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Henry Fielding
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Abstract. Fielding, Henry (1707-1754), playwright, journalist, reforming magistrate, and the inventor of the comic novel in English.

One of the inventors of the modern novel, Henry Fielding was by birth a gentleman. However, the early death of his mother and his father's profligacy obliged him to have recourse to literature and the law to make a living. Born on April 22, 1707 in Somerset, England, Henry Fielding was the eldest son of Edmund Fielding and Sarah Gould Fielding. From his earliest years, Fielding enjoyed an unusual degree of autonomy: after his mother's death when Fielding was only 10, he was raised by a grandmother too indulgent to control her unruly charge. Throughout his childhood, Henry was separated from his father Edmund, first by his father's career in army, which took him to Ireland and Portugal, and, then, after Sarah's death, through Edmund's hasty remarriage to a Catholic woman, who bore Edmund six sons. While Fielding's maternal grandfather, Sir Henry Gould, had provided an estate for the support of Sarah and her children, Edmund spent his way through much of that estate. Although Henry Fielding had a difficult time collecting the allowance due him from his father, and inherited nothing when Edmund died in 1741, he emulated his father's spendthrift ways throughout his life. Fielding received a first rate education in Greek, Latin, and the modern classics, first from a local tutor, next at Eton, and finally, during his 18 months of study at one of the continent's most important seats of Protestant learning, the University of Leyden. Over 6 feet tall and physically robust, the young Henry Fielding had the vigor, activity, and zest for life that he confers upon his heroes Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones. A youthful phase of libertine enjoyment, so often a part of the "education" of young gentlemen of that epoch, may explain Fielding's tolerance for this behavior in several of his main characters. Fielding addresses his most characteristic expressions of social joy to close friends, like James Harris of Salsbury, George Lyttelton, and Ralph Allen, (the latter two become his patrons). His passion for his beautiful and beloved wife, Charlotte Cradock, was given literary expression in the characters Sophia Western and Amelia Booth. After ten years of marriage, Charlotte died in 1744. Throughout this sometimes difficult life, Henry enjoyed a life-long attachment to his younger sister Sarah (b.1710), with whom he sometimes lived and periodically engaged in literary collaboration. Seeking a more southern climate to ameliorate a host of ailments, Fielding departed England for Portugal in June, 1754, in broken health and near death. He died in Lisbon on October 8, 1754 at the age of 48.

Fielding's career evidences a quite extraordinary range of talent as playwright, novelist, political journalist, and reforming magistrate. He is one of the most productive and inventive playwrights of the 1730s; Tom Jones was the most widely read prose fiction of its time after Pamela (1740), and it achieved greater critical recognition than any other English novel of the century. During the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, Fielding emerged as one of the most effective political journalists writing in defense of the Whig and Protestant England won by the settlement of 1688. Finally, in his last years, Fielding served as the magistrate of the County of Middlesex (London). In that post, Fielding founded the modern London police, and emerged as an innovative reformer of the British policy toward crime, criminals, and the poor. The range and quality of these

achievements, as well as the testimony of his friends and patrons, suggest that Fielding was one of the most gifted, creative, and intelligent men of his generation.

Satire and Sentiment

Both in his writing and in his world view, Henry Fielding serves as a bridge between the satiric writing which achieved triumphant expression in the third and forth decade of the 18th century, and the sentimental writing toward which British taste was moving. Thus, for example, Fielding's rewriting of Richardson's *Pamela*, first in Shamela (1741) and then in Joseph Andrews (1742), is often aligned with Fielding's participation in the satiric traditions most famously practiced by Swift, Pope, Gay, and Hogarth. Indeed, Fielding's first great success, the drama Tom Thumb (1730), is written in the bright and brittle language of Pope's The Rape of the Lock (1717). In the last act of the play, the tiny Tom wins a great military victory, but, on the way to claim the hand of the princess Huncamunca, he is swallowed by a cow. Like The Rape of the Lock and Swift's voyage to Lilliput (from Gulliver's Travels), the conjunction of grand language and diminutive size becomes a satiric device for exposing vanity to ridicule. Fielding's editorial expansion of Tom Thumb into Tragedies of Tragedies (1731), edited by H. Scriblerus Secundus, is an explicit tribute to Martin Scriblerus, the editor of the *Dunciad*, and other satiric works. Fielding's Jonathan Wild (1743, revised in 1754), by taking up the history of the fence and thief-taker Jonathan Wild, updates the stage sensation of 1728, John Gay's The Beggar's Opera. These literary influences on Fielding's writing allow us to take account of a satiric strain in Fielding's work: urbane and skeptical, the satirist's moral aim is to cleanse the world by exposing vice and folly to view. But, Fielding is a satirist with a difference. By embedding satire in an inclusive and generous social commentary, he softens the tone and pluralizes the directions of satiric critique, Thus, Fielding's narrator is sociable, garrulous and playful; his works seem conceived as much to sustain as critique social life; and, certain passages of his writing, like the "Man of the Hill" episode in *Tom Jones*, diagnose the misanthropy of satire's assumption of the posture of the alienated outsider.

While the traditions and devices of satire—from the mock epic style to the literary caricature—flow into the English novel through Fielding (Paulson, 1968), a productive commingling of satiric and sentimental impulses can be read across the arc of Fielding's major fictional works, from Joseph Andrews (1742) and Jonathan Wild (1743) to Tom Jones (1749) and Amelia (1751). While all the novels have a rich economy of sentimental motifs, critics have found Amelia to be Fielding's most domestic, personal, and sentimental novel. Throughout these novels, Fielding manipulates the emotions of the reader by staging moments of endangered innocence, sudden loss, and touching acts of selfless generosity. Thus, for example, in writing Joseph Andrews, Fielding clearly intends to disperse the solemnity with which Richardson invests Pamela's sturdy but sanctimonious defense of her virtue. However, when we read the scenes in which Joseph Andrews protects his own virtue, first from the rapacious Mrs. Slipslop, and then from the importunate Lady Booby, Joseph sounds a good deal like his "sister" Pamela. He tells his mistress Lady Booby, "I can't see why her having no virtue should be a reason against my having any. Or why, because I am a man, or because I am poor, my virtue must be subservient to her pleasures?" (I: VIII, 35) So, what at first seems like a satiric device—a reversal of genders so as to mock Richardson's cult of virginity—modulates in

both Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones into something more nuanced: an exploration of the way a character balances the temptations of the moment and the weakness of the flesh against the social value of faithful love.

Fielding's distinctive approach to novel writing arises from his class, his education, and his experience. While Defoe and Richardson still suffer a puritanical distrust of the mendacity of story-telling, and worry the deleterious moral effects of the new entertainment of novel reading, Fielding heartily embraces the restorative value of entertainment. Seven years of play writing and directing the Haymarket Theater had given Fielding practical insight into how to please contemporary audiences. His turn to novel writing, like the playwright Aphra Behn's recourse to writing novels in the early 1680s, was precipitated by a forbidding political climate. The boldly literal satire of Fielding's plays stirred the ire of the Walpole regime, and the Licensing act of 1737 closed the theater to him. Fielding understood the entertainment value and enlightenment potential of his prose histories through the classical apology for literature. The literary author, according to Horace's Ars Poetica, must strive to balance delight and instruction (*dulce et utile*). By contrast, in Pamela, Richardson exploited the absorptive powers of the novels of amorous intrigue to draw young readers toward the conduct book lessons he would teach them. Success for Richardson would mean that young readers would not want to read any more novels. (Warner, 1998) By contrast, Fielding understands *Pamela* to be a novel masquerading as a guide to moral life. In Joseph Andrews, Fielding writes his alternative history of modern life in "the manner of Cervantes." The Spanish master gives Fielding a template for fiction centered upon a critique of the dangerous effects of absorptive romance reading. Fielding also follows Cervantes by translating vast learning in ancient and modern literature and classical rhetoric into a "history" of contemporary English life. In writing *Joseph Andrews, Tom Jones,* and *Amelia*, Fielding's avowed aim is to teach readers to be skeptical, wise, and generous critics of the social world of which they are a part. Some of Fielding's contemporaries, like Francis Coventry, agreed that Fielding had succeeded in practicing a "new species of writing," one that elevated the ethical purposes of novelistic writing while expanding its literary resources. Fielding also helped to raise the market value of novels. His publisher, Andrew Millar, paid Fielding unprecedented fees for the copyrights to his three novels, and, after Fielding's death, Millar published an elegant posthumous collection of his novels in the quarto format, to which he appends a "life of Fielding," especially commissioned for the edition and written by Arthur Murphy. When, in the nineteenth century, Walter Scott anthologizes the most important novels of the previous century for Ballantyne's Novelist's Library, he gives pride of place to Henry Fielding, as the most valuable English influence for the novel writing of the new century.

Comedy and the Novel

Among the eighteenth century novelists, it is Fielding who most inventively exploits the possibilities of the comedy. In The Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye offers a general account of the plot of comedy, from Greek new comedy to the novels of Charles Dickens, which applies particularly well to Fielding's major novels. In the *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, the romance of the two lovers is interrupted by one or more blocking figures; their happiness is delayed by a journey full of incidents that are at once comic and instructive; the narrative climaxes with the surprise discovery of the true

paternity of the hero; the plot's resolution takes the form of marriage and the prospect of a happiness that is at once erotic and moral; the narrative ends with a festive meal, itself an emblem of a communal celebration of life. But what gives Fielding's comedy its distinctive flavor is his inventive interweaving of the diverse speech genres he finds in his social and literary world. I can illustrate this idea by discussing the scene, at the very end of *Tom Jones*, where the eponymous hero asks Sophia Western to marry him. Here, Fielding composes one of the oddest proposal scenes in literature. While Tom speaks the language of a penitent lover, asking forgiveness for his many transgressions, Sophia turns the language of personal injury into a judicial examination: "Mr. Jones, have I not enough to resent? After what past at Upton, so soon to engage in a new amour with another woman, while I fancied, and you pretended, your heart was bleeding for me!—Indeed, you have acted strangely. Can I believe the passion you have profest to me to be sincere? Or if I can, what happiness can I assure myself of with a man capable of so much inconstancy?" (XVIII: xii, 972) Pressed so strictly on his infidelities, Tom has recourse to a libertine alibi: "The delicacy of your sex cannot conceive the grossness of ours, nor how little one sort of amour has to do with the heart." Sophia's reply has the dialectical finesse of a lawyer: "I will never marry a man who shall not learn refinement enough to be as incapable as I am myself of making such a distinction." (XVIII: xii, 973) The scene seems in danger of ending with the hero consigned to the extended probation necessary to prove his reform to Sophia. However, more hopeful words from Sophia make Tom "mad with joy," and he "kissed her with an ardor he had never ventured before." Sophia's father Squire Western, who is listening outside the door, "burst into the room, and with his hunting voice and phrase, cry'd out, 'to her boy, to her, go to her.—That's it, little honeys, O that's it.'" When he finds that Sophia has not "appointed the day" for marriage, Western demands Sophia's consent to marry "not a minute longer" than the day after tomorrow. When Sophia firmly declines, Western rants, "When I forbid her, then it was all nothing but sighing and whining, and languishing and writing; now I am for thee, she is against thee. …She is above being guided and governed by her father…It is only to disoblige and contradict me." When Sophia suddenly consents to be guided by her father ("What would my Papa have me do?") and when she agrees to marry "to-morrow morning," "Jones then fell upon his knees, and kissed her hand in an agony of joy, while Western began to caper and dance about the room." (XVIII: xii, 974-975)

The distinct art of Fielding's comedy comes from the collision of radically different characters, sensibilities, and the language proper to each. In this scene Tom's impatient desire to get on with loving must enter into extended dialogue with Sophia's very sensible reservations about the implications for their future of Tom's all too recent infidelities. This proposal scene gets its power to represent social reality not from its plausibility—it is difficult to imagine real lovers talking this way—or as an analysis of a consistent character—we have not heard Sophia speak this sort of closely reasoned moral discourse before. Instead, the dialogue in this scene interweaves social languages for talking about love. Tom speaks the casuistic excuses of the libertine and the impatient enthusiasm of the lover. Sophia brings to bear upon his behavior the strict standards of the wise moralist. Finally, Squire Western interrupts their colloquy with the language of the hunt, of the indignant patriarch, and, finally, of the leader of the revels. Fielding develops a literary method that sustains the diversity of the social reality that he references. Fielding's most crucial literary technique is what we see in this scene: the

incorporation within the boundaries of the comic novel of a diversity of genres, derived from the social world, which Bakhtin calls *heteroglossia*—"another's speech in another's language" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 324). While Fielding's comic novels give free reign to social passion (from conviviality to lust) they resist the coercive demands for sincerity, purity of sentiment, and ideological closure that Fielding associated (whether fairly or unfairly) with the novels of Samuel Richardson. To offset the abstracting and rationalizing tendency of both characters and narrators, expressed in this scene by Sophia's critical assessment of her Tom's moral shortcomings, Fielding's comedy reminds us of the tenacious centrality of the body, asserted in this scene by the venturesome "ardor" of Tom's kiss and the sudden physical intrusion of Squire Western.

Literature and the Law: Conceptualizing Society as a Complex Totality

The only major English novelist who was also a practicing lawyer and magistrate, Fielding's study of the law (1737-1740) precedes his novel writing and deeply suffuses his fiction. (Bender, 1987) His day to day grappling with the problem of modern vice may have intensified his skepticism of moral formulas, like "virtue rewarded," the subtitle of Richardson's novel Pamela. Fielding offers his retort to this idea in the first lines of Book XV of Tom Jones.

> There are a set of religious, or rather moral writers, who teach that virtue is the certain road to happiness, and vice to misery, in this world. A very wholesome and comfortable doctrine, and to which we have but one objection, namely, that it is not true. (XV:1: 783)

Written in one elegantly balanced period, this passage at first seems to extend support to the doctrine of 'virtue rewarded,' until, with a sudden turn, like the prosecuting attorney at court, the author raises his one, devastating "objection", "namely, that it is not true." Fielding's rejection of the moral idealism of Richardson's exemplary characters, and Fielding's defense of his own use of ethically "mixed characters" (like Tom Jones and Captain Booth), reflects the empiricist underpinnings of legal practice. While the law may be grounded in the concept of social good, the judge must constantly balance the abstract code of the law against the stream of actual, all-too-human individuals who are brought before the law. As the world's largest city, London posed certain common problems for both the city dweller and the judge. Fielding's sometimes garrulous narrator discusses these problems with his reader and makes them integral to the education of the reader his novels attempt. How should one evaluate the character of strangers? Why should we be skeptical about initial appearances? When should we extend sympathy to strangers?

Out of Fielding's practice of literature and law there emerges the concept of society as a complex, interdependent totality. Such an idea is implicit in one of his practical solutions to the sheer scale and anonymity of London: the formation of a "Universal Register Office", where those needing services, and those providing services, could register and find each other. It opened for business Feb 19, 1750, a year after the publication of *Tom Jones*. (Battestin, Companion, 197) Fielding's most systematic, non-novelistic development of this idea is in a 1751 pamphlet, entitled, "An Inquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers." Like numberless other enlightenment era pamphlets, Fielding seeks social improvement through a rational set of legal and institutional reforms. But what is most innovative about his analysis is the way Fielding

interconnects the diverse causes for a recent crime wave. Insisting that this crime wave is symptomatic of a larger set of social maladies, Fielding attributes crime to the effect on the poor of the allure of luxury and the many diversions easily available in London, to the practice of drunkenness (intensified by the new prevalence of distilled gin), and to the rage for gambling. Luxury, drunkenness, and gambling not only motivate crime, they also expand the numbers of the poor, the chief source of the most hardened criminals. But rather than setting the poor against the middling and upper ranks of society, Fielding insists that the poor acquire these vices by emulating the rich. Fielding assures his reader he is no visionary, and would not think of trying to reform these pleasurable "fashions" of the rich. Besides, Fielding notes, these vices carry their own punishment to the great, in the ruin of their estates and families. However, among the poor they lead to violent crime. This crime robs all Englishmen of the security needed to enjoy the liberty that they so much pretend to value. Further, these practices, by vitiating the health of the people, lead to a dangerous physical decay of the nation.

In making his case for new laws, and new institutions to enforce old law, Fielding gives a new turn to the legal concept of the English constitution by making it the living soul of the body politic. The constitution is dynamic and constantly changing because it is not simply its written and unwritten law, or the distributed power of its different political agencies (King, Lords, and Commons); it also comprehends the "customs, manners, and habits of the people." (Preface, 9) To conceptualize what gives coherence to the complex amalgam, Fielding has recourse to Greek philosophy:

> [The constitution is] something which results from the order and disposition of the whole; … many of the Greeks imagined the soul to result from the composition of the parts of the body when these were properly tempered together; as harmony doth from the proper composition of the several parts in a well tuned musical instrument; in the same manner, from the disposition of the several parts in a state, arises that which we call the constitution.(Preface, 9-10; in William Ernest Henley, LL.D., *The Complete Works of Henry Fielding, Esq.*, Vol. VIII, *Legal Writings* (United States: Barnes & Noble, 1967)

Here, Fielding's analogy attributes the soul of the human body, the harmony of musical instruments, and the heath of the political constitution to the composition, or disposition, of parts "properly tempered together." This is the alchemy that Fielding attempts in his magnum opus, *Tom Jones*, where the idea of society, as the necessary inter-relation of all its members, is given an early, and very influential, literary expression.

Fielding constructs *Tom Jones* so that it offers an encyclopedic view of society, from country house to the road to the city of London, from high to middling to lower life, from a London Masquerade to Newgate Prison. To incorporate this social diversity, Fielding privileges the picaresque locales of the public inn, the stage coach, and the road, places of unexpected encounter and unruly plurality, where different classes mix and converse. Adopting the formal conventions of epic, this literary construction requires an intricate plot that will bind all its events into one action. In this way, the reader can watch a host of characters, in ways dimly understood by the characters, and only gradually understood by the reader, come into a grand pattern of mutual interdependence. This is the "truth" about human nature and human society to which Fielding's "great creation" hopes to give his reader access. The narrator of *Tom Jones* argues that the author who would actualize this idea, must, in contrast with the romance writers, have "powers of

mind, which are capable of penetrating into all things within our reach and knowledge, and of distinguishing their essential differences," "a good share of learning," a "universal" "conversation" "with all ranks and degrees," and finally, he must have "a good heart, and be capable of feeling." The length of this catalog of traits is an index of the difficulty of comprehending the society in its totality. The necessity of doing so with a "good heart," suggests that the idea of the coherent interdependence of society is not just a theory that may or may not be true; it is also an ethical imperative toward which one should aspire. If both author and reader do so, they can then understand their own exchange as part of a worthy and enjoyable social conversation: "The author who will make me weep, says Horace, must first weep himself…in the same manner…I am convinced I never make my reader laugh heartily, but where I have laughed before him,…"(IX:1: 490-494) The literary debt owed to Fielding by later novelists like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and George Eliot, results in good part form his literary development of the idea of society is as a complex, mutually dependent totality.

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Suggested image: from an engraving of a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds