Eliza Haywood’s Progress through the Passions

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1 Introduction

Eliza Haywood (1693?–1756) was a popular and prolific author of early eighteenth-century Britain. Noted by one of her earliest critics as ‘the Great Arbitress of Passion’¹ and some of her most recent as the ‘Fair Philosopher’,² she successfully synthesises both of these authorial personas throughout her oeuvre.³ This chapter argues that Haywood’s sustained and specific discussion of feeling in her fiction theorises emotions in narrative form; her novels effectively demonstrate how the intersection of philosophy and narrative provide authentic representations of private emotion in a public format. As a significant place to explore, plan, and test emotional theories of sentiment, sensibility, and sociability, the emergent novel may be one of the most dynamic modes of eighteenth-century print culture. Fiction can explore emotions from first-person accounts and comment on characters through third-person omniscience, so it is one of the few genres in which philosophy, personal experience, and critical analysis can occur simultaneously. By examining two of her texts, Reflections on the Various Effects of Love (1726) and Life’s Progress through the Passions; or the Adventures of Natura (1748), I show that, over this 22-year span, she explores a discourse for the passions – what I call an ethics of emotion – in a fictional narrative form.

The word ‘emotion’ is contested and, in discussions about feeling, a relatively new term.⁴ Earlier definitions of the word dealt with movement, especially relating to migration and political unrest, and while the term’s early connotations also referred to emotions as ‘an agitation of mind; an excited mental state’, an aspect of movement has always been an intrinsic part of the word’s meaning.⁵ For Haywood too, passions give movement to feelings. Haywood uses the words ‘emotion’, ‘passions’, and ‘feeling’, but not interchangeably. In Life's Progress, she argues that
all the various emotions which agitate the breast...which, tho' they bear the name in common with those other more natural dispositions of the mind, I look upon rather as consequential of the passions, and arising from them, than properly passions themselves’. Emotions are the ‘movements’ that passions give rise to – sometimes, they are the physical evidence of feeling: blushes, palpitations, tears, and bloody noses. At other times, they refer to feelings raised by the passions: fury, wrath, joy, or grief. The ‘passions’, in contrast, are inborn character traits, more in line with humoral understandings of emotion. Examples of ‘the Passions’ include sorrow, anger, and spleen, but also include avarice and pride (concepts that modern thinkers do not refer to as emotions). She does not provide an inclusive list of emotions or passions, and there is slippage between her terms from time to time. Despite this uncertainty in diction, there are clear rules for passionate living in Haywood’s texts, and the passions provide structure for an eighteenth-century notion of individuality.

Passionate motifs pervade Eliza Haywood’s early novellas – usually the passion of love and the dangerous consequences of hyper-emotionality – and dictate critical interpretation of her corpus. This repetition of emotionality, and the sustained analytical voice which comments on the episodes of her fictional stories, create a code of passionate living. Whereas ‘ethics’ often refers to a code of principles that govern a person’s behaviour, what is morally good or bad, right or wrong, Haywood creates a structure of passionate ethics, a scheme based on the principles of what is emotionally good or bad, right or wrong, which eventually leads to a sense of individualism for her characters. Rather than a systematic code of examples of the passions or a precise working theory of the passions, Haywood explains how to live authentically and passionately through a fictional paradigm. This ethics of emotions contains specific truths of emotional life, as outlined by Haywood throughout her fiction, which become increasingly specific and encompassing as her work matures. Haywood’s novels, then, create a community of feeling that draws upon the public philosophical discussions of emotions, but develops that discussion because her fiction is most interested in private understanding of how to negotiate passions and how those negotiations lead to individual identity.

2 Haywood and the passion conversation

The conversation about the passions was centuries old by the time it reached the eighteenth century, spanning the work of the ancients,