



Henry Fielding between Satire and Sentiment

Politeness and Masculinity
in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Dita Hochmanová



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Table of Contents

1 Introduction	7
2 <i>Joseph Andrews</i> and the Problem of Decorum	17
3 <i>Tom Jones</i> and the Right Measure of Self-Interest	35
4 <i>Amelia</i> and the Limits of Empathy	61
5 Conclusion	87
Resumé	91
References	95

1 INTRODUCTION

In the long eighteenth century, the work of Henry Fielding represents a milestone between the era of the Ancients and the era of separation from the old values ushered in by the Moderns. His unique position between the two modes of thinking reflects pieces of both worlds – the fading world of the Ancients, which Fielding admired but could no longer belong to, and the developing space of the Moderns, who desired to depart from the old traditions and create their own values representative of the newly forming middle class. Even though Fielding was largely indebted to the satirical tradition of his predecessors, he managed to adapt to the new literary trends of his time and incorporate them into his writings. While experimenting with various forms of prose, he laid the foundation of the genre of the novel, a process which has been mapped in a great number of key studies, among others Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel*, J. Paul Hunter's *Occasional Form* and Frederick Olds Bissell's *Fielding's Theory of the Novel*. The author's ability to blend various traditions – ranging from ancient models like Virgil or Milton, to foreign traditions in the works of Cervantes and Scarron, to the Augustans (especially John Gay and Jonathan Swift), to his contemporaries (especially Samuel Richardson, but also Addison and Steele) – shows not only his genius, but also the rich mixture of influences which was present at that time.

Fielding used these aesthetic traditions to enter a debate over one of the key social issues of the eighteenth century, taken up by many other thinkers and artists in this period – the struggle for social refinement in the form of politeness.¹ Although eighteenth-century definitions of what exactly is 'polite' may differ in details, Philip Carter identifies three essential principles on which eighteenth-cen-

1 P. Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, Harlow, Longman, 2001, p. 21.

1 Introduction

tury commentators focused when defining politeness: propriety or decorum; elegance of manners (that is, behaving with elegant complaisance); and the display of generosity and accommodation to one's companions. As Carter says, the call for improved standards of behaviour was reflected especially in the work of 'the most influential early eighteenth century polite theorists, among them Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, and later the periodical essayists Joseph Addison and Richard Steele'.² Karen Harvey further explains the crucial connection between masculinity and politeness in that period and explains the difference between Addison and Steele's social-oriented mode of politeness and Shaftesbury's more intellectual approach to the subject.³

This great social project was also pursued by the painter William Hogarth and the writer Samuel Richardson, who contributed to the overall discussion about, and formation of, the new personal and social virtues, and who had a major influence on Fielding. This endeavour to reform manners and break free from the old patterns and values of the preceding generations became an opportunity for the thinkers and artists of the time to have a say in forming the future system of moralities, and to create models of behaviour against which people could be judged. Since the men and women of the emerging middle class were sufficiently financially secure and in dire need of new models of virtue which would define their identity, they became the target audiences for most writers. Reading novels and magazines became a common practice for them as well as an emblem of their social status. Erin Mackie's study 'The Commerce of Everyday Life' reveals that the largest portion of the new literate group interested in magazines 'came from Britain's professional bureaucracy and its commercial and financial classes'.⁴ This group of people was the main and intended audience for the educational project supported by Steele and Addison, who published the magazines *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. As Mackie explains, 'the task the papers set themselves is to reform sensibilities – aesthetic, sartorial, social, and sexual – of each man and woman in the reading audience so that he or she, guided by the principles of good sense, decorum and benevolence, would then do, say, like, and buy the right thing'.⁵ The period magazines were, therefore, a major venue for the global propaganda of new values and moral standards.

Even though magazines, along with more traditional forms of moral-forming sources like religious texts and conduct books, were the most frequent type of reading for London citizens, the newly created audiences were also exposed to more enjoyable sorts of texts like novels, which became an important source

2 Ibid., p. 24.

3 K. Harvey, 'The History of Masculinity', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2005, p. 306.

4 E. Mackie (ed.), *The Commerce of Everyday Life*, Boston, Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998, p. 6.

5 Ibid., p. 2.

of public intellectual formation. The power of literary and political propaganda in the development of social values and gender patterns has been minutely described by Nancy Armstrong in her *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, where she explains that not only directly educational texts but also ‘the novel provided a mighty weapon in the arsenal of Enlightenment rhetoric’.⁶ The new medium of the novel, which to a great extent replaced theatre performances as a popular pastime of the town, provided an alternative to the often low type of entertainment then available and also became a form of education for a substantial portion of society. As a result, the prominent novel writers of the time fully used the commercial potential of this new genre, seizing the opportunity to influence the thinking of the general public by asserting their ideals of early modern society. With the growing number of circulating libraries and the popularity of novel-writing, the readership widened to such an extent that novels became a powerful means for distributing new ideas and models for society. Just as *The Spectator’s* mission was to cultivate the minds of its readers, Fielding’s novels likewise aimed to enhance the understanding of his audiences and influence their perception of the surrounding world. Although he often contributed articles to magazines, after the Licensing Act in 1737, Fielding chose the novel as his main mode of expression, since the genre had a great potential to guarantee financial profit, and it was clear it would become the trend of the future decades. As a playwright, a contributor to various newspapers, and mainly a novelist, Fielding actively participated in the battle over new gender and social models which was taking place at the time.

To what extent books were a sign of an eighteenth-century English person’s social and personal development has been documented, among others, by James Raven, who wrote several studies on the history of the book trade in this period. His work documents the practices of booksellers, which not only reflect the increasing demand for books, but also the exclusivity and limits imposed on their value and use. Although the number of circulating libraries was rapidly growing, especially later in the century, Raven clarifies that at least in the early part of the century, only those with substantial incomes could afford to join them.⁷ Therefore, despite the expanding audiences, the practice of reading books remained a privilege of a specific – bigger yet limited – social group. Of course, there were some attempts to answer the demand for books among people with lower incomes, and cheap versions of novels began to be imported from Ireland. As Raven describes, these were printed on low quality paper and were often significantly abridged.⁸ Such attempts were, however, seen as illegal, due to violations

6 N. Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 98.

7 J. Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade 1450-1850*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, p. 182.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 232.

of copyright agreements, and the full original versions remained only accessible through regular trade for a higher price. The concern over the quality of printed books was obviously connected with the financial interest of printers and owners. Nevertheless, it also shows the overall concern about the quality of the content and experience of reading, which was understood to contribute to the moral and personal development of the reader. Consequently, the wide range of printed texts suddenly available also made it necessary to distinguish quality literature from texts designed merely for entertainment. The idea of ‘the idle reader’, who does not use literature as a source of personal development but as a mere pastime, became associated with the wives of well-off professionals. However, Naomi Tadmor demonstrates that ‘reading was not seen only as a pastime activity of the privileged group’.⁹ In fact, as she further demonstrates, ‘the practice of reading was connected not to idleness, listlessness or frivolity but to a routine of work and of religious discipline’.¹⁰ Tadmor stresses that reading was combined with other activities, like working and card-playing and ‘it was done along intermittently – reading of many texts was stretched over months and was entwined with reading of other texts from various genres’.¹¹ As a result, the common practice was that, for instance, Richardson’s *Clarissa* was read along with and in the context of *The Whole Duty of Man* and *The Guardian*. Such practices show that texts like novels were not only widely accessible, but also an undeniable part of one’s personal education.

Since a relatively large part of the new readership of the time were women, who in the past only rarely learned to read or had access to education through books, they became the most targeted audiences for romantic stories as well as for more serious novels and magazines, which aimed to influence their view of society and contributed to their self-image and patterns for gender relationships. Although female readers were constantly confronted with models of womanhood in various conduct books, in Addison and Steele’s articles, in Richardson’s novels, and in other texts, they did not remain mere recipients of such ideologies. Tadmor shows that women were critical readers, giving the example of Miss Mulso, Mrs. Chapone senior, Miss Highmore, and Miss Talbot, who ‘disputed Mr. Richardson’s views on issues such as filial duty and women’s independence’.¹² Also, the discussions and reflections on what women were reading captured in their letters show that they were highly influenced by their readings and ready to embrace as well as question the new conventions laid

9 N. Tadmor, “‘In the Even My Wife Read to Me’: Women, Reading and Household Life in the 18th century”, in J. Raven, H. Small and N. Tadmor (eds.), *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 165.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., p. 168.

12 Ibid., p. 173.

out in front of them on the printed pages. Apart from reflecting the writings in their letters, women also entered the public debate in the role of writers. Unlike at any other point in previous eras, they had relatively extensive freedom to express their opinions on the state of society and to openly respond to other texts in their writings. Although the statistics clearly show that the number of reprinted editions by female writers were considerably smaller than those by the top-selling male authors,¹³ their texts were widely read, and as Raven later stresses, ‘all rivalled the contemporary popularity of Fielding and Richardson’.¹⁴ Such freedom led to a number of literary experiments, like Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier’s *The Cry*, and pieces which openly criticized some of the practices and conventions common at the time.¹⁵ The writings of Eliza Haywood warrant special consideration in the context of Fielding’s and Richardson’s writings, not only because of her open criticism of social conventions, but also because she was the best-selling female writer of the first part of the century, making her a true rival of Fielding, Defoe, Smollett, and Richardson.¹⁶ Eliza Haywood, therefore, has to be considered as an important point of reference when discussing the female debate over gender models, but also when contextualizing the work of Fielding, since the two writers probably influenced each other, or at least responded to the same social and literary impulses within the period.

Both male and female writers of the era consciously aimed to influence their readers, men and women alike, by producing new images of gender roles and models for social relationships. The wish to guide the course of future standards in the changing structure of society resulted in a literary environment full of rivalry and criticism, where novels were not innocent sources of entertainment, but were closely linked to philosophies, specific social practices and political propaganda. As a result, the popular novels of the age were widely discussed and often severely criticized by literary critics as well as readers themselves.

Passionate discussions of the newly produced texts also brought into question the general capacity of readers to interpret texts correctly and sufficiently. The unrestricted access of readers with no or low education to all kinds of books resulted in a wave of criticism and general concern. As Raven states:

the reader was a complex filter – not merely a mesh which caught some of the text in interesting and eccentric ways, but a processor partly constructed and reshaped

13 J. Raven, *British Fiction, 1750-1770: A Chronological Check-List*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1987, p. 14.

14 J. Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade 1450-1850*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, p. 23.

15 Ellen Gardiner presents a more detailed analysis of female readers as well as the novel *The Cry* in her book *Regulating Readers: Gender and Literary Criticism in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*.

16 Raven, *British Fiction, 1750-1770*, p. 14.

1 Introduction

by previous reading and reading experience. External factors also affected the way a person read as well as the circumstances in which reading took place and the ends to which it was directed.¹⁷

Raven also documents that ‘reports criticized readers for reading in unsuitable places or for reading badly, quickly, insensitively, or too much’.¹⁸ He further illustrates that checks to untutored or irresponsible reading were common at that time.¹⁹ Such an anxious approach to the practices of reading reveals the great concern of society about the possible danger of misinterpretation and the use of texts as a means of powerful ideological propaganda.

Since the work of Henry Fielding reflects the changing social paradigms as well as the abundant literary scene of his time, this book will explore the role of his texts in the overall project of a reformation of manners. In particular, it will focus on the correlating development of the models of masculinity and the understanding of politeness as defined by Philip Carter in the context of theories of satire and sentiment. A great number of works – for example, those by Martin Batestin – have been written about Fielding’s concern with politics and religious doctrines, which are both prominent in most of his novels and plays. In the last few decades, however, research on Fielding has started to look at the problems of gender, which are clearly present in eighteenth-century texts but remain rather under-researched, as suggested by Robert Hume in his summary of the history of research on Henry Fielding’s work ‘Fielding at 300: Elusive, Confusing, Misappropriated, or (Perhaps) Obvious?’. An attempt to throw some light on gender issues in Fielding’s work was made by Angela Smallwood in the late 1980s in her study *Fielding and the Woman Question*, where she stresses the importance of the debate on gender roles in his writing and reconsiders some of the key characters which were neglected or reduced in value in the previous studies. Although the problem of gender had not been at the centre of attention of Fielding scholars until quite recently, nowadays it has become an important point of consideration in the context of the growing interest in masculinity studies and provides a vital modern perspective on the work of this canonical writer.

In addition to focusing on the previously disregarded topic of gender, Armstrong also criticizes some of the conventional contexts in which Fielding’s work is understood – namely, the excessive contrasting of his novels to Richardson’s – which she thinks resulted in confirming ‘the masculine image attributed to Fielding, purely because Richardson’s work is commonly credited with a feminine

17 Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade 1450-1850*, p. 23.

18 J. Raven, ‘From Promotion to Proscription: Arrangements for Reading and 18th-century Libraries’, in J. Raven, H. Small and N. Tadmor (eds.), *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 180.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 186.