The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling

Fielding Henry
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FICTION

TOM JONES BY HENRY FIELDING · INTRODUCTION BY GEORGE SAINTSBURY
VOL. ONE
A TALE WHICH HOLDETH CHILDREN FROM PLAY & OLD MEN FROM THE CHIMNEY CORNER

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY
The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling

By Henry Fielding

Volume One

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INTRODUCTION

The orbis terrarum of literary criticism has not had much difficulty in deciding that Tom Jones is, in something else than mere size, Fielding's greatest work. If both Johnson and Thackeray seem to have preferred Amelia, enough allowance has been made in the General Introduction 1 for any expression of the former, while the latter was evidently biased at the particular moment. The characteristics of Amelia were well suited to contrast with and atone for the rather exaggerated delineation of Fielding's Bohemianism which it had suited Thackeray to give; and, speaking to a mixed audience, he no doubt felt it easier to dwell on the later than on the earlier book. The extreme condemnation of Tom the hero as distinct from Tom the book, which is put elsewhere in the mouth of Colonel Newcome, is at least partly dramatic; and I am not sure that the indirect eulogy in Pendennis—that Tom Jones was the last book in which an English novelist was allowed to depict a man—does not make up for any censure expressed or implied elsewhere. It is, without the grandiloquence, nearly as lofty a eulogy as Gibbon's. What that great writer said is universally known, and no comment on it is necessary, except a reminder that in many ways Gibbon's tastes were rather Continental or cosmopolitan than English, and that he was by no means likely to be bribed by the intensely national flavour of the novel. Of late there has been a disposition to demur to Coleridge's hardly less lofty eulogy of the mere craftsmanship shown in the novel. But Scott, a practised critic, a novelist of unsurpassed competence, and not always a very enthusiastic encomiast of Fielding, has endorsed it in the Introduction to the Fortunes of Nigel. After such names it is unnecessary to cite any others by way of authority, and we may pass to the direct consideration of the book itself.

Tom Jones, then, is a novel which differs from almost all other novels both in the range and the precision of its scale and scheme. Its personages are extremely numerous, and there is justice in the half-humorous protestation of the author, in reference to the apparent repetition in the two

1 This appeared originally as an introduction to Fielding’s works and has been reprinted in Joseph Andrews in Everyman’s Library.

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landladies, that they are "most carefully differentiated from each other." Its scenes are extremely varied, and each has its local colour adjusted with perfect propriety. Of the actions and passions represented it is indeed possible for the *advocatus diaboli* to urge that, whatever their range and truth to nature within their limits, there is a certain want of height and depth in them. But this is only saying in other words that the middle of the eighteenth century was not the beginning of the sixteenth; that Fielding had not the tragic touch; and that though he was most emphatically a "maker," he was not in the transferred and specialised sense a poet. Lastly, all these varying excellences and excellent variations are adjusted together in so cunning an arrangement of dramatic narrative, that some have found it absolutely impeccable, while few have done more than protest against the Man of the Hill, question whether we do not see more than we need of Mrs. Fitzpatrick, and ask whether the catastrophe is not, especially considering the very leisurely movement of the earlier scenes, somewhat hurried and huddled. As for the characters, exception, so far as I know, has not been seriously taken to any save on the score of art and nature to Allworthy and Blifil, on the score of morality to Mr. Jones himself. Some have indeed expressed their desire for something with more air and fire than the heroine; but there are always people who grumble thus. Let us try to sweep the negatives aside before attempting the affirmative.

I have already in the General Introduction attempted to disable the objection to the "Man of the Hill," and I need say no more on that head except that he, like all his kind, is distinctly a *hors-d'œuvre*, to be taken or left at choice. Nor do the other objections to construction seem to me much more valid. The famous preliminary observations have had extended to them by severe judges the indulgence which I myself claim for the episodes, and while they cannot be said in any way to delay the action, they provide the book with an additional element of interest—an element with which, to the same extent and in the same intensity, no other novel in the world is furnished. As for the end, a certain "quickening-up at the finish" hath invariably been allowed, and even prescribed, to artists, and I do not know that it can be said to be greatly exceeded here.

It is, however, undeniable that the defects of Allworthy and Blifil appear at this point more than elsewhere, and
indeed to some extent produce the effect complained of. And I shall further admit that these two characters, especially Blifil, seem to me almost the only spots in Fielding's sun. For Allworthy we can indeed make some excuse—lame after its kind, for your excuse invariably claudicat. There is little doubt that Fielding was hampered and misled by his intention to glorify a particular person, his benefactor Allworthy. Nature, when you cannot take liberties with her, is always a clog on Art, and gratitude constrains the license of the will of men more than malevolence, inasmuch as there is a greater difficulty in disguising particulars. But Allworthy is not so unnatural as he is unsatisfactory; for a very benevolent and very unsuspicous man, whose head was not quite so good as his heart, might act in the way here described. Moreover, his folly and injustice (for his action towards Tom really deserves these words) are not only useful, but almost necessary to the course of the action—a defence rather technical than convincing, but technically good. And here it may be sufficient to say a few words about the effect of Fielding's long practice in drama before he took to fiction. The order has not been usual, for obvious reasons, though the contrary process, the corruption of a good novelist into a dramatist not so good, is, for reasons equally obvious, quite common. But Fielding and Dumas are eminent instances of the happy effect which dramatic practice exercises on the novelist. Dumas, a better dramatist than Fielding, cannot touch him as a novelist; but, like him, he owes to his dramatic practice the singular freedom of even his most hastily cobbled-up stories from what is really otiose. His playwright's eye kept him from the commonest and worst fault of novel-writing, the introduction of matter irrelevant to the story. But it may be somewhat questioned whether the same playwright's habit did not in Fielding's case induce the fault of being contented, in rare instances, with what was necessary for the story.

This operated, I think, even more strongly in the case of Blifil. I do not know that even he can be pronounced wholly unnatural. "A prig, and a bad prig," is not, I fear, an unnatural character in itself. But for this or that reason, Fielding has not made this young wretch alive, as he has made every one else, great and small, among his personages. He seems almost to have deliberately abstained from doing so. We see very little of Blifil in action; he is generally recounted to us. The "messengers," to use the term familiar to readers of the
Greek drama, do his business; the author hangs back to tell his misdeeds; himself is seldom in much evidence on the actual stage. It may be that Fielding could not trust himself with him; that he felt that if he had allowed his figure to appear more actively, something of the dreadful greatness of Jonathan Wild would have passed into Blifil, and have dwarfed and eclipsed the healthier and lighter characters. It may be that he disliked him too much, and shovelled him as quickly as possible out of his hands, as a little later he may have done with a particularly loathsome rogue at Bow Street. But here again these are weak excuses. If Thackeray has one great advantage over his master, I think it is when we compare Barnes Newcome with Blifil. They are very much alike; indeed, as Mr. Blifil, we are expressly told, "retired to the North," it may possibly have happened that some of his blood was in the veins of that most respectable family. But Barnes is much more human, much completer, much more alive. The late Mr. G. S. Venables, an excellent lawyer and an excellent critic, used, I am told, to remark in connection with some puzzling passages at the end of Oliver Twist, that "Dickens hanged Fagin for being the villain of a novel." I am inclined to think that Fielding exacted a more terrible penalty from this his one odious child for the same offence. He deprived him of life to start with.

Nobody can say this of Blifil's brother by the mother's side. "Mr. Thomas" is exceedingly human; and the objections which have been lodged against him have been and must be quite different. With one of them—the anathema launched by Colonel Newcome—there is some slight difficulty in dealing. But the Colonel, though one of the best, was not one of the wisest of men, and he was decidedly weak in history. It might be almost sufficient to say that Scott, the paragon of manly chivalry, and not always a very lenient or sympathetic judge of Fielding, does not seem to have taken any special objection to the Lady Bellaston episode. And I frankly admit that I do not see why he should. In the first place, it must be remembered that the point of honour which decrees that a man must not under any circumstances accept money from a woman with whom he is on certain terms, is of very modern growth, and is still tempered by the proviso that he may take as much as he likes or can get from his wife. In Fielding's days, or but a very little earlier, this moral had simply not been invented. Marlborough, his father's great commander,
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notoriously took a large sum from the Duchess of Cleveland in precisely Tom Jones' circumstances; and though Marlborough's enemies included the bitterest and brightest wits of his time, they seem to have objected, when they objected at all, rather to his careful investment of this money than to his acceptance of it. No easy-going gentleman of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in France or England—and it must be remembered that to compare Tom Jones with the grave and precise ones is absurd—would have thought the worse of himself for accepting a present of money from his mistress, any more than he would have thought the worse of her for accepting one from him. During Tom's youth not a few of the finest gentlemen in Europe found a Lady Bellaston in the Czarina Elizabeth, and during his age many more found one in the Czarina Catherine. I have myself a great admiration for nice points of honour—I don't think you can make them too nice or too fine; but the person who has not been taught them—nay, in whose time they scarcely exist—cannot justly be said to violate them. It seemed perfectly natural to Tom that, when he had money, he should dress out Molly Seagrim, who had none: I do not suppose that it seemed much less natural to him that Lady Bellaston should dress him out when she had money and he had none. A shocking blindness, doubtless; but all blindness is more or less relative.

The more general objections to Mr. Thomas's character seem to me to proceed from one of the commonest but most uncritical faults of criticism—the refusal to consider what it is that the author intended to give us. It is most certain that Fielding did not intend to give us an Æneas or an Amadis, a Galahad or an Artega. He meant to give us an extremely ordinary young man in all respects except good luck, good looks, fair understanding, and generous impulses—a young man incapable of doing anything cruel, or, as far as he understood it, mean, but of no very exceptional abilities, rather thoughtless, fond of pleasure, and not extraordinarily nice about its sources and circumstances—a **jeune homme sensual moyen**, in short. His concessions to heroic needs consisted in making Tom not only—

"Like Paris handsome, and like Hector brave,"

but a much better fellow than Paris and a much luckier one than Hector.
It seems to me that we have absolutely no business to go beyond these limits and insist that Tom shall be a Joseph or even a Percivale; still less to demand that he shall be a young man of literary and artistic sympathies; least of all that he shall be troubled about his soul either in the manner of Launcelot Smith or in the manner of Francis Neyrac. The late Mr. Kingsley was, and the living M. Bourget is, a very clever man. To them too, especially to the first, fell something of the faculty of creative observation, and neither mixes with it more ephemeral matter than he had a right to mix. But if, when the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are to some future generation what the first before and the first after Christ are to us, some competent critic turns out of a new Herculaneum or Pompeii a box containing Tom Jones, Yeast, and La Terre Promise, I know what his verdict will be.

A very little of the same injustice which has thus weighed upon Tom has involved the divine Sophia; but with this we need hardly concern ourselves at all. It is not necessary that she should be our ideal, or any one's ideal. But if any one has read and digested the great and famous first chapter of the Sixth Book, which, if not exactly exhaustive of its difficult subject, contains more practical wisdom than the Phaedrus and more honest passion than all Stendhal's treatise De l'Amour, he will admit that she was a worthy object of the feelings it discusses. Perhaps Mr. Jones was not quite worthy of her; it is not the least of her own worthinesses that the fact is extremely unlikely ever to have occurred to her.

For all the rest we have few vituperators. I think indeed with Scott, rather than with my friend Mr. Dobson, that Squire Western ought not to have taken that beating from the Captain; but then I own myself, as Scott probably was, jealous for the honour of the Tory party, to which Mr. Western also belonged. Nobody else is "out" for a moment during the whole of this long and delightful story. Everybody does what he or she ought to have done—I do not mean morally, which might subject me to the censures of the Church and the Schools alike, but according to the probabilities of human nature and the requirements of great art. Fielding cannot introduce the most insignificant character who makes a substantial appearance without finishing the drawing; he cannot send on the merest scene-shifters, the veriest candle-snuffers, and "population of Cyprus," without impressing upon them natural and distinct personalities. As you turn the pages,