

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 2023

Volume 49 Issue 2

## Essays in Honor of Christopher Kelly

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# Interpretation

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## Literary Theory in Henry Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*

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According to us, a moral book is a book about moral people. But the old idea was almost exactly the opposite; a moral book was a book about immoral people.

—G. K. Chesterton<sup>1</sup>

English writer Henry Fielding (1707–1754) began writing novels in the 1740s, after a successful career as a playwright and theater director. My focus is on only one of Fielding's novels—probably the first he actually wrote, dealing with the criminal career and public hanging of a noted thief (and “thief-taker” fencing stolen goods), *Jonathan Wild*.<sup>2</sup> This early novel by Fielding lacks many of the endearing characteristics of his later novels, such as *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, which examine the virtues of competing forms of goodness and sociability in an emerging, modernizing liberal society. *Jonathan Wild* examines the vices of criminality through a framework of literary irony devised by Fielding to test how far readers are prepared to go in following the supposed hero Jonathan Wild in claiming that his criminal exploits are evidence of his self-esteeming virtue of greatness, despite the absence in Wild of any traces of the virtues of goodness.

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<sup>1</sup> G. K. Chesterton, “Tom Jones and Morality,” quoted in *Henry Fielding: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Claude Rawson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 330.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Fielding, *Jonathan Wild*, ed. Hugh Amory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). This article relies on this Amory edition which is based on the first edition published in 1743. Fielding's revised second edition, published in 1754, is available in Henry Fielding, *Jonathan Wild*, ed. David Nokes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982). See Jenny Davidson, “*Jonathan Wild*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry Fielding*, ed. C. J. Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 65–79.

Fielding was part of a movement of literary innovation testing the norms of civic greatness. Fielding's colleague Alexander Pope (1688–1744) was one of many writers who recoiled from the conventional trust in the so-called greatness of modernist literary civic and political leaders.<sup>3</sup> The texts of classical literary criticism like Aristotle and Horace were at the heart of Pope's writing on literary criticism, shaping a "neoclassical" protest against Whig exercises in literary and political modernism.<sup>4</sup> Literary critic Lawrence Lipking invites us to view the 1740s as "the most innovative decade in English literature": the decade following the fall of the Walpole government unleashed a literary eruption, illustrated in no small part by Fielding's project begun with such dry humor in *Jonathan Wild*.<sup>5</sup>

#### FIELDING'S LITERARY THEORY

The term "literary theory" refers to a wide variety of attempts to frame the study of literary criticism around philosophical theories of the nature of writing and reading. Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* (originally published in 1949) marks out the early years in the contemporary academic study of literary theory.<sup>6</sup> The field of literary theory emerged from the traditional practice of literary criticism and has expanded rapidly over the last fifty years, with a preponderant focus on "postmodern" philosophies often resistant to traditional or "humanistic" literary criticism, and also dissenting from mainstream schools of analytical philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Yet within the growing subfields of literary theory, one can discern substantial historical interest in the "premodern," or better, early modern origins of contemporary literary practice, especially during those moments, such as the 1740s, when new writers articulated classically derived apologies for their literary innovations.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, "Essay on Man: Epistle IV," in *Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. William K. Wimsatt Jr. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1951), 156–67. See generally Bertrand A. Goldgar, *Walpole and the Wits* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), esp. 197–221; and "Fielding's Periodical Journalism," *Cambridge Companion to Henry Fielding*, 109–21.

<sup>4</sup> See "An Essay on Criticism," in *Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry and Prose*, 63–84.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Lipking, "The Genie in the Lamp," in *High Romantic Argument: Essays for M. H. Abrams*, ed. Lawrence Lipking (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 136–38. On *Jonathan Wild* as a conservative critique of Whig political philosophy, see Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 382–94.

<sup>6</sup> Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> Leading examples include Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008). The alternative approach of "literary criticism" is well illustrated by Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Instructive here is M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical*

This paper examines one such defense made by Fielding. The deeper philosophy in Fielding's literary theory becomes clearer when we discover that one of Fielding's intellectual authorities was English philosopher Lord Shaftesbury (1671–1713), whose *Characteristics* inspired Fielding to experiment with new forms of literary humor or raillery, reflecting many ancient as well as modern approaches to the art of fiction writing.<sup>9</sup> Fielding is decidedly a humorist, although his elusive irony makes his humor puzzling. This article tries to solve some of those puzzles. A good writer who was also a good reader, English novelist William Thackeray, noted that Fielding taught generations “to laugh wisely and fairly” and also educated “scholars” in “the exercise of thoughtful humour and the manly play of wit.”<sup>10</sup>

A seasoned dramatist who staged over twenty plays, Fielding turned to novel writing in response to the 1737 Theatrical Licensing Act of the Walpole government. Plays by opponents of the Walpole government would thereafter not be officially licensed. Fearing the worst, the dramatist became a lawyer (later a magistrate) and went on to write many of the best pioneering English novels: *Joseph Andrews* (1742), *Tom Jones* (1749), and *Amelia* (1751). Critics suspect that *Jonathan Wild* was intended as an ironic critique of the questionable greatness of England's first self-styled prime minister, “the great” Sir Robert Walpole.<sup>11</sup> Critics also note that Fielding had literary as well as political opponents, including rival novelist Samuel Richardson, whose *Pamela* was answered by Fielding's brief (and anonymous) *Shamela* (both 1741). Fielding's first published novel, *Shamela* is a critique of corrupt misunderstandings of virtue, foreshadowing Fielding's later political theme of

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*Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); and especially *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory* (New York: Norton, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Samples of Fielding's use of Shaftesbury are evident in *The Criticism of Henry Fielding*, ed. Ioan Williams (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 23, 57, 150, 253, 283. See also W. B. Coley, “The Background of Fielding's Laughter,” *ELH* 26, no. 2 (1959): 229–52. On Shaftesbury and modern political philosophy, see John Uhr, *Performing Political Theory* (Singapore: Palgrave, 2018), esp. 33–49.

<sup>10</sup> W. M. Thackeray, *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Grey Walls, 1949), 174. See also Thackeray, “Review of Fielding's Works,” in Rawson, *Critical Anthology*, 263–66.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Claude Rawson, introduction to *The Life of Mr Jonathan Wild the Great*, in *Jonathan Wild*, ed. Amory, ix–xxxii. On Fielding's anti-Walpole drama, see J. H. Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), 100. See also J. H. Plumb, foreword to *Jonathan Wild*, by Henry Fielding (New York: Signet Classics, 1961), xi–xvii. Note W. B. Coley, “Henry Fielding and the Two Walpoles,” *Philological Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (1966). On core philosophical issues, see Robert Faulkner, *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

the goodness of regenerative civic virtue.<sup>12</sup> The novel *Jonathan Wild* engages in this critique indirectly or ironically—appearing to illustrate and defend Wild’s own understanding of his questionable greatness. The novel examines the quality of human greatness as claimed by vicious criminals like Wild, with less direct attention paid to the scarce virtues of human goodness examined more thoroughly in later, more optimistic novels like *Tom Jones*. The somewhat bleak Wild novel can be read as one of England’s first political novels because of the close association made between the great criminal thief Wild and the dubious greatness of more than one unnamed “prime minister.”

#### CONTEMPORARY LITERARY THEORY

Few political theorists have bothered with Fielding, despite the potential importance of *Jonathan Wild* as a pioneering political novel. Histories of political theory sometimes find novels useful as illustrations of political or public culture; novelists, however, rarely rate as proponents or cultivators of political culture.<sup>13</sup> Habermas, for example, in his early work on the structural transformation of the public sphere, notes the role of Fielding’s rival novelist Richardson whose work influenced Rousseau’s and Goethe’s reflections on civil society; Fielding however passes unnoticed.<sup>14</sup> Fielding’s biographers have dug more deeply into the writer’s literature and politics and their accounts of Fielding’s life and times help readers appreciate the close interest in political philosophy managed by this leading magistrate working so close to the vitalities, both good and bad, in English civil society.<sup>15</sup>

Literary theorists tend to tell a different story. Some prominent literary theorists like Bakhtin note the importance of Fielding as one of the pioneers of the modern comic novel, with *Jonathan Wild* seen as a pioneering

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas Brooks-Davies, introduction to *Joseph Andrews and Shamela* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), vii–xiii. On Fielding’s critique of Richardson, see Terry Eagleton, “Walter Benjamin,” in *The Eagleton Reader*, ed. Stephen Regan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 203. Note also Thomas R. Cleary, *Henry Fielding: Political Writer* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984), 190–97.

<sup>13</sup> An important exception is R. S. Crane, ed., *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). Note especially Crane’s chapter “English Neoclassical Criticism: An Outline Sketch,” 372–88. This chapter anticipates M. H. Abrams, “Pragmatic Theories,” in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 14–21.

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 49–50. On Fielding as “an historian of bourgeois society,” see Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 16.

<sup>15</sup> See especially Martin C. Battestin, *Henry Fielding: A Life* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Donald Thomas, *Henry Fielding: A Life* (New York: St Martin’s, 1990).

example.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, many other literary theorists qualify their evaluation of Fielding's literary worth. Fielding is praised, often conditionally, by literary theorists who examine the literary innovations in such later works as *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*. Yet few of these sympathetic literary theorists include *Jonathan Wild* in their list of Fielding's "theory" contributions. This approach also ignores the bulk of Fielding's general literary theory which was published in the three volumes of *Miscellanies* containing *Jonathan Wild*.<sup>17</sup> Fielding published *Jonathan Wild* as one part of a wider range of reflections on the nature of literary or public culture which reveal much about his framework for literary theory: Fielding's important prefaces to his 1743 miscellaneous collection convey his unusual blending of literary and political theory which continue to confuse literary as well as political critics. These prefatory contributions will be examined towards the end of this article.

Fielding's place in literary theory is due in large part to his innovation in the art of writing novels. However, the real clue to his "theory" comes not only from his writing novels but also from his writing *about* novels, sometimes as digressions in his own novels and at other times in his prefaces and related critical writings. One of the few literary theorists to have acknowledged Fielding's nonfictional analysis is Wayne Booth, with his close interest in classical uses of rhetoric by ancient and modern writers.<sup>18</sup> Booth sees *Jonathan Wild* as Fielding's most unusual novel because it so cleverly reveals the author's "role as a magistrate and reformer of public manners." Fielding's cynical narration is a deliberate part of the author's literary rhetoric which can and will change in his later novels. Prominent in this rhetoric is the use of irony to lead readers closer to the lack of goodness found in many influential examples of civic greatness, like *Jonathan Wild* and his many imitators.<sup>19</sup> The narrator of *Jonathan Wild* is crafted by Fielding's rhetoric for the political purposes of

<sup>16</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 9, 164, 393, 398.

<sup>17</sup> Now republished as Henry Fielding, *Miscellanies*, 3 vols., The Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1972–1997). *Jonathan Wild* is included in *Miscellanies*, vol. 3, ed. Bertrand A. Goldgar (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 3–196, with Goldgar's important "General Introduction," xix–xliv, and Amory's valuable "Appendix 1: Textual Introduction," 197–224.

<sup>18</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). On the importance of digressions in Fielding, see Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 438–39.

<sup>19</sup> Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed., 72, 82–83, 317. On irony in Fielding's "realism," see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1953), 408, 424, 434.

that novel, just as the narrator of *Tom Jones* is later crafted to promote other social and political purposes.<sup>20</sup>

Fielding's role as a critic as well as a writer of literature has received ambiguous support from literary critics. The dissenting, unambiguous view of a minority of literary critics has been that Fielding was "the most fearful and honest magistrate of his day" who became, according to Walter Allen, the "first English theorist of the novel." Fielding's practice of novel writing rested on his use of irony as "his great weapon against pretence, vanity, hypocrisy, inhumanity." Allen judges that *Jonathan Wild* survives as "the grimmest and most brilliant prose satire we have." Fielding thus stands out as a writer of engaging "comedy which, however remorseless, is still comedy." Fielding's novels have impact because the writer "is showing the age its face."<sup>21</sup>

The conventional wisdom of the majority of literary critics has less praise for Fielding. A significant yet troubling voice seeking to identify Fielding's place in "the Epic Theory of the Novel" is Ian Watt's classic analysis of the rise of the modern novel.<sup>22</sup> Watt frames what has become a contemporary commonplace that Fielding's arguments about literary theory are "unimpressive," reflecting Fielding's idiosyncratic "personal value judgments" drawn from his theatrical interest in entertainment. According to Watt, "not too much importance should be attached" to the famous preface to *Joseph Andrews*: Fielding's literary criticism of his own work is flawed.<sup>23</sup> Watt sees Fielding as leaning towards the ancients and away from the moderns in his confusing articulation of "the neo-classical literary tradition" which misses that all-important "epic prototype" promised by Fielding. Watt claims that "Fielding's Homeric style" of burlesque reveals "a somewhat ambiguous attitude to the epic model." He claims that "a good Aristotelian like Fielding" would have known the philosophical and literary limits facing "this ambivalence" between classical Homeric epic and the "mock-heroic" comic dramas so popularly valued by Fielding's audience. Watt concludes that Fielding's genuine

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<sup>20</sup> Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed., 177–78, 211, 215–18. On Fielding's irony, see Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 59–60, 179–84; A. R. Humphreys, "Fielding's Irony," in Rawson, *Critical Anthology*, 377–84; and especially Terry Eagleton, *How to Read Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 53–54, 58, 76, 101–2.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954), 53–67.

<sup>22</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), 249–70.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 260–61.

skills as dramatist of popular comedy undercut his avowed allegiance to the high principles of the classical epic.<sup>24</sup>

As we can see, many call into question the intellectual integrity of Fielding's literary criticism. George Watson is a good example of the prevailing academic ambiguity which acknowledges Fielding's gifts as novelist yet doubts Fielding's justification of his own literary philosophy. Fielding continues to be praised for his innovative novel writing, which is valuable because the writer is "deeply aware of the social context of the individual." Watson, however, withholds praise for Fielding's "incoherent" critical commentary on general literary principles.<sup>25</sup> To be sure, he accepts that Fielding is England's esteemed pioneer in the art of "novel criticism." The problem is that this "first critic of the novel" failed "to create a tradition, and had no disciples": the root of this problem is that Fielding started his literary career as a dramatist and allegedly remained captivated by his love of "burlesque" or stage parody, apparently complicating his criticism with "endless difficulties." For example, the public figure Jonathan Wild emerges from that novel as a "prince of hypocritical scoundrels" in a work that, according to Watson, falls far short of the type of comedy outlined in Fielding's ambitious preface to *Joseph Andrews*. For Watson, Fielding has no genuine "literary theory," to use a concept only just emerging at that time of Watson's scholarship. As a scholar of literary criticism, Watson sees Fielding's well-intentioned criticism as flawed, providing the English literary community with no more than a historically important "false start" to the development of high-principled literary criticism.

#### THE PLOT OF *JONATHAN WILD*

The epigraph with which this article begins has English writer Chesterton refer to the character of Tom Jones as less than fully moral. Chesterton's thesis was that Fielding's great gifts as a novelist reflected his ability to use characters of vice to help readers learn more about the nature of virtue. Here we encounter the idea that the writer Fielding intended to promote deeper understandings of individual and social virtue through his rich and colorful accounts of individual and social vice.<sup>26</sup> Tom Jones stands between low vice

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 264–65, 268–69.

<sup>25</sup> George Watson, *The Literary Critics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), 72–80.

<sup>26</sup> Useful here are Claude Rawson, "Fielding's Style," in *Cambridge Companion to Henry Fielding*, 153–74; and Vivasvan Soni, "Judging, Inevitably: Aesthetic Judgment and Novelistic Form in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2015): 159–80.

and high virtue, with Fielding using stories about this character to help readers learn more about the pathways to virtue associated with this fascinatingly flawed individual.

One way to begin to correct misunderstandings of Fielding is to turn back to the texts themselves and try to see “the plot” of novels like *Jonathan Wild* as we imagine it was understood by author Fielding.<sup>27</sup> A number of literary scholars have already begun to recover Fielding’s original understanding: one of the most impressive such studies is Crane’s chapter in his edited volume *Critics and Criticism*.<sup>28</sup> Using *Tom Jones* as his example, Crane went to some lengths to contrast conventional criticism of the many confusing plot-lines of this later Fielding novel with what Crane suggested was the deeper plot revealing Fielding’s underlying sense of philosophical integrity in this masterwork. In one surprisingly long footnote, Crane sought to clarify his approach to “the concept of plot” by reference to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, in contrast to the recent “extreme reduction of Aristotle’s principles” by those critics who reduce “the plot” through a “method” and “technique” made famous by “critics of the *Scrutiny* group” (that is, the so-called Leavisites).<sup>29</sup> The plot should not be reduced “to action alone,” as though a critic could interpret a novel by collecting the activities of each character over the course of the recorded action. Crane’s alternative approach is to distill “the form of the plot” as “the most important virtue” brought to the work by the novelist intent on moving “our feelings powerfully and pleasurably in a certain definite way.”<sup>30</sup> This alternative approach reflects Crane’s interpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* as an encouragement for critics to reconsider “the concept of the plot” in terms of a dialogue between writer and reader which uses the actions of characters to provide readers with evidence of the underlying unity and integrity of the written text. The unity might well be lost on many or most of the characters, with the implication that recovering the integrity of the text will involve elements of judgment from readers that capture the disguised or dispersed unity

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<sup>27</sup> On mock-heroic themes of *Jonathan Wild*, see C. J. Rawson, “The Hero as Clown,” in *Studies in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. R. F. Brissenden (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1973), 17–52.

<sup>28</sup> R. S. Crane, “The Concept of the Plot and the Plot of *Tom Jones*,” in *Critics and Criticism*, 616–47. Note Wayne Booth’s high praise for this chapter in *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1st ed., 217, 219; on Crane, see also Booth at 33, 36, 321, 372, 377.

<sup>29</sup> Crane, “Concept of the Plot,” 617n7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 620–22. Note Frederick G. Ribble, “Aristotle and the ‘Prudence’ Theme of *Tom Jones*,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 15, no. 1 (1981): 26–47.

championed by the author. In Crane's specific language, the "whole" of the plot is greater than the sum of the "parts" acted out by characters in the text.<sup>31</sup>

Fielding's art of writing in *Jonathan Wild* includes very frequent references to his "readers." Three of the four books of the novel each contain fourteen chapters; the fourth and final book contains sixteen chapters. Almost each of these fifty-eight chapters has the narrator refer to the "readers," with the implication that readers will take note of the comprehensive presence of the "writer" who might or might not be the narrator. By emphasizing the presence of "readers," Fielding is nudging them to think a little bit harder about the role of the "writer." The narrator emerges as yet another character in the novel, mediating between the author and the audience and eliciting a closer relationship between audience and the invisible author.<sup>32</sup> Notably, in the final chapter of book 1, Fielding speaks more openly, either as narrator or as author, when he says that "For my Part, I own myself" when clarifying his own standards of greatness, including that type so disliked by Wild which can "embellish his Country with the Improvement of Arts and Sciences" (1.14).<sup>33</sup> This example illustrates Fielding's capacity occasionally yet strategically to inject himself closer into the action of the novel. Another occasion occurs in a long footnote revealing what "I shall conclude" about the display of different hats by competing gang members (2.6). Fielding can thus use the narrator to separate the audience from the novel's many (twenty-five or so) characters so that readers can start to see beyond the alluring vices of Wild and his gang of followers; but also beyond the endearing virtues of those relatively good characters like the Heartfree couple who are Wild's main prey, with Mrs. Heartfree being Wild's obsessive infatuation.<sup>34</sup>

The plot of *Jonathan Wild* involves three core concepts being explored by Fielding: greatness, goodness, and public integrity. I will examine each before turning to the related prefatory writings illustrating Fielding's underlying art of comedy.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Fielding's irony is well examined by Aurelien Digeon, "Jonathan Wild," in *Fielding: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ronald Paulson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 69–80, which is reproduced from Digeon's *The Novels of Fielding* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), 96–128.

<sup>32</sup> Abrams's category of "pragmatic theories" relates this literary strategy to classical or "mimetic theories": see *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 14–21. On Fielding as narrator, see Claude Rawson, *Order from Confusion Sprung* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1992).

<sup>33</sup> Parenthetical citations are to book and chapter of *Jonathan Wild*.

<sup>34</sup> For a brief but very useful account of irony, see Abrams, "Irony," in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 80–84.

<sup>35</sup> Excellent here is Ian Donaldson, *The World Upside-Down: Comedy from Jonson to Fielding* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 183–206.

## A. GREATNESS

The first concept, that of greatness, is at the forefront of Fielding's novel. *Jonathan Wild* is formally titled *The History of The Life of the Late Mr Jonathan Wild the Great*.<sup>36</sup> Fielding claimed little novelty in writing a work of literature about this former criminal who was hanged in 1725. Defoe's impressive work of 1725 says as much about the criminal character of Wild as readers might ever expect to find.<sup>37</sup> What is distinctive about Fielding's title is the explicit reference to "Wild the Great." The very first chapter introduces Wild as resembling the "ancient Heroes" Alexander and Caesar; yet in contrast to unnamed "Sages or Philosophers," the narrator refuses "to confound the Ideas of Greatness and Goodness" and so presents Wild as carrying as little goodness as is consistent with his "Race to Greatness" (1.1). Fielding is thus inviting readers to view Wild as an exception to the normal blending of part greatness and part goodness: Wild is (or at least thinks he is) exceptionally great. Wild lacks goodness precisely because he wants to magnify his greatness, defined in this first chapter as "bringing all Manner of Mischief on Mankind," imitating what Wild believes to have been the conduct of Alexander the Great (1.3).

If many believe that Alexander had Aristotle as his tutor, then along similar lines Fielding introduces Wild's own tutor in the character of Count La Ruse. In a novel with so many tawdry characters, Count La Ruse stands out as the initial mentor of Wild in the disguised arts of stealing and soon after as the most notable subject of Wild's astute stealing skills. Wild's potential for greatness reflects his belief that great leaders should never be dependent on their followers. Wild declares that no "statesman" is very different from "the Prig" or "what the Vulgar name a Thief"—thereby dramatically emboldening the Count's more cautious advice about the hidden criminal skills required even of "a prime Minister" (1.5). Wild and the Count differ on where the skills of real greatness should be directed, with Wild convinced that "the Statesman" lacks the substantial "Honour" that a wily "Prig" can hope to extract from "his Gang." Wild displays his greatness by eventually taking down his mentor, mainly because Wild is persuaded that the Count is wrong in his praise for the rewards likely to be won by leading statesmen through their deceitful betrayal of public trust. Wild proves his point not only by robbing

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<sup>36</sup> Fielding, *Miscellanies*, 3:xlvi. Note the slightly abbreviated title used in the text relied on in this article: *Jonathan Wild*, ed. Amory, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Defoe, *The Life of Jonathan Wild*, in *Jonathan Wild*, ed. Amory, 183–218.

the Count but also by doing all he can not to be robbed by his own gang of petty thieves.

Wild's contempt for political greatness allows him to wrestle away from the political mainstream a favorite classical political philosopher: Wild justifies his own richer style of scheming by acknowledging what he has learned from Aristotle's *Politics* about treating others as slaves of one's own superior interests (1.8). The conventional honors of political life fall short of what Wild regards as the real nature of honor which is substantially about respect for the domination of power exercised by those in command, as Wild astutely strives to be in relation to his own gang of criminal followers. Knowing that "the Art of Policy is the Art of Multiplication," Wild confesses that armed with a gang he can rightly expect to "be as Great as any Prime Minister whatsoever," yet free from all the limitations of institutionalized politics (1.14).

Fielding makes it difficult for Wild to assemble "his Gang," precisely because each of his potential followers has an antagonistic self-interest which warns them away from serving under the braggart Wild. The gang is eventually formed but only after Wild is given a special opportunity to engage in a revealingly despondent soliloquy on "the State of Priggism" recorded by the narrator (2.4). Nothing great can occur without driving ambition, which Wild nurtures. Wild's scheme to enlist his gang of followers illustrates one of the deep arts of greatness known as "Policy, or Politicks, or rather Politricks" (2.5). Is Fielding inviting us to think of conventional political leaders like Walpole as managers of "pollitricks"? The novel returns to Wild's own "pollitricks" in a wonderfully brief chapter "Of Hats" (2.6). Fielding reveals Wild's strategy of dominating the competitive world of gangland by getting his followers to cease what we might call their "hat-tricide" of misguided factionalism.<sup>38</sup> Instead, what they have to focus on is not their favorite style of "hats" but instead their leader, Wild, who goes on to escalate his power over his gang by displaying how such an effective "Leader" (Fielding's deliberate term) will not stop short of executing followers found to be unworthy of his trust (3.3). Book 3 concludes with an even more bleak challenge to Wild's command over his gang when a follower called Blueskin resists the "Subserviency" leaders expect of followers (3.14). Refusing Wild's request to hand over stolen goods, Blueskin denies that Wild is "the Head" of their gang who mistakenly think they must promote Wild's own "Benefit and Advantage." Wild replies that in "a legal Society," Blueskin's thesis about the limited role of

<sup>38</sup> Note S. T. Coleridge's high praise for this chapter, "A Note," in Rawson, *Critical Anthology*, 257.

“the chief Magistrate” would hold; but in “an illegal Society” there is only one rule, which is “Nothing but a Head, and Obedience to that Head.” The gang comes to side with “their Leader” (again, Fielding’s deliberate term) against this instance of “Disobedience and Revolt.” Wild arranges to get the legal authorities to arrest Blueskin and have him sent to Newgate prison, a location and institution which dominates book 4, the novel’s final book (3.14).

Book 4 traces Wild’s deluded greatness through the busily occupied Newgate prison where the leader is held after yet more rebellious attacks from disgruntled followers. The prize of greatness reassures Wild, even though the legal system finally accepts the advice of a mysterious magistrate who gathers evidence from Wild’s distraught victims, the good (if greatless) Heartfrees. The storyline of *Jonathan Wild* contains the eventual public hanging of the disgraced criminal leader (4.15). Our attention here, however, is with the deeper plot crafted by Fielding which involves two additional concepts worth examining.

## B. GOODNESS

The second concept in the plot of this novel is goodness. *Jonathan Wild* contrasts the scheming cunning of Wild against the naive innocence of the Heartfree couple: the amiable jeweler Mr. Thomas Heartfree and his wife Mrs. Heartfree. Despite their modesty, neither of the two Heartfrees is a completely attractive or persuasive model of moral goodness. Fielding tests his readers to see if they can see ways of building on the naive strength of the Heartfrees to construct a more comprehensive model of goodness. Just as Wild retains minimal elements of basic decency as he grows into vicious criminality, so too the Heartfrees rely on a quite underdeveloped capacity for goodness in their struggle against the predator Wild. Fielding could easily have written about Wild and his cunning management of his criminal gang without reference to a couple like the Heartfrees. By including the Heartfrees in his novel, Fielding helps readers weigh Wild’s vice against some identifiable measure of virtue.<sup>39</sup> The trick entertained by Fielding is to show how vulnerable the goodwill of the Heartfrees is to the social power of Wild’s criminality, through which the luckless Thomas Heartfree finds himself entrapped in Newgate Prison and the canny but socially inexperienced Mrs. Heartfree finds herself at sea—literally, striving to navigate her way back

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<sup>39</sup> C. J. Rawson, *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal under Stress* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 228–59; Davidson, “*Jonathan Wild*,” in *Cambridge Companion to Henry Fielding*, 71–72.

home after being sent to sea and hounded by Wild with his “unbridled Lust and rapacious Avarice” (2.9).

Two elements of this tale of beleaguered goodness seem important to Fielding's underlying plot. First, the type of goodness illustrated by the Heartfrees is free from the social vices relished by Wild. However, the trouble is that the Heartfrees cannot defend themselves against Wild's viciousness. Modest if worthwhile goodness is no match against Wild's great vice. The second element is the surprising use Fielding makes in book 4 of what is almost certainly the last individual character to have a role in *Jonathan Wild*: the curiously unnamed “good magistrate” who emerges to secure the safety of Mrs. Heartfree and to restore the civil liberty of Mr. Heartfree by officially extracting him from Newgate Prison (4.6). The larger point is that modest social virtue and stealthy criminal vice are not equally capable forces: civil liberty needs additional institutional safeguards if virtue is to be protected against the sly power of vice. The unnamed “good magistrate” holds a significant public office which has legitimate power to punish those like Wild who endanger others through a self-interested career in criminality.

Critics have indeed acknowledged Fielding's slight account of the good characters in *Jonathan Wild*. What has been missed, however, is Fielding's moderation in the analysis of the threatened place of the good in this tale of great criminality. Wild grows and grows as an evil predator, thereby showing how easy it can be for those like him who find no interest in trying to be good. Wild is excellent at being bad—in a novel that really shows no characters who grow in excellence at being good. The Heartfrees lack something important, which might be hinted at in their shared family name: they are free of something vital in the heart, which is a commitment to grow in moral strength as a positive quality to outmatch Wild's negative commitment to strengthen his vicious capacities.<sup>40</sup>

The Heartfrees enter the novel in book 2, in a chapter with a subtitle about the “Characters of silly People, with the proper Uses for which such are designed” (2.1). The silly characteristic refers to the “Good-natured” quality of this couple, by which Fielding means the “several great Weaknesses of Mind” of Thomas Heartfree who is presented as “so silly a Fellow” with his excessive generosity, married to “this silly Woman” Mrs. Heartfree. Fielding makes effective use of this “designed” couple as the honest victims who “misapprehended the Design” of Wild. Their modest level of goodness reflects

<sup>40</sup> Davidson, “*Jonathan Wild*,” 72–73.

this low level of apprehension. Fielding's own "design" is to help readers understand that substantial moral goodness will require the kind of astute apprehension displayed by the "good magistrate" who sees through Wild's chosen advocate Fireblood. Wild's advocate weakens under the power of "the Justice" to whom he "honestly confest" that Thomas Heartfree's conviction rested on his own false evidence (3.10; 4.6).

### C. PUBLIC INTEGRITY

The third concept in the plot is public integrity. The "good magistrate" outwits Wild's foremost gang member and thereby frees Heartfree from prison. This magistrate learns "the Truth" from Fireblood through what Fielding's narrator calls a justifiable deceit about Wild's supposed promise of assistance to the magistrate. The role of the "good magistrate" is to promote public integrity, even through the use of deceitful procedures wherever justified. Fielding suggests the boundaries of this discretion by noting the even greater power of "the Sovereign" to whom the Heartfree case is satisfactorily referred (4.6). The role of the magistrate is not to make up the law or provide legal justice as he might see fit, but to correct injustices through approved processes that reach right up to the pardoning power of "the Sovereign." Indeed, the final chapter describes many other forms of restitution for the Heartfrees achieved at the suggestion of the "good magistrate" (4.12, 16).

*Jonathan Wild* has several characters who act in ways that mimic the "good magistrate." Fielding uses these characters to sketch out the place and importance of public integrity in the plot of this novel. The least admirable such character is Marybone, one of Wild's gang who refuses to commit a murder while carrying out a robbery. Wild fears that Marybone's delicate conscience might disturb and divide the gang with this plea for something resembling a degree of public integrity. Wild ensures that Marybone is "impeached and executed" in a mock imitation of the legal process that will eventually rob Wild of his own life (3.3). A second character invoking integrity is Thomas Heartfree, who, when he starts to recognize that Wild is not the friend he pretends to be, declares his commitment to "a good Conscience," claiming to imitate Socrates who refused to save his life by escaping from prison (3.5). A third example is the character Blueskin who struggles against the "Subserviency" managed by Wild, against whom he tries to reset the rules of the gang. Blueskin's unsuccessful rebellion attracts considerable support from gang members like Wild's favored Fireblood, who "returned to his Integrity" in supporting Wild once Blueskin's "Disobedience and Revolt"

came unstuck (3.14). This sole use of the term “integrity” in the novel highlights the useful but severely limited sense of *public* integrity entertained by Fireblood who is one of Wild’s team players—later to turn informant against Wild when facing the “good magistrate.”

Two more examples stand out. Wild’s battle within Newgate against the established party led by the minor character Roger Johnston imitates the earlier chapter on “the hats” by having Wild defeat Johnston and so win the right to wear the colorful “Ornaments” and “Trappings” worn by the defeated leader (2.6; 4.3). Again, an unnamed character then emerges as “a very grave Man” whose only speech asks the inmates of Newgate what is the “Benefit to us” of such struggles over costumes. The hint toward integrity is seen in the plea for “a total Change in our Manners” away from the domination not only of “the *Prigs*” but also of “*Priggism*.” Better it would be to “let us be content with our honest Share of the common Bounty.” This unusual speech in favor of “our Liberty” calls on the prison inmates to “consider ourselves all as Members of one Community,” sacrificing “our private Views” to “the public Good” (4.3). Fielding’s “design” is thus to deepen readers’ understanding of the plot of *Jonathan Wild* which looks beyond Wild’s criminal vice to a regime of civic virtue worthy of the rehabilitated Heartfrees we encounter in the very last chapter (4.16).

#### FIELDING’S ART OF COMEDY

Central to the plot of *Jonathan Wild* is Fielding’s art of comedy which provides us with an opportunity to look outside the text of the novel to those prefaces containing Fielding’s pioneering literary theory. Fielding gives the text of the novel to his readers while he uses the prefaces to give something more directly philosophical to the critics. The text of *Jonathan Wild* explicitly refers to “the Pleasure of the Critics” who are acknowledged as “a Sort of People” writers must pay “all that just Duty and Respect” (4.6). What counts as “all that just Duty” is reflected in both the text and the related prefaces. The text of this novel has the narrator looking back to classical antiquity in greater detail than Wild, who looks back somewhat conveniently to his understanding of the antiquity of Alexander the Great. Fielding has three references each to Socrates and Aristotle and one to Plato.<sup>41</sup> These brief passages of philosophical reference are matched by several passages where the narrator reflects on the art of writing generally, with the art of writing history

<sup>41</sup> Fielding, *Jonathan Wild*, 90, 97, 164 (Socrates); 26, 64, 172 (Aristotle); 172 (Plato).

used as the primary model.<sup>42</sup> The narrator frequently refers to the work as a “history” meaning that the novel is not made up as a work of fiction as readers might think. The narrator claims that the novel is not “contrary to the strictest Rules of Writing and Probability” (4.6). However, Fielding’s art of comedy is rooted deeply in the text of *Jonathan Wild* which pretends to tell a historical tale free of the extravagant disguises of romance literature. In the penultimate chapter, Fielding’s narrator wonders whether a historian should “indulge himself in the Licence of Poetry and Romance” in order to produce “an instructive Moral,” similar to that arising from the stories around the death of Wild (4.15). The comedy is caused by the confusion over the morality arising from Wild’s hanging, which might be the morality of greatness displayed by the mighty Wild or the morality of the civic decency of such a criminal’s death. Fielding slyly suggests that while his account follows “the Truth of History,” it also challenges “the Latitude of Fiction” in generating this truthful tale (4.16).

The first preface to note is that from the 1743 edition of the *Miscellanies* containing *Jonathan Wild*.<sup>43</sup> Although the text of the novel often refers to it as “our history,” Fielding explicitly notes in this preface that the novel is more about the actions which Wild “might have performed, or would, or should have performed, than what he really did.” Thus, the novel also suits “any other such great Man,” as Walpole’s followers in “the Great World” might have appreciated. Fielding refers to “the Doctrine” and related “useful lesson” his novel seeks to inculcate. The focus is not so much on the world of Wild as “the Great World” where greatness hides its lack of virtue. Speaking bluntly, Fielding says that “the splendid Palaces of the Great are often no other than *Newgate* with the Mask on.” *Jonathan Wild* takes “the Mask off.” Having “Wealth and a Title” is no defense against the temptations of vice. The “Doctrine” distinguishes the two ideas of goodness and greatness, so that readers can see those who are great but not good and also those who are good but not great. The good lack “Parts or Courage”; the great are possessed by “every Kind of Villany” in their surprisingly deceptive “Bombast Greatness.” The rare exceptions are those great, good characters like Socrates and Brutus, illustrating “the *true Sublime* in Human Nature.”

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., Fielding, *Jonathan Wild*, 135, 140–41, 176, 179.

<sup>43</sup> Appendix 2, in *Jonathan Wild*, ed. Amory, 219–24; this is an edited extract from the original preface which is available in Fielding, *Miscellanies*, vol. 1, ed. Henry Knight Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 3–15.

The preface to *Joseph Andrews*, published a year before the publication of *Jonathan Wild*, is Fielding's most notable contribution to what we now call literary theory.<sup>44</sup> This novel is also called a "history" in its title, yet it also declares that it was "Written in Imitation of the *Manner* of Cervantes, Author of *Don Quixote*."<sup>45</sup> The preface examines "this kind of Writing" which might resemble a romance but differs to such an extent that it is of a kind never attempted before in the English language. Drawing on Homer and Aristotle, Fielding notes the importance of separating comedy from tragedy and seeks to clarify the nature of a comic epic by examining aspects of a comic romance, again separating the conventional type of comedy known as a parody or burlesque from his own type of comedy closer to the imitation of nature. Burlesque comedy deals with "what is monstrous and unnatural"; natural comedy resembles "the true Sublime" in the way that it highlights "the Ridiculous." Drawing explicitly on his mentor Shaftesbury, Fielding identifies the role of "Mirth and Laughter" in the nurture of "Good-Humour and Benevolence" for audiences not wanting to be "soured by a Tragedy or a grave Lecture." The task then is to define the nature of the ridiculous so that we can better understand the subject matter of comedy, which seems to stop short of ridiculing shocking calamities and "the blackest Villanies": "*the Comedy of Nero*" is an appalling example of what not to expect of a comedy, yet potentially the topic for "a Tragedy or a grave Lecture."

For Fielding, the source of "the true Ridiculous" is one type of vice: "Affectation," which itself arises from either the modest social vice of vanity or ostentation, reflecting "some human Frailty or Foible"; or alternatively from the immodest social vice of hypocrisy or deceit. The immodest vice deceives by reversing what the individual "would *seem* to be" which arouses "our Detestation," whereas the modest vice deceives by exaggerating and distorting pretended virtues which can arouse "our Pity." The aim of comedy is to help audiences "to laugh, and with justice" at detestable social deceit.

The last of the three prefaces is the one published a year after *Jonathan Wild* in Fielding's sister's novel about David Simple.<sup>46</sup> The provocation for

<sup>44</sup> Henry Fielding, preface to *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Homer Goldberg (New York: Norton, 1987), 3–8. See Homer Goldberg, "Comic Prose Epic or Comic Romance: The Argument of the Preface to *Joseph Andrews*," *Philological Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1964): 193–215; and Judith Frank, "The Comic Novel and the Poor: Fielding's Preface to *Joseph Andrews*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27, no. 2 (1993–94): 217–34.

<sup>45</sup> On Fielding and Cervantes, see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 84, 88–89.

<sup>46</sup> "The Preface," in *The Adventures of David Simple*, by Sarah Fielding, ed. Malcolm Kersall (Oxford:

this preface is Fielding's fear that his own reputation as a writer has been damaged by allegations that he has written much of "the Scurrility, Bawdy, Treason, and Blasphemy" of recent publications. We suspect that rival novelist Richardson was not the sole person to engage in such allegations. Fielding explicitly refers to his preface to *Joseph Andrews* to clarify the nature of "a comic Epic Poem," written either in poetry like Pope's *Dunciad* or in prose like Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. The defining feature of such comic epics is that their tales are "amiable, ridiculous and natural." Admittedly, comic novels can employ "the help of Irony" to disguise the amiable as "the odious" which might well reflect Fielding's own practice in *Jonathan Wild*. Ridiculous writing here means deflating the pretension of those with affectations towards the singularity of greatness; and natural writing means measuring those affectations against "the Perfection or Imperfection of Friendship." Wild's self-interested friendship for the Heartfrees is a marker of imperfect friendship; while the friendship between the two Heartfrees reflects a more perfect form of friendship ready to be nurtured even further by the "good magistrate."

## CONCLUSION

One challenge facing readers of Fielding is to know what to do with his notorious irony, understood as "a coded language meaning one thing to the few and another to the many."<sup>47</sup> Critics have long pondered the cryptic advice from nineteenth-century British writer Keightley that *Jonathan Wild* was "a scathing political satire" written with such care that "the real meaning is so veiled as to be hardly discoverable without a key."<sup>48</sup> The most promising key is in the three-volume *Miscellanies*, which contain two essays on polite (or politic) communication.<sup>49</sup> These two works contain Fielding's most frank account about cultivating the uncommon virtue of good nature and exposing the common vice of hypocrisy. Humor is Fielding's favored art to try to comfort those who fear that social virtue will fall victim to the deceptive power of the wily Jonathan Wilds who rule their chosen social domains.

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Oxford University Press, 1987), 3–8; see also Goldberg, "Comic Prose Epic or Comic Romance," 208–13.

<sup>47</sup> Claude Rawson, "Fielding in the Dock," *London Review of Books*, April 5, 1990. See also Goldgar, "General Introduction," xli–xliv.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in J. E. Wells, "Fielding's Political Purpose in *Jonathan Wild*," *PMLA* 28, no. 1 (1913): 1. Donaldson, *The World Upside-Down*, 196–203, argues that *Jonathan Wild* is comic but not satiric.

<sup>49</sup> See "An Essay on Conversation" and "An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men," in *Miscellanies*, 1:119–78. Useful commentary is Henry Knight Miller, *Essays on Fielding's "Miscellanies": A Commentary on Volume One* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 164–214.

Fielding's novels can be seen as experiments designed to draw from his mentor Shaftesbury the inspiration to produce narratives of social and indeed public comedy.<sup>50</sup> Socratic irony emerges as Fielding's preferred model for those striving to promote the type of prudent character he identifies as a "Sophronus" who (perhaps like Fielding) can amuse the many while they try to instruct others in deeper moral philosophy.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> On Shaftesbury, see Fielding, *Miscellanies*, 1:126 and 157.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 142–44.

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