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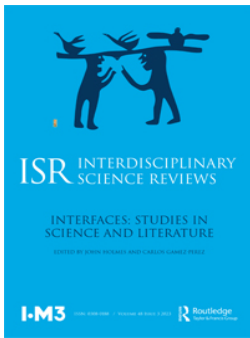
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Can fiction lead to prosocial behaviour? Exclusion, violence, empathy, and literature in early modernity

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ABSTRACT

In this short essay, I want to address the relationship between positivity and negativity in affect theories and literary analysis by focusing on the connection between empathy and literature in early modernity, a period when affect theories emerge robustly and are articulated in treatises such as *De anima et vita* (1538) by Juan Luis Vives (1492–1590) or *Nueva Filosofía* (1587) by Oliva de Sabuco (1562–1626?).¹ We begin with the proposition that fictional narratives may move us to care for others and help them. Indeed, the idea that fiction can make us more empathetic and, thus, turn us into better human beings is a powerful hypothesis that has been the subject of a great number of discussions and publications.² However, as we continue to investigate whether and how fiction may lead to prosocial behaviour via empathic responses and what are the narrative strategies that authors may employ to elicit empathy in readers, we need to acknowledge that: (1) the connection between empathy and prosocial behaviour, known as the empathy–altruism hypothesis, is still a controversial one and more empirical evidence is needed to back it up;³ and (2) there is no direct correspondence between empathic authorial intention and audience reception, a phenomenon that can be discussed through notions such as failed empathy or empathic inaccuracy.⁴

KEYWORDS

Empathy; literature; prosocial behaviour; early modern; María de Zayas; narrative strategies; exclusion; violence

The link established between affect and the transformational power of fiction is a very old one. The power of storytelling to move audiences and change their behaviour was already acknowledged in the classical world, as demonstrated by the commentaries of Plato and Aristotle on the effects of tragedy, which are echoed in Juan Luis Vives's account of the potential of fictional narratives to move us to compassion

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¹On early modernity and emotion, see also Jaén (2021).

²An example is Steven Pinker's (2011) book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, where he discusses fiction as a technology of vicarious experience that expands our collective concern for others.

³The empathy–altruism hypothesis, according to which empathic concern leads to altruism, is defined as: 'a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare' (Batson 2012, 41).

⁴See Keen (2007).

(understood as ‘feeling with’) and the cognitive and affective aspects of being moved by witnessing others’ distress.⁵ Moreover, the emotion–altruism connection appears frequently in early modern thought, particularly in the context of Renaissance humanism, where being moved by the suffering of others is regarded as the first step to humanitarian action. While we are still far from fully understanding the link between empathy, fiction and pro-social behaviour, examining literary production with a focus on this important connection may help us not only to obtain a more cohesive perspective on the dynamics of oppression but also to explore from a cognitive-historicist perspective if and how fiction can influence audiences and lead to positive change.

Jean Decety (2012) defines empathy as ‘the natural capacity to share, understand, and respond with care to the affective states of others’ (vii). This definition captures three fundamental aspects of intersubjectivity and emotion: feeling with (share), feeling for (understand) and reacting to (respond with care) the affective states of others, embracing the idea of empathy as a complex experience that encompasses feeling (both ‘felt’ and ‘witnessed’) and behaviour. The early modern precursor to this notion of empathy is compassion, often named ‘pity’ and corresponding to the Latin notion of *misericordia*, which originates in sympathy or affinity (*sympathia*). Vives defines compassion as ‘a very gentle emotion given by God to mankind as a great good and for our mutual help and consolation through the various misfortunes of life’ (1990, 47), a view that stresses the value of emotion and action towards others’ suffering.

Moreover, early modern thinkers debated whether one needed to feel others’ pain or simply acknowledge it in order to respond with care, a question echoed in today’s understanding of empathy and the distinction between its cognitive and emotional components (understanding how others feel versus feeling how they feel).⁶ As a Christian-humanist thinker, Vives rejected the Stoic view that one can help others without feeling their pain. Avoiding shared feeling could lead to a lack of compassion:

Nothing helps more to alleviate and soothe the pains and extreme suffering of a soul than to share them with others; no help is more welcome and more efficient. What can be more miserable or desperate in life than to think one does not have the commiseration of anybody? But let us forget the Stoics, who through pedantic cavils tried without success to convert their human natures into stones. (1990, 47)

Spanish Baroque author María de Zayas (1590–unknown), who expressly directs the empathy of early modern readers towards the suffering of women as the victims of exclusion and violence, aligns herself with Vives and the Christian-humanist tradition. Through her work, she demonstrates how a lack of shared feeling and an anti-compassion stance impacts women by excluding and harming them. Indeed, lacking concern towards women, men have come to keep them away from education, disrespect them, and treat them with great cruelty. This anti-compassion attitude was believed, in the context of early modern humanist philosophy, not only to endanger society but also to go against our very human nature as social and compassionate beings. As Vives had stated:

⁵In Vives (1782) *De anima*, Book Three, where he offers his detailed classification of the passions.

⁶See, for example, Shamay-Tsoory (2009).

If it is a precept of wisdom and goodness that humans be attached to each other as by a most sacred bond, and if nature has us so disposed, then obviously nature, wisdom, and goodness give and prescribe in us this feeling of compassion. Could harshness, fierceness, cruelty, and inhumanity take the place of compassion? Would humankind thrive if we all adopted cruelty instead of humanity? (1990, 47)⁷

Zayas not only shares this view but amplifies it and places it at the core of her narrative project, as she denounces the beliefs and attitudes of her time that consider women as incapable and inferior, blocking their access to education and turning them into objects of male disrespect and abuse. Far from understanding them, sharing their pain and helping put a remedy to their precarious situation, men close their eyes to the needs of women. In the prologue to the *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* [*Amorous and Exemplary Novels*] (1637), Zayas (1990) challenges misogynistic views that often relied on early modern views of gender difference as theorized by doctors such as Juan Huarte de San Juan (1529–1588), author of *Examen de ingenios* [*The Examination of Men's Wits*] (1575), a book widely known and impactful in early modern Europe, in which he details the natural temperament differences between women and men as well as the different degrees of maleness and femaleness that can be found according to these temperament variations. Within this ideological frame, Zayas claims that there is no natural justification for the exclusion of women and suggests that it is a socially determined phenomenon:

Our blood is the same; our senses, our powers, and the organs that perform their functions are all the same; our souls the same, for souls are neither male nor female. How, then, can men presume to be wise and presume that women are not? In my opinion, the only answer to this question is men's cruelty and tyranny in keeping us cloistered and not giving us teachers. The real reason why women are not learned is not a defect in intelligence but a lack of opportunity. When our parents bring us up if, instead of putting cambric on our sewing cushions and patterns in our embroidery frames, they gave us books and teachers, we would be as fit as men for any job or university professorship. (1990, 1–2)

While early modern misogyny was an institution with myriad ramifications (religious, philosophical, etc.), it was the medical discourse on gender difference that offered the ultimate justification for excluding women from education and public life, by explaining how their cognitive ability was impaired due to their natural constitution. This was precisely the discourse that, as a woman of letters, Zayas despised the most and against which she reacted forcefully in her prologue.

This scientific early modern view of female cognitive inability, pioneered by Huarte and grounded on Aristotelian, Hippocratic, and Galenic ideas, assumed that wits could be classified according to bodily temperament. For Huarte, this classification was essential for the practical purpose of organizing the Republic, by correlating ability with social role. Through his discussion of the physiological correlates of intelligence, based on humoral theory, readers could learn that a predominance of dryness promoted thinking, while moistness promoted imagination and warmth memory. Dryness was the base temperament in the male organism and was a fundamental quality for the social roles related to the public sphere (mainly letters and politics). Women, since

⁷Despite the condemnation of these Stoic attitudes, an anti-compassion view became, as Martha Nussbaum (2001) reminded us, the dominant tradition in Western philosophy for centuries (369) and came to be represented by Descartes and Spinoza, among others.

their organisms were conditioned for procreation, were moist and cold and thus they were believed to lack the faculty of judgement or understanding, the ability to evaluate and discern the truth, necessary to adopt those important roles in the Republic.

Zayas employs various empathic narrative strategies for exposing the early modern misogyny that undermined women's development and their participation in society, condemning them to systemic exclusion and making them vulnerable to violence.⁸ The main strategy that she employs is the creation of a multi-level multi-discursive structure that appeals to both the sympathy and compassion of her audience (what we refer to today as the cognitive and affective aspects of empathy). In this structure, the stories themselves are conceived as the emotional experience that complements the manifesto that she offers in her prologue, allowing for both perspective taking and affective involvement in her audience. Zayas adds then one more discursive level, by turning the traditional structure of the framed novel genre – a genre in which the frame narrative usually lacks a developed plot and serves as a moral reflection on the main stories – into a complex empathic metanarrative, as we may call it. Within this frame, the stories or *maravillas* ('enchantments') are designed to fill with wonder and to undeceive the audience about men's cruel ways. There are twenty stories, distributed in two volumes, *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares*, also known as *The Enchantments of Love* (1637) and its sequel *Desengaños amorosos* [*The Disenchantments of Love*] (1647).

The frame story is set in a *sarao* (an evening of entertainment) organized in the honour of Lysis, the female protagonist, who is ill with quartan fever, because of the rejection of her lover, don Juan, who now openly courts Lysis's cousin, Lisarda. To try to regain the affection of don Juan by provoking his jealousy, Lysis begins to welcome the advances of don Diego, whom she does not desire. As part of the complex affect-centred plot, the main characters are engaged in an intense 'guessing' game that fills their souls with myriad thoughts, emotions and behavioural reactions, testing the limits of their resilience, as they attempt to read and manipulate each other, while trying to avoid moments of embodied transparency that may reveal what they feel.⁹ All along, they are being watched by the rest of the *sarao* participants, who constantly both witness and attempt to interpret the emotional states of the protagonists of the amorous intrigue, based on their bodily reactions and behaviours. In this context, the body becomes a site and a stimulus for empathic understanding.

The body is indeed at the core of this work. It not only constitutes the affective locus of the frame narrative, as both the *sarao* guests and us readers exercise our theory of mind to reflect on the affective states of others, but also, and importantly, it mediates the portrayal of violence against women that Zayas offers in the stories contained within the frame, which include very explicit descriptions of rape, torture, murder and other brutal crimes.¹⁰

Zayas offers a representation of the victimized body that connects with Vives's Aristotelian account of the undeserved evils that move us to compassion when they fall upon others – 'disease, death, hunger, thirst, tortures, violence, and robbery' (1990, 45) – as well as his remarks on the extraordinary power of artistry in narrative to stir our compassion:

⁸For a more detailed analysis of these strategies, see Jaén (2014).

⁹On the notion of embodied transparency, see Zunshine (2008).

¹⁰On the connection between our human theory of mind abilities and narrative, see Leverage et al. (2011), among others.

The same disaster rouses our emotions more with the help of the actor's artistry. The likelihood of our being touched by the story is increased by the emphasis upon the gravity of the suffering, by realizing how undeserving the victim is, how much more entitled to good than to evil things. (1990, 49)

Zayas also relies on her knowledge of the fact that early modern citizens were familiar with the public display of the victimized body, via the *auto-da-fé* ceremonies, by which, 'the system exploited the exemplarity of corporeality to convey the message of its own power' (Vollendorf 2001, 52).

Aware of the power of the body to both attract her audiences and create a reaction in them, Zayas charges her narrative heavily with this graphic gender violence, particularly in the second volume of the novels, where we can read shocking descriptions such as, 'He went around behind her and with a knife he'd brought for this very purpose and had had sharpened that same day, he slashed her across the throat with such force that her head crashed down onto the table' (1997, 296). Indeed, we may argue that, while the frame narrative intrigue is the cornerstone of the cognitive aspect of Zayas's empathic strategy, the stories' graphic descriptions, by which she makes her readers 'see' the violence perpetrated against the female sex, constitute the necessary affective component without which compassion is unviable. The vividness of Zayas's descriptions might help enhance in readers the experience of witnessing others' pain by providing them with a powerful 'visual' account of their suffering. Such descriptions, which foreground violence and distress, have the potential to provoke in audiences a strong affective reaction and constitute the articulating spine of Zayas's empathic narrative technique.

The victims of this brutality are usually portrayed as innocent and unaware of the evil that surrounds them, often tortured or killed out of unfounded or obsessive jealousy, as happens in the story 'Marriage Abroad: Portent of Doom' to doña Leonor, who is strangled with her own beautiful hair by her husband, upon praising the gallantry of a Spanish captain (1997, 244). The emphasis on the innocence of these women and on the brutality of their male executioners, in the context of visually charged scenes, not only contributes to audience empathy with the undeserving victims but also underscores the author's agenda of showing and censoring men's cruelty and lack of compassion. By offering in her novels a portrayal of men's uncontrolled and unjustifiable violent behaviour, Zayas denounces their unfitnes to organize and rule the Republic for the common good of all citizens. She both supports and subverts Huarte de San Juan's project of examining (male) wits to determine their adequate social role, only to find that most wits are defective and many of those in positions of power are unfit for the role that they play.

In this way, Zayas responds to the male construction of women's cognitive impairment with her own construction of men's cognitive inability, showing how their lack of compassion and self-control endangers the Republic by excluding and mistreating women. The three discursive levels that she creates in her collection of novels (the prologue, the frame narrative, and the stories) prompt her audience to share, understand and respond with care to the precarious situation of early modern women, while allowing us to reflect on the complexities of the connection between storytelling and empathic response. Zayas's novels not only constitute a fundamental piece in the construction of narrative fellow-feeling in relation to gender and prosocial behaviour during the early modern period but also help us to trace the origins of the fiction-empathy-altruism

connection, adding yet another layer of complexity to our understanding of its essence and development.

As we return to our initial question, ‘Can fiction lead to prosocial behaviour?’, we must ponder whether Zayas’s stories, which enjoyed great success and were later appropriated by writers such as the French Paul Scarron (1610–1660), may have had the impact that the author intended. Did she manage to attract attention towards the exclusion and violence perpetrated against women? Did her stories promote positive social change by exhorting readers to respond with care? While we cannot assess this impact accurately, it is important to view Zayas’s work not as an isolated phenomenon but as part of the wider gender activism movement that the European *Querelle des femmes* constituted and which took a distinctive form in the novel genre.¹¹ In this context, Zayas is, undoubtedly, a very important contributor to what we can call empathic narrative discourses, that is, narratives intended to raise awareness of the struggles of human groups victimized by discriminatory and violent practices, which are rooted in and exacerbated by a lack of empathy for others, as well as legitimized, in the case of women, by early modern beliefs on gender difference. By challenging these beliefs and denouncing the situation of women through her novels, Zayas becomes a pioneer in the strategic employment of storytelling with the purpose of eliciting empathic responses.

In sum, although the fiction–empathy connection is a complex one and, as we know, there is not a direct correspondence between empathic authorial intention and empathic audience response, we may consider Zayas’s work as a powerful example of early modern narrative technologies designed to help audiences feel with and care for the oppressed *other* and, thus, promote a more compassionate society.¹²

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Isabel Jaén-Portillo holds PhDs from Purdue University and the Universidad Complutense of Madrid and is Professor of Spanish at Portland State University. She teaches literature, film and cognition. Her books include *Cognitive Literary Studies* (University of Texas Press, 2012), *Cognitive Approaches to Early Modern Spanish Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2016), *Self, Other, and Context in Early Modern Spain* (Juan de la Cuesta, 2017) and *Cervantes and the Early Modern Mind* (Routledge, 2022). She is co-director of the International Conference on Film and Literature organized with the Portland International Film Festival and co-president of the Latin American, Latino and Iberian Studies Association (LALISA). She is the USA/North America representative for the Commission on Science and Literature (CoSciLit) of the Division of the History of Science and Technology within the International Union for History and Philosophy of Science and Technology. She is a former executive member (2008–2012, chair in 2011) of the Division for Cognitive Approaches to Literature at the Modern Language Association (MLA) and a former member of the Purdue Cognitive Literary Studies Steering Committee (2008–2010). Dr. Jaén also co-founded and co-directed (2005–2015) the Literary Theory, Cognition, and the Brain Working Group at the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University.

¹¹See, for instance, Donovan 1999.

¹²On the question of whether narratives can promote empathy and positive social change, see also Jaén (2018).

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