of the commercially driven “inferior female creator.” This image, a kind of archetypal figure filled with the life-stories of individual women writers, conveniently collapsed the early Romantic, status-quo threatening forces of literary commercialism and feminization into one. The phenomenon is studied specifically with reference to the 18th century English author Eliza Haywood. By analyzing attacks on Haywood and other important female writers during her lifetime, as well as the predominantly negative image of the author created in George Frisbee Whicher’s early 20th century biography *The Life and Romances of Mrs. Eliza Haywood*, it will be shown that the writer seems to have acted as a key representative of a derogatory category which lofty, predominantly male “geniuses” could define themselves against.

**Keywords**: genius; gender; Eliza Haywood; inferior female creator; G.F. Whicher, *The Life and Romances of Mrs. Eliza Haywood*

## 1.) Introduction

The present article argues that the Romantic ideology of genius arose during a time in 18th century England when – due to an unprecedented entrance of successful women writers – the male dominance within the literary domain came under considerable strain. Added to this, this time also saw the emergence of literary commercialism, a tendency the strong appearance of female writers became closely associated with.

It will be claimed that – just like pre-Romantic ideas typically conceived of genius as a male spirit/figure accompanied by a female counter-part – the Romantic notion of genius also subtly configured a division where the role of the lofty genius creator was reserved for males and unthreatening token females. Most women related to the art world, on the other hand, were channeled into subordinate roles such as the muse, the helpmate or – most relevantly for the present discussion – the “inferior, female creator.”

This claim will be analyzed with specific reference to the prolific and successful English writer Eliza Haywood (1693–1756). It will be argued that Haywood – just like Shakespeare for the genius figure (Bate, 1999) - seems to have acted as a key representative for the image of the “inferior female creator”, a stigma that accompanied the writer into the 20th century, until her recent recovery by feminist critics as a “key player in the history of the British novel, and a leading figure in a brilliant and competitive London literary scene” (Saxton, 2000, pos. 40).

In order to corroborate these claims, I will provide a succinct discussion of reactions to Haywood and associated female writers during her life-time, and – to show the lasting influence

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of the figure of the "inferior female creator" – an analysis of the derogatory portrayal of Haywood in George Frisbee Whicher's early 20th century biography *The Life and Romances of Mrs. Eliza Haywood.*

The present article is indebted to works such as Battersby's *Gender and Genius – Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (1989) and Clarke's *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters* (2004), with her claim (to present a generalized interpretation of a complex argument) that in the world of 18th century literature positioning oneself as a woman over-all conforming with traditional gender roles was essential to literary survival. Also, it relies on other crucial texts such as by Prescott's *Women, Authorship and Literary Culture, 1690-1740* (2003) and Siskin's *The Work of Writing – Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700-1830* (1998), among many others that will be referred to during the course of this study. Nevertheless, I believe that the present discussion of Haywood's reception with specific reference to the emergent genius ideology and the subsequent analysis of the author's portrayal in Whicher's biography may act as original contributions to the field.

The article will start off with a brief outline of key concepts such as the history of genius and the concept's inherent gendering. Subsequently, it will glance at Haywood's life-time and show how several texts by her contemporaries actively tried to create a narrow space for superior male and acceptable female genius writers by defining themselves against "inferior" writers such as Eliza Haywood. It will then turn towards an analysis of Whicher's biography and illustrate how even in the early 20th century Haywood is still evoked as a representative of the "inferior female creator." Finally, the conclusion will present a brief summary of the matters discussed as well as pointing to the relevance of these issues to our contemporary, literary world.

## 2.) Glancing at the basics

### The history of genius

For the present analysis, we will chiefly rely on the definition of genius as "an exceptionally intelligent or able person" (Pearsall 2003). The history of the concept is a long and complex one. The ideology of genius can be seen as a combination of certain – often mysterious - beliefs (such as innate talent and mysterious inspiration) and a genius figure with its own separate development. As to the former, a notion of innate artistic capacity was already present in ancient Greece (Murray 1999: 11) and in the Latin concept of "ingenium". With regard to the genius "figure", it takes its origin in ancient Rome, where genius originally acts as a spirit of masculine procreativity (Nitzsche 1975: 20). The concept of genius also becomes merged with Greek ideas of daimons, related Christian divisions of angels and demons and appears as an allegorical figure in several works of medieval literature (see, for instance, Zilsel 1972).

The Romantic concept of genius which has been so influential to our day (Battersby 1989: 16) started being formally established in 18th century England, in significant texts such as Joseph Addison's essay "Genius" (1711) published in the London magazine *The Spectator* and Edward Young's treatise "Conjectures on Original Composition" (1759). Some of the most influential writing on genius then occurs in Germany, with Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (1790) being considered one of the most formative influences on the genius ideology (Nahm 1965: 128-9). The Romantic, artist-centered cult of genius then extended its influence (although altering its specific form in ways that cannot be discussed within the limited scope of this paper) over Victorian and, later, Modernist conceptions of artists (Ayers 2004: 52-3). It may be added that

alongside the cult of the creator, there was also a sense of “chosen” art public who, distinguished from the masses (Shiner 2001: 94), could discern the sublime messages of a true work of genius

**Genius and gender.**

Interestingly, the idea of genius - especially in its more embodied version - has often been accompanied by a female counter-part. Although it evidently much predates the Romantic concept of genius, the image of the muse as a female, inspirational figure – already invoked by Homer – has, for instance, long acted as a spiritualized “collaborator” of (typically male) creators (Murray 2006). The Roman spirit of genius had its direct female counter-part in the figure of Juno, a spirit of female procreativity (Nitzsche 1975: 11). In medieval literature, Genius is often in contact with the female figure of Nature (see, for instance, Battersby 1989: 62). From early Romanticism onwards, it seems that the concept remains normatively male (ibid and Korsmeyer 2004, 2008) and that the female counter-parts turn more implicit. According to Battersby, the female aspect actually becomes absorbed into the image of the male genius, as great artists start talking about their artistic pregnancy and labor (ibid: 73). Also, the “male” genius is often accompanied by a female helpmate (Chibici-Revneanu 2013).

However, I would like to introduce another implicit, gendered counter-part to genius, namely that of the typically commercial “inferior female creator” – an antagonistic figure that is seen as standing against core genius values such as independence from the market and “high literary quality”.

In order to understand the emergence of the latter, it has to be clarified that the early 18th century was marked by crucial cultural changes such as rapid urbanization and the replacement of family businesses by factories (Battersby 1989: 72). Among the aspects most relevant for our present analysis, there was also a growing commercialization in the arts (Shiner 2001: 199), a related interest in constructing artistic hierarchies, and a division of commercial vs. pure artists (Bourdieu 1992/1996: 166).

Secondly, there was also a notable entrance of women on the English literary scene, especially as readers and writers of a new genre: the novel. Both aspects are mentioned in Ian Watt’s classic *The Rise of the Novel – Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. However, whereas Watt provides a detailed discussion of a new, female reading class, he only mentions the original predominance of female novelists in passing. In fact, the theorist arguably falls prey to the category of the “inferior female creator” when he states that “the majority of eighteenth-century novels were actually written by women, but this had long remained a purely quantitative [sic] assertion of dominance” (1957: 298). That Watt was wrong about his collective dismissal of these women’s works “quality” is clearly illustrated by Dale Spender in her significant *Mothers of the Novel - 100 Good Women Writers Before Jane Austen* (1986). Among the most crucial writers of the 17th and 18th century, we find precisely Eliza Haywood, alongside with Aphra Behn (1640-1689) and Delarivier Manley (1663–1724) also known as “the fair triumvirate of wits” (Spender, 1986)

One may add that this numerous emergence of women on the literary scene was enabled both by the fact that education became more widely available for women at the time (Stevenson 1993: 48) and that the novel itself was – as a genre independent of the classics and initially looked down upon – more accessible to female authors and readers (Clark, 2000: pos. 190-194).

Now, it seems that both the increased commercialization and feminization of the literary field were experienced as threatening to the male status quo (Harzewski 2006: pos. 636-639). As a

result, and as previously mentioned, there was an emergent need to separate the "high" from the "low", the "pure" from the "commercial" and, often in close association, the "masculine" from the "feminine". The idea of genius – albeit also related to other cultural phenomenon such as the impending industrialization - therefore helped to codify two distinct ways of writing. Despite allowing for gender exceptions in both categories, it collaborated in the cognitive distinction between normative, non-market driven, aesthetically superior masculine creations and market-driven, inferior feminine productions. As will be shown in the subsequent section, Eliza Haywood and her successful contemporaries seem to have added to the wrath against this strong female presence, as well as become representative figures of the emergent category of the commercially driven "inferior female creator." Drawing heavily from the abject as outlined by Kristeva in her work The *Powers of Horror* (1982) - especially images of garbage - the members of this category have thus been (ab)used as a negative reference for superior geniuses to define themselves against.

### 3.) Pushing women out

In order to understand the often gendered battles over literary status that took place over the 18th century and Eliza Haywood's and other female contemporaries' conceptual involvement in them, it is important to provide a brief overview of Haywood's importance within the London literary scene.

In her previously mentioned work *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters*, Clarke argues that Haywood actually dominated the latter for "almost four decades after *Love in Excess* (1719)" (2004: pos. 192) – the author's first and extremely successful novel. In fact, Haywood was so closely associated with the emerging genre that Henry Fielding famously referred to her as "Mrs. Novel" in one of his plays (id). Moreover, Haywood published her complete *Works* in 1724, a fact which has been interpreted as a sign not only of the author's popularity, but also her "canonical appeal" (Prescott 2003: 72-3). Nevertheless, in keeping with Clarke's argument that a women had to carefully place herself to conserve her literary fame, Haywood was also highly controversial, arguably because of her often very explicit engagement with female sexual desire (King 2012: 1801).

Both Prescott and Siskin in their respective texts *Women, Authorship and Literary Culture, 1690-1740* and *The Work of Writing – Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700-1830,* present interesting analyses of how the presence of significant women writers such as Haywood, as well as Behn and Manley, led to rhetorical attempts to redefine male loftiness and push some non-acceptable women (back) out.

As to the former, Prescott - for instance – highlights the derogatory language in the introduction to Penelope Aubin's work which is often believed to have been authored by Richardson as a way of preparing for his novel *Pamela* (2003: 86). In this writing – and in harmony with the notion of a necessary adherence to traditional female roles – Aubin is praised for her "Purity of Style and Manner", as opposed to others (a probable allusion to Behn, Manley and Haywood) who are "like fallen Angels" and have brought "Disreputation on the very Name" of the novel (quoted in ibid: 83). Here, although the text does not allude directly to the notion of "genius", it clearly helps to establish the concept of potentially dangerous inferior female writers.

As to Siskin, he presents William Godwin's "Of History and Romance" as another attempt to rhetorically diminish women's influence within the literary scene (1998: 170-1). Indeed, in this text, Godwin not only decries the vast amount of "scum and surcharge" written for "women and boys", he also asks for "the development of great genius, or the exhibition of bold and masculine

[sic] virtues" (Godwin 1797). Here, we already find a more explicit example of masculinized genius and an assignment of women into an inferior, abject ("scum") literary category.

However, the connection between genius and an anxiety around female, commercial authorship might still be strengthened further. One may, for instance, draw attention to the fact that two of the most influential voices in the history of genius – Addison and Young – were Haywood's contemporaries, sharing the same London literary scene. In fact, Addison's important article "Genius" was published in the *The Spectator,* a magazine edited by the author himself and later presented in a female version by Eliza Haywood. Young, on the other hand, not only dedicates his text on genius to Samuel Richardson, the novelist who was clearly Haywood's rival at the time (his *Pamela* was not published until 1740); Richardson is also mentioned as the one who urged him to write the text and corrected it for publication (1759: footnote 338).

When briefly analyzing both of these writings, one notices that – while neither is explicitly sexist - they both display an agenda of defining genius as a lofty, predominantly male category. Indeed, from the beginning both texts show a clear concern with "too much access" to publication and literary fame. Addison, for instance, complains that "There is no character more frequently given to a writer than that of being a genius" (Addison, 1711). He then establishes different categories of "true" geniuses, the examples for which - Shakespeare, Homer, Pindar etc. - are, without exception, male (id). As to Young, he again argues for narrowing down access to print ("Some are of the opinion that its growth is overcharged" [1759: 338]) and claims that those of "inferior quality" should withdraw. For, the quote continues:

> Overcharged, I think, it could never be, if none were admitted but such as brought their imprimatur from sound understanding and the public good. Wit, indeed, however brilliant, should not be permitted to gaze self-enamored on its useless charms, in that fountain of fame (if so I may call the press), if beauty is all that it has to boast (id.)

What is noteworthy here, is that he chiefly disparages those of "wit" and "beauty" and "charms", arguably a gendered allusion to Haywood, Manley and Behn, the "fair triumvirate of wits [sic]". Finally, all the examples of true geniuses Young mentions (e.g. Homer, Ovid, Seneca and Shakespeare) are – once again – male. Even though both texts are, of course, richer and more multilayered than can be presented here, they nonetheless illustrate a connection between the ideology of genius as an attempt to re-define (masculine) literary superiority and – through their subtle gendering - to push "unsuitable" women into a category of undesirable inferiority.

Turning to battles over literary access and supremacy more explicitly directed at Eliza Haywood, it is crucial to mention that the author received an impressive number of attacks during her life-time. The most famous and influential case of Haywood's abuse is contained in Alexander Pope's work *The Dunciad.* Here, the writer is presented as a ludicrous figure awarded as the second prize for a pissing contest. She is depicted as: "yon Juno of majestic size/With cow-like udders, and with ox-like eyes" (Pope 1903: II.155-6).

Two observations may be highlighted with regard to this. Firstly, Prescott again believes that literary competition may have been at the heart of Pope's attack, as the latter had his *Works* published only a few years before Haywood (2003: 73). Secondly, it is important for our present context to note how Pope disparages Haywood in subtle genius terms. For beyond other derogatory attempts to emphasize Haywood's femininity (e.g. "cow-like udders"), Pope calls the author "Juno". This is not only the name of an antagonistic figure in Virgil's *Aneid,* but, as previously discussed, also the Roman counter-image to genius. Pope's influential dismissal of Haywood thus seems to further contribute to the establishment of the male category of genius

and a counter-category of antagonistic women, for whom Haywood acts as a kind of paradigmatic example.

### 3.) The construction of Haywood's inferiority in Whicher's *The Life and Romances of Mrs. Eliza Haywood*

In this section, I would like to undertake a historical leap and turn towards the beginning of the twentieth century, the period of literary modernism which has been mentioned as one that still strongly invests in the idea of artistic genius. More specifically, I will illustrate how in Haywood's biography *The Life and Romances of Mrs. Eliza Haywood* by George Frisbee's Whicher (1915) she is lastingly presented as an "inferior female creator" as opposed to more lofty male geniuses and socially more acceptable female writers. It is furthermore hypothesized that this renewed rhetoric against Haywood may have been related to a cultural reaction against another powerful emergence of women, now due to the first wave of feminism (Dekoven 2011: 212). Also, she seems to have continued to provide an antagonistic image for other writers to define themselves against. Interestingly, Virginia Woolf may act as an example of those who harshly criticized Haywood and even fervently dismissed Whicher's biography on the basis of the 18th century author's insignificance [Alt 2010: 169]). This, in turn, might be interpreted as an attempt to establish her own identity against that of the "inferior female creator" Haywood has so often represented.

Whicher's *The Life and Romances of Mrs. Eliza Haywood*, then, was "long the standard source on Haywood" (Saxton 2000: 92). The biography has significantly aided with the conservation of some information about the novelist's life and work. However, it also propagated many inaccurate facts (influencing, for instance, Virginia Woolf's knowledge and opinion of Haywood, ibid: 92-93) - and, as will be shown, chiefly presents Haywood in the role of the "inferior female creator." This is mainly achieved by unfavorably comparing her to other, more canonical and acceptable writers; criticizing her work through a number of "backhanded" compliments; and constructing her as an inferior writer for inferior readers.

From the beginning Whicher establishes Haywood as a kind of anti-genius, stating that: "Mrs. Haywood's one resemblance to Shakespeare is the obscurity that covers the events of her life" (ibid: 2). This trend of comparing her negatively to other writers – chiefly great men accepted into the literary canon – can then be traced throughout the biography. Even though Whicher does not condone Pope's attack he, for instance, still claims that "Pope could make a portrait specific by the vigorous use of epigrams, but Mrs. Haywood's comments on her heroes and heroines are but feeble" (ibid: 40). Similarly, with regard to Defoe, Whicher – arguably humble about his own achievement as well as adamant about the insignificance of Haywood's – emphasizes that his biography is no more than a "footnote" to Trent's *Life and Times of Daniel Defoe* (ibid: ix). Interestingly, Whicher – following the trend previously mentioned – also highlights Haywood's lack of significance in comparison to other, more acceptable female writers such as Fanny Burney and Jane Austen (ibid: 26). Hence, we may already observe a subtle tendency to elevate traditional masculine geniuses, allow for the existence of outstanding (acceptable) women writers and push Haywood into the category of the inferior female writer, once more.

As to criticism of Haywood's work and literary ability, this abounds throughout the biography. In fact, one detects a consistent pattern either of unabashed criticism or of slight praise coupled with an immediate reminders of the limits of the author's achievement. Whicher – for instance – directly diminishes Haywood's literary abilities when he complains that her tragedy "Frederick, Duke of Brunswick-Lunenburgh" "contains almost nothing in its five acts but rant"

(ibid: 8), and that "To reveal character in action was beyond the limit of Eliza Haywood's technique" (ibid: 53). Haywood is presented to posterity as a writer who could, in fact, barely write.

As to examples of the biography's many backhanded compliments, Whicher quotes Morillot to remind us that "In literature […] even if quality is wanting, quantity has some significance" (Morillot in ibid: 26), clearly expressing that Haywood's importance lies in the sheer number yet not in the aesthetic value of her writings. This, of course, reminds one of the rhetoric deployed by Ian Watt, dismissing women writers in comparable terms of (excessive) quantity and lacking quality.

In a similar vein, Whicher states that:

> Wretched as her works seems in comparison to the modern novel, it was for the time being the nearest approach to idealistic fiction and to the analysis of human feelings […] when freed from the impurities of intrigue and from the taint of scandal, the novel of heart interest became the dominant type of English fiction. (ibid: 90)

Here, again, we find a recurrent language of lack, describing Haywood's work as abject ("wretched", "unworthy" and "impure"), the kind of literary "garbage" great authors can define themselves against. Again, then, Haywood is pushed into the category of the "inferior female creator", who can create quantity, but not quality in fiction.

In addition, one also detects a dismissal of Haywood due to the commercial orientation of her work. Whicher implies that the author's need for money acts as another sign of her "non-genius" nature. For in contrast to the genius figure's traditional disregard for all questions of financial success, Whicher draws attention to Haywood's tendency to dedicate her novel to important figures of her time: "Usually the needy novelist's dedications were made up of servile adulation and barefaced begging" (ibid:14). Again – especially through Whicher's use of adjectives ("needy", "servile", "barefaced") and alliterations ("barefaced begging") - one discovers quite how much effort he occasionally puts into disparaging her personality and presenting Haywood in the role of the "inferior female creator."

Finally – in a trend that has also been analyzed by Blouch in her article "'What Anne Lang Read' – Eliza Haywood and Her Readers"- it is interesting to observe how Whicher's gendered attacks do not end here. For, ultimately Haywood is also described as an inferior (female) writer for inferior (female) readers. An interesting case in point is his claim that "Doubtless Mrs. Haywood's wares were known to the more frothy minds of the polite world and to the daughters of middle-class trading families" (1915: 13). This statement reveals the idea that author's supposed readership was unintelligent ("frothy minds") and female ("daughters"). A similar pattern of discrimination against Haywood's presumed readers (sexists as well as classist) can be discerned from Whicher's observation that many of her: "exercises in fiction were evidently composed *currente calamo,* with little thought and less revision, for an eager and undiscriminating public. Possibly […] they were read chiefly by milliners and other women on the verge of literacy" (ibid: 13). Hence, Haywood's "bad writing" ("with little thought and less revision") becomes correlated with culturally unrefined readers ("undiscriminating", "on the verge of literacy"). This, I believe, further strengthens the association of lack of literary quality, femininity and market success. In a text where – as a biography – one may have expected or at least hoped for some sustained praise for Haywood – the author is lastingly pushed into an inferior category that helps to elevate outstanding male and more acceptable female writers.

## 4.) Conclusion

In the course of this paper we have thus observed how the emergence of the Romantic concept of genius seems to have been a partial reaction to the growing commercialization of the literary field and the appearance of powerful women on the literary scene (as readers and as writers). It has been stated that a counter-category to the lofty and predominantly male concept of genius has been forged, namely that of the commercially driven "inferior female creator". Eliza Haywood has been discussed as an influential writer during her own time who appears to have acted as a contributing source to this battle for re-established male literary supremacy, as a well as a lastingly paradigmatic example for this "inferior" literary role.

One might conclude the present paper by observing that an analysis of battles around gender, literary quality and commercialism may go far beyond its immediate historical interest. It has been recently observed in a work on the highly successful, highly controversial and female-dominated genre of Chick-lit that – perhaps - we have not moved for far from the category of commercially driven "inferior female creators." In her work "Traditions and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners", Stephanie Harzewski (2006) draws a direct analogy between the dismissal of Haywood and her contemporaries and recurrent, contemporary attacks on Chick-lit. Once again called "froth", as well as "instantly forgettable" (Lessing and Ezard quoted in Harzweski, 2006, pos. 649), this genre predominantly written for and by women thus indeed appears to have "revived anxieties over the novel's commercial origins as well as the role of the female writer and reader" (ibid: pos. 667). Maybe it's time to address these anxieties and rethink our often "Romantically categorizing" approach to literature and (female) authorship.

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