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Visions: Re-historicizing Genre: Teaching Haywood's *The Adventures of Eovaai* in a Fantasy-Themed Survey Course

Abstract

Eliza Haywood is an increasingly popular author to assign in eighteenth-century literature courses. But Haywood is also a prime figure to represent the eighteenth century in courses with a broader scope. This essay proposes teaching *The Adventures of Eovaai* in a fantasy-focused, introductory-level survey of British Literature. Identifying *Eovaai* as part of the fantasy tradition leverages students' prior knowledge and facilitates teaching this complex novel to first-year students. *Eovaai* provides a wealth of topics for class discussions and activities, including the development of the novel as a genre, identity and othering in fantasy literature, and the use of fantasy conventions like world-building and speculative technology. Moreover, considering Haywood as both representative of the eighteenth century and a pioneer of fantasy literature encourages students to broaden their conceptualizations of the early modern period, women writers, and generic conventions.

Keywords

Eliza Haywood, pedagogy, *Adventures of Eovaai*, Fantasy Literature, women writers, eighteenth-century

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This essay proposes including Eliza Haywood's *The Adventures of Eovaai* (1736) in an entry-level undergraduate course, specifically a course themed around fantasy literature. Haywood is an increasingly popular writer to teach, and the subject of many recent pedagogical conversations.¹ Most of these conversations focus on including one or more of Haywood's works in eighteenth-century focused courses: for example, Ros Ballaster's work on teaching Eovaai, which describes the novel's inclusion in a course on eighteenth-century fantasy. Building on Ballaster's work, this essay describes the approach of teaching Eovaai in a survey course devoted to fantasy literature.² Within a course with a broader scope, Eovaai has the potential to reshape students' conceptualization of both the eighteenth century and the genre of fantasy, providing a new historical understanding of the genre's popular motifs that properly centers early modern women writers.

The methods discussed here stem from teaching Eovaai in "Introduction to British Literature," a 100-level broad survey course at an R1 state school. Enrollees in the course are primarily first-year students, not English majors, and seek to fulfill a general humanities requirement. The department's broad learning objectives for the course—that students read texts from several major literary periods and genres, with an emphasis on developing an understanding of British literary history—are supplemented with my own goals, namely, that the course provides a narrative arc of (some) major works of fantasy, that students draw connections between genres and time periods, and that they demonstrate the ability to critically interrogate fantasy motifs and their popularity.

As I have taught it, Eovaai falls roughly in the middle of a broad historical survey, covering one to two texts from each major literary period. My course is themed around identity, exploring characters' attempts to live into particular roles or destinies: the knight in Marie de France's "Lanval" (c. 1155-70) and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (c. 1350); the ruler (king, princess) in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) and the titular heroine Eovaai; the hero in C.S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* (1955) and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937); and the witch/wizard in Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986) and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997). *Eovaai* is particularly productive as a pivot point in the semester. By supplying the course's first female protagonist, a middle figure in a line of female authors (medieval, early modern and twentieth-century), an archetypal villain character, and the inclusion of science fiction elements, the novel lends itself to conversations about gender and genre, described in more detail below, that are central to the course.

From the perspective of a feminist eighteenth-century scholar, *Eovaai* offers 100-level students a nuanced introduction to the period. Rather than focusing on male authors and the realist novel, I aim to illustrate for students the centrality of women writers, not only to the eighteenth century, but to the development of popular genres.³ *Eovaai* leverages the skills of fantasy-focused pedagogy, including student interest, discussing controversial issues, and troubling generic boundaries.⁴ Simultaneously, the novel represents a prime opportunity to engage students in fresh theoretical work, as recent scholarship on Haywood applies new generic lenses to her oeuvre.⁵ In what follows, I offer brief descriptions of the foundational elements of teaching *Eovaai* within this context, including framing the novel as part of the fantasy tradition, familiarizing students with a challenging text, and using the text to shape student conceptualizations of both the eighteenth century and the genre of fantasy.

Framing *Eovaai* as a fantasy novel

Given the topic of the course, students encounter *Eovaai* as a fantasy novel, rather than the political allegory it is frequently defined as. While much critical attention has been devoted to political aspects of the text, it can be pedagogically productive to foreground the novel's fantastical elements.⁶ This is not to say that the text's political implications are unimportant, but rather that students are better equipped to understand and appreciate those implications as an element of a fantastical tale, particularly in the context of a survey course. In a course designed to cover hundreds of years of British Literature—the kind that are increasingly demanded—it is impractical to offer students a complete overview of the novel's political context. Subsuming the political allegory to the fantasy plot has several advantages for this situation. Firstly, it leverages students' existing generic interest in fantasy, an enduringly popular genre, to drive engagement with a text that is, for most students, obscure and unfamiliar. Secondly, focusing on fantasy, as opposed to politics, makes it possible to include a text like *Eovaai* in a broad, introductory level course. Within that setting, there exists neither the time or scaffolding to offer students a comprehensive background of the specific historical, cultural, and political nuances *Eovaai* draws on. But students are quick to understand the notion of a fantast text that is deeply invested in a particular historical moment, and this concept facilitates teaching *Eovaai* in a course where it might otherwise be impractical.

At the beginning of the semester, the class develops their own definition(s) of fantasy.⁷ Each student finds and shares a resource attempting to define the genre, then, as a group, the class generates a list of descriptions, themes, and characteristics that they believe are common to fantasy texts. I then provide students with common lists of fantasy and science fiction terms so that they can develop a critical vocabulary for concepts they are already informally familiar with. Fantasy is typically understood as having a combination of seven motifs or textual features: “magic, otherworlds, universal themes, heroism, special character types, talking animals, and fantastic objects” (McGowen). Science fiction, a closely-related genre and one students frequently consider *Eovaai* to belong to, has among its commonly-identified themes “temporal settings in the future, or in alternative histories; spatial settings or scenes in outer space, on other worlds, in subterranean earth, or in parallel universes; aspects of biology in fiction such as aliens, mutants, and enhanced humans; predicted or speculative technology such as brain-computer interface, bio-engineering, super intelligent computers, robots, and ray guns and other advanced weapons; undiscovered scientific possibilities such as teleportation, time travel, and faster-than-light travel or communication; new and different political and social systems and situations, including Utopian, dystopian, post-apocalyptic, or post-scarcity; future history and evolution of humans on Earth or on other planets; and paranormal abilities such as mind control, telepathy, and telekinesis” (“Science Fiction”).

This vocabulary is incredibly helpful when reading *Eovaai*, which demonstrates a plethora of such motifs, which offer students language to analyze the frequently bizarre elements and events in the text—for example, the concepts of otherworlds and parallel universes work well to understand the novel’s setting of Ijaveo, a fictional kingdom in the pre-Edenic Far East. Similarly, productive discussions emerge from considering *Eovaai*’s telescope as a fantastic object or a piece of speculative technology. For those interested in teaching or researching the text through this lens, what follows is a non-exhaustive gloss of elements in *Eovaai* that correspond with recognized components of fantasy and science fiction texts: magic (throughout), otherworlds (Ijaveo and Hypotyfa), universal themes (feminism, liberty, personal development), heroism (Prince Adelhu saving *Eovaai*), special characters (spirits), talking animals (Atamadoul, the woman who turns into a monkey), fantastic objects (*Eovaai*’s jewel, the carriage, Ochihatou’s wand), alternative history (the “pre-Adamitical” setting), parallel universes (Ijaveo and Hypotyfa), enhanced humans (Ochihatou), speculative technology (*Eovaai*’s magic telescope), teleportation (*Eovaai*’s kidnapping), dystopia

(Ochihatou's reign of terror), and paranormal abilities (Ochihatou's powers of delusion and deception).

In addition to vocabulary, framing *Eovaai* as fantasy gives students a critical framework within which to analyze the novel despite not having read other eighteenth-century texts. As I do with all texts in the course, I ask students to analyze *Eovaai*/Haywood's contribution to fantasy literature. At that point in the semester, they have seen magic wands, spells, mysterious figures, quests for magical objects, and the like many times over. How do such motifs function similarly or differently in this text? Where is Haywood appropriating generic tropes, and where is she making innovative choices? How can we apply what we have observed while reading other texts to *Eovaai*? Questions like these take advantage of the mimetic, allusion-heavy nature of fantasy to encourage students to apply in-depth analysis and cross-textual comparisons to *Eovaai*.

One way I ask students to bring their accumulated knowledge of fantasy tropes to bear on *Eovaai* is analyzing the novel's world. A hallmark of fantasy texts is their orientation to the "real world;" that is, the relationship between the text's world and our own and how the text informs its readers of that relationship. In my course, students encounter a variety of such orientations: *Macbeth* incorporates magic into a historical real world, *The Hobbit* is set in an alternate world, and the Harry Potter series depicts parallel worlds. Students thus approach *Eovaai*'s formal complexity—including its setting, frame narrative, supposed translation, and multivocality—as yet another example of the work a fantasy author does to set up a system of magic and provide readers with crucial information about an alternate society. These features become easier to comprehend when analyzed alongside examples from other fantasy texts, as Haywood here again borrows from multiple traditions. Asking students to find similarities between *Eovaai*'s world-building and other texts has led to comparisons between *Eovaai*'s "pre-Adamitical" setting and the use of Scottish history in *Macbeth* and connections between *Eovaai*'s supposed translation and transmission with the oral storytelling culture from which "Lanval" stems. This discussion about how Haywood crafts *Eovaai*'s conceptual universe also provides an opportunity to educate students about eighteenth-century novelistic conventions, including anonymous authorship, prefaces by fictional editors, and claims of veracity.

After framing *Eovaai* as a fantasy novel, at least for the purposes of our course, I also offer students background information on the novel's complicated generic identity. Part of my introduction to *Eovaai* is introducing the novel as a concept, including briefly narrating the assumed centrality of realism to the rise of the

novel, which *Eovaai* challenges. I then explain that in addition to challenging realist norms, Haywood's fantasy draws on genres that prefigure novels, namely, romances and Oriental tales. Having read *Gawain*, students are familiar with medieval romance, and I offer a brief trajectory about how the genre transformed from the fifteenth-seventeenth centuries and influenced the development of the novel, highlighting Haywood's work translating continental romances. Similarly, when explaining the novel's orientalism, I offer students a brief background on eighteenth-century British sinology, *Eovaai*'s relationship to *The Arabian Nights*, and Haywood's interest in translation and mediation.⁸ In drawing on these wide influences—poetry and prose, drama and fiction, Western and Eastern cultural traditions—*Eovaii* evinces that fantasy is at its core referential, and the novel becomes central to students' ongoing work in the course to conceptualize generic norms.

Familiarizing *Eovaai* for students

Anyone who has read *Eovaai* will be aware that it is not among Haywood's most lucid or readable texts and might thus seem an illogical choice to teach at the introductory level. The novel is made challenging to comprehend—and thus to teach—by multiple authorial choices: the dense, multifaceted political allegory, a complicated narratological structure involving several ambiguous personas, its setting in a pre-Edenic time in the Far East, and its bizarre kind of magic, which blurs the line between fantasy and science fiction. Given this, I employ a variety of strategies when teaching the text that, combined with the foundational vocabulary described previously, help to familiarize students with what might seem to them a challenging text.

Before students begin reading *Eovaai* they are provided with a concise plot description highlighting major events of the text. While many literature teachers bemoan the influence of online summary sites like [SparkNotes](#), Kelly Gallagher models the practice of using learning objectives to guide one's use of plot summaries, rather than rejecting them outright.⁹ *Eovaai* has an incredibly dense plot; my objectives when teaching it include that students are able to read it relatively quickly, understand what is happening, and, perhaps most importantly, appreciate the moments of allusion, humor, or oddity—and providing a plot summary facilitates those objectives. Moreover, despite anxiety about students substituting summaries for reading assigned texts, I have found that the summary enables deeper engagement with the text, reflecting data that students use online

plot summaries chiefly to clarify points of confusion during or after reading.¹⁰ Providing a summary (I craft my own, loosely organized by *Eovaai*'s geographic movements) prevents anxiety about comprehension, limits the chance that students will consult inaccurate summaries online—particularly likely with an obscure text like *Eovaai*—and frees up class discussion to be focused on analysis.

I also use the physical book itself to guide students to think about fantasy, expectations, and visualization. Unlike most other texts on the syllabus, there is no film adaptation or plethora of fanart for *Eovaai*, but the readily accessible Broadview Press edition is an excellent pedagogical resource, particularly its paratextual inclusions. The cover bears an image of an Asian woman walking with an umbrella, and the text is prefaced with a copy of the original title page and a frontispiece from the 1741 edition of the text.¹¹ Before reading the text, students discuss these prefatory materials and the expectations they respectively raise—that is, our fantasies as readers about what fictional people and places look like. Critical points in this discussion are the way the modern cover centers *Eovaai*'s ethnicity, how the 1741 image resists this by depicting her in British dress, and the way the language of the original title page—particularly the claim that the novel's events “may happen again”—more strongly aligns the novel with other works of fantasy than either of the images.

These discussions re-engage our earlier discussions of genre, particularly in terms of the novel's orientalism. Students generally agree that the modern cover does not hint at the fantastical elements of the story, suggesting the publisher felt the heroine's ethnicity was more important to advertise than the plot. This leads to discussions about the mental images we all form while reading, including who we imagine as heroes, or villains. Students typically bring up the exotification of Asian women seen in a variety of fantasy texts and movies, as well as the way negative physical appearances (like Ochihatou's repulsiveness) reflect morality, and I bring up the popularity of manga and anime with Western audiences.¹² I also ask students to consider the implications and motivations of a white British woman choosing to set this narrative in the Far East, including the complexities of aligning a real geographic locales and ethnic identities with fictional worlds and characters.¹³

As mentioned above, pedagogically centering the fantastical aspects of *Eovaai* does not mean ignoring the political ones. Indeed, as noted by Earla Wilputte, it is inaccurate to divorce the novel's politics from its fantastical plot, with Haywood using “an unstable mixture of generic forms, and employ[ing] intrusive textual machinery to help represent the chaotic activity of the political, sexual, and

literary world she satirizes.”¹⁴ Within the context of a fantasy course, the novel’s political significance becomes easier for students to grasp. While introductory students are typically completely unfamiliar with Georgian political debates, they are entirely accustomed to authors who use fantastical plots and settings to comment on real, often political, people and events. Merely by being situated among such texts, *Eovaai* seems less baffling. While the complexity of the political situation Haywood is critiquing might be difficult for students to grasp, they are used to fantasy being used to process current events. I refer to examples both from the syllabus, like twentieth-century writers using epic battles between good and evil to allegorize their experiences of the World Wars, and from more recent texts they might be familiar with, like the allegorizing of police brutality against Black Americans in Tomi Adeyemi’s *The Children of Blood and Bone*. It then makes sense to students that just as these authors draw on real people and events, Haywood uses a persecuted princess to allegorize the danger of political fraud. This framing allows students not only to comprehend the basics of Haywood’s political critique, but also to link the novel with the current political moment in the United States involving alternative “facts,” conspiracy theories, and the spread of misinformation.

Representing the eighteenth century with *Eovaai*

Because I choose *Eovaai* as the sole eighteenth-century text, students, many of whom have never encountered texts from this period before, base their understanding of eighteenth-century literature on the novel. One reason for assigning *Eovaai* is that if one is limited to assigning one text from the period, Haywood is an ideal figure by which to represent eighteenth-century authorship. Her productivity, generic proliferation, and shifts to accommodate consumer tastes over a long career exemplify crucial aspects of both eighteenth-century print culture and women’s role within it. As described by Ballaster, teaching eighteenth-century fantasy texts is productive because it resists the oft-invoked narrative of “the rise of the novel and its attendant realism.”¹⁵ Of course, *Eovaai* is not the only work of fantasy from the period, but it is well-suited to represent it for a variety of reasons.

In addition to Haywood’s suitability as a representative author, *Eovaai* in particular is unique in bringing up a compendium of issues relevant to the period, including representative government, consent and sexuality, companionate marriage, judgment, education, racial otherness, travel, and the emergence of

science and technology. Though some of these topics surface in other fantasy texts from the period, like those by Samuel Johnson and Jonathan Swift, *Eovaai* addresses all these themes, and thus facilitates a greater variety of class discussions. While I am particularly interested in gender and sexuality, one could use the novel to teach virtually any aspect of the eighteenth century. Also, *Eovaai* is more obviously linked to earlier and later works of fantasy than its contemporaries. For example, the presence of magical wands, sorcerers, and enchanted modes of transportation establish connections to twentieth and twenty-first-century fantasy novels not present in Johnson or Swift's work, and unquestionably mark the novel as participating in an ongoing, mimetic tradition.

Defining fantasy with *Eovaai*

Within the context of a fantasy survey course, *Eovaai* becomes part of the corpus that defines fantasy for students, shaping how they delineate and understand genres. Understanding *Eovaai* as part of the fantasy tradition is productive in multiple ways. Firstly, *Eovaai* brings up critical issues that often go undiscussed in fantasy texts written by men, particularly questions of gender and sexuality. Alongside of the adventures, fantastic objects, and enchantments, which are typical of most fantasy texts, *Eovaai* raises issues of sexual purity, consent, and bodily autonomy. The importance of these themes in the novel provides an opportunity to offer students historical context about gender politics, sexuality, and early feminism that is critical not only as background for *Eovaai*, but as part of the broader goals of a humanities course. In addition, by virtue of being situated at the historical midpoint of the course, *Eovaai* shapes how students encounter issues of gender and sexuality in other texts. For example, students might trace the experiences of magical heroines across *Eovaai*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, and the Harry Potter series, or interrogate why issues of gender and sexuality are not major themes—or at least not often identified as such—in many canonical fantasy texts, like those by Lewis and Tolkien.

Secondly, and perhaps most significantly, *Eovaai* illuminates for students the role of women in pioneering fantasy. At the beginning of the semester, students typically restate the common conceptualization of fantasy writing as primarily male dominated. Haywood proves that women were active and innovative in the realm of fantasy long before the more well-known achievements of Jones and Rowling in the late twentieth century. Her work includes nearly all of the elements that readers find compelling in later, male-authored texts, which

provides an opportunity to discuss reception history, recovery work, and the politics of canonization with students. Moreover, pairing *Eovaai* with earlier and later female-authored texts—like “Lanval” and the Harry Potter series—provides students with an alternative, more accurate genealogy of fantasy writing in which women have been central from the beginning.¹⁶ In this sense, reading *Eovaai* broadens students’ perspectives of gender vis-à-vis genre, properly emphasizing the achievements of early modern women writers and their unrecognized status as fantasy pioneers.¹⁷

¹ These conversations have occurred formally, as in the case of *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Eliza Haywood*, ed. Tiffany Potter (Modern Language Association, 2020) and informally, as in the question and answer session of the Haywood panel at the 2020 British Women Writers Conference or recent dialogues on Twitter about seminal eighteenth-century figures (see <https://twitter.com/bcdonnely18/status/1445430362721640456>).

² Ros Ballaster, “Eovaai and the Fiction of Fantasy in Eighteenth-Century England,” in *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Eliza Haywood*, ed. Tiffany Potter (Modern Language Association, 2020: 155-161).

³ As Ballaster notes, “most students and even teachers in eighteenth-century studies still operate within the framework of Ian Watt’s 1957 definition of ‘formal realism’.” 155

⁴ Melissa Thomas provides a thorough defense of teaching fantasy despite accusations that it is “fluff,” including that students like it and that fantasy texts are rife with metaphors for the human condition. Robin Fuxa describes how in addition to these factors, fantasy is particularly useful for facilitating discussions about controversial, challenging, or personal issues.

⁵ For example, Shea Stuart’s comparison of Haywood’s amatory fiction with modern digital dating practices in a paper entitled “Haywood the Arbitress and Futurist of Love” at the inaugural Eliza Haywood Conference in 2019, Benjamin Hudson’s linking of *Fantomina* and *Fleabag* to discuss comedy and performativity in “A Strategic Pragmatism: Eliza Haywood Refracted through Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s *Fleabag*” at the 2020 British Women Writer’s Conference, and Eugenia Zuroski’s examination of humor and the bizarre in *Eovaai* in a 2020 BWWC keynote entitled “Eliza Haywood’s Anamorphic Visions.”

⁶ Ballaster, Jennifer L. Hargrave, Christopher Loar, and Kathryn King, among others, have offered readings of the novel focused on its political significance.

⁷ Often due to their engagement with fandom culture, students routinely understand, even if they do not yet know the associated critical vocabulary, concepts like parallel universes, hard vs. soft magic systems, etc.

⁸ For a thorough analysis of Orientalism in *Eovaai*, see Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (University of Chicago Press, 2012: 217-230).

⁹ Gallagher outlines his decision to pair *Hamlet* with SparkNotes' *No Fear Shakespeare* based on learning objectives, including students' ability to read the text relatively quickly and to comprehend its plot.

¹⁰ When instructor Alison Bach surveyed her students about why they use SparkNotes and similar sites, responses included "I use SparkNotes when I don't understand a reading or when I'm confused about what I'm reading;" "the only time I use SparkNotes or any website like it is when I am confused about a concept or idea in a story or novel. It is to clarify my thoughts, not to cheat;" and "I use SparkNotes after I read the assignment to make sure I have the right understanding."

¹¹ *The Adventures of Eovaai; A PreAdamitical History* (1736), ed. Earla Wilputte, Broadview Independent Press, 1999.

¹² The class circles back to this discussion later in the semester when we read *Howl's Moving Castle* and watch Hayao Miyazaki's 2004 anime adaptation.

¹³ Our discussions anticipate our work later in the semester, especially with *The Hobbit*, in which evil is disturbingly represented by non-white/European physical characteristics. In this sense, *Eovaai* helps students to identify and analyze the trend of white, British authors displacing their fantasies—whether of good or evil—onto foreign people and places.

¹⁴ Wilputte, "Introduction," *The Adventures of Eovaai*, x-xi.

¹⁵ Ballaster, 155.

¹⁶ *Eovaai* can accomplish similar work in regard to science fiction—after reading it, a student who had taken several other British Literature courses wondered aloud why Mary Shelley is considered the pioneer of science fiction when Haywood and Margaret Cavendish engage in similar projects decades earlier.

¹⁷ While this essay is focused on fantasy literature, the strategies outlined here—which align seemingly obscure or challenging texts with generic conventions familiar to students—might be easily applied to a variety of eighteenth-century texts. While fantasy has some distinct pedagogical benefits, I have also successfully framed eighteenth-century texts as memoir, self-help, testimony, epic, and fanfiction.

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