

EN8533: Decisions, Or How Does the 18th Century Novel Decide?

Wednesday 6pm-8:30pm; Dr Peter DeGabriele



Does anyone ever make a decision? To put this philosophical question more literarily, does anyone ever decide anything in 18th century novels? This class will examine the 18th century novel as a study of our ability or inability to make decisions, whether these decisions about whether to lie or steal, who (or whether) to marry, or which carriage to buy. While the 18th century saw a range of philosophical theories that discussed our motivations as actors in the world, the suddenly popular genre of the novel presents us with extended meditations on how we make decisions. This class will ask what motivates us (love, money, sentiment, survival) to make the decisions we do. We will examine whether we make decisions mechanically, based upon the actions and movements of our bodies; sentimentally, based upon our feelings; rationally, based upon our reason; or morally, based upon an idea or feeling about what is good or right. In asking these questions, we will also consider what kind of subject or self makes decisions, and thus about whether we are primarily mechanical, sentimental, rational, or moral beings. While we will read philosophy, both from the 18th century and today, central to the class will be the idea that the 18th century novel develops its own complex ideas about how we decide and about what motivates us.

Among our readings will be novels by Eliza Haywood, Jane Austen, Daniel Defoe, Frances Burney, and Laurence Sterne; philosophy by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, and Jacques Derrida; and a variety of literary criticism.