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978-0-521-85451-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Henry Fielding

Edited by Claude Rawson

Excerpt

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CLAUDE RAWSON

Introduction

Henry Fielding was born on 22 April 1707 and this *Companion* thus appears in his tercentenary year. He died on 8 October 1754. In a life of less than fifty years he became the most important English playwright of his time, whom Shaw thought the ‘greatest practising dramatist . . . between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century’¹ apart from Shakespeare. He is also one of the great inaugural figures of the history of the novel, admired and imitated by Stendhal, Dickens, Thackeray, and other masters of the particular species of fiction that uses a strong controlling narrator. His novels were from the start written in self-conscious opposition to those of his rival Samuel Richardson (1689–1761), who represents an equally foundational but more self-effacing mode, in which the author purports to be invisible, and which aims at creating a feeling that the reader is witnessing real events rather than reading a story. Though not the only or the first important early novelists in Western literature, both writers represent, and helped decisively to shape, alternative styles of what was to become the dominant literary form of the modern world.

Fielding had aristocratic lineage and was educated at Eton. He was also continuously short of money, and experienced debt and various forms of low life as a penniless author and frequenter of taverns. His novels are laced with a lightly worn classical erudition, and have an ironic urbanity, partly worn as a badge of caste, but they also show a not wholly incompatible fondness for coarse popular entertainments. His manner derives to some extent from the satirical writers of the preceding generation, themselves spokesmen for a quasi-aristocratic ethos and a deep cultural loyalty to the ancient classics, who, while themselves mostly non-patrician, knew how to combine lordly hauteur with touches of demotic vulgarity. Fielding formed his oblique, ironic style, and his thrusting satirical energy, partly from Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), whom he venerated as a satiric master. But his writings are marked with his own individual stamp, warmer, more generous, and (except in some later works) less pessimistic. The Scriblerus Club, the coterie led by Swift and the poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744), was the source of the

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pseudonym Scriblerus Secundus, which Fielding used in his early plays. In this too he differed from Richardson, a more bourgeois figure, equally suspicious of the lordly and the low, and not naturally given to urbanity or ironic finesse.

Fielding wrote over two dozen plays between 1728 and 1737, when his outspoken criticism of Sir Robert Walpole's government helped to bring about the Licensing Act. This legislation imposed pre-production censorship on the English stage and lasted until 1968, though latterly exercised over moral rather than political issues. Fielding had engaged in political controversy in the 1730s, and continued throughout his life as a pamphleteer and journalist, editing several important journals from the *Champion* (1739–40) to the *Covent-Garden Journal* (1752). He also began to practise law, eventually becoming Justice of the Peace for Westminster and Middlesex, and writing several works on social and political issues, of which the best known are the *Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers* (1751) and *A Proposal for Making an Effectual Provision for the Poor* (1753). He played a role in the shaping of what eventually became the Metropolitan Police.

This *Companion* considers Fielding's achievements as a dramatist, journalist, political writer, and socio-legal thinker. But he is principally celebrated for his fiction, which effectively began with *An Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews* (1741), a parody of Richardson's first novel, *Pamela* (1740). Most of his subsequent fictions, *Joseph Andrews* (1742), *Tom Jones* (1749), and *Amelia* (1751), pointedly define themselves in relation to Richardson's work and personality, which stood as a lifelong shadow over Fielding's shoulder. His feelings for Richardson, unlike Richardson's for him, were not wholly negative, and included a warm admiration for Richardson's second novel, *Clarissa* (1747–8). There was personal antagonism between the two writers, but it helped to establish and refine two rival models of the novel, and the effect of Fielding's almost obsessive concern with Richardson was to develop and sharpen a mode of fiction-writing whose life and afterlife continue strong.

NOTES

1. George Bernard Shaw, Preface to *Plays Unpleasant* (1898; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), xii.

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Henry Fielding's life

Henry Fielding was born on 22 April 1707. His father, Edmund Fielding, was the son of a younger son of a seventeenth-century Earl of Desmond, whose family claimed kin (erroneously as it later turned out) with the imperial Habsburg dynasty. In 1707, at the age of twenty-seven, Edmund was a Lieutenant Colonel in Queen Anne's army, and had served with distinction in the wars against France, including the Duke of Marlborough's great victory at Blenheim (1704). Henry's mother, Sarah, was daughter of Sir Henry Gould, who had succeeded in a more prosaic but no less powerful profession, rising to be one of the most distinguished lawyers of his time. It was at Sir Henry's estate, Sharpham Park in Somerset, that Edmund and Sarah's first child, named for his grandfather, was born. The match was a fruitful one, producing seven children in nine years: Henry was followed by Catherine, Ursula, Anne (who died in 1715 at the age of three), Sarah, Beatrice, and Edmund. Shortly before his death in 1710 Sir Henry Gould arranged the purchase of a substantial farm for them in the village of East Stour in Dorset. Here, in a rich rural setting later celebrated by the novelist Thomas Hardy, the Fielding children spent their early childhood, mostly in the care of their mother, since Edmund, who clearly found the idea of being a country squire unappealing, was often away on active service, or on pleasure trips in Ireland or London.

In 1718, just before Henry's eleventh birthday, his mother died, and this led to a series of upheavals which transformed the children's lives. Their father, still only in his late thirties, remarried within a year; his return to East Stour from London with his new wife, who was already pregnant, initiated a new regime, in which, it was rumoured, the children of Edmund's first marriage were at best neglected and at worst abused. Moreover, the new Mrs Fielding was said to be a practising Catholic – a serious charge in the early years of the first Hanoverian king, George I, amid continuing fears of an attempt to restore the Catholic Stuarts to the throne. All this stirred Sir Henry's widow, the children's formidable grandmother, Lady Gould, to

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action. Sir Henry had not completed the purchase of the East Stour farm before his death, leading to legal confusion about its ownership; moreover, clearly doubtful of his son-in-law's ability to handle money or domestic responsibility, he had left the farm for the benefit of his daughter and her children only. Now Lady Gould sued Edmund both for the farm's income, which, she said, he had appropriated to himself rather than spending it on his children, and for custody of the children themselves because of the neglect and abuse they were suffering.

Court records document the charges and counter-charges that followed, as Edmund tried to assert his rights to his children on the one hand, and to the farm and its income on the other. Perhaps he was never likely to succeed, with the legal skill and knowledge of the Goulds ranged against him. After two years and a series of bruising encounters during which family members and servants took partisan positions, revealing intimate and embarrassing details of the Fieldings' life in open court, Lady Gould gained custody of the children, and obtained legal guarantees that the income from East Stour would be used for their benefit. It was determined that Henry, who was by now at school at Eton, would spend his school holidays with his grandmother.

It is easy to imagine how distressing and disruptive all this must have been to Henry, a boy who already, according to evidence given in court, was passionate, headstrong, and unruly. He had, with his siblings, been publicly wrangled over; he must have been aware of the accusations of abuse and bad behaviour on all sides; he was now to be deprived of the control which might be exercised by his father, in favour of occasional attendance in a household dominated by two elderly women – his grandmother and her sister – and containing five younger siblings, four of them girls.

Lady Gould had recently moved to Salisbury, and the Fielding girls had been placed in a school there. On at least one occasion Henry apparently ran away from Eton to the sanctuary of his grandmother; certainly he seems not to have defied the courts to be with his father. But in fact, during his adolescent years, he seems to have been content enough at school. Eton was one of the leading schools in the country, the first choice for the sons of many of the aristocracy and gentry. Along with the harsh regime of bullying and beating which afflicted most boys' schools in the eighteenth century, Eton offered a curriculum, based on thorough knowledge of classical literature in the original Latin and Greek together with a close familiarity with the Bible, which was felt to equip a gentleman's son to make his way in any of the leading professions, as well as to provide him with superior social and intellectual resources. The extent to which Fielding enjoyed, and was influenced by, a wide range of classical writers first encountered at Eton is

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evident from his later work (although projects to translate the works of Aristophanes and Lucian never reached fruition). Eton's other major attraction was extra-curricular: it enabled the sons of aristocrats and gentry to make friendships which were intended to serve them well in adult life. Again Fielding benefited: the friendships he made at Eton – with George, later Lord, Lyttelton, and with Charles Hanbury Williams and William Pitt, later Lord Chatham, all of them powerful in government in the mid-century – created loyalties which lasted for the rest of his life.

During school holidays, and frequently afterwards, he made his home with his grandmother and sisters in Salisbury. Visiting Salisbury around this time, as part of his 'tour through the whole island of Great Britain', Daniel Defoe described 'a large and pleasant city' – in fact, with 8,000 inhabitants, one of the ten largest cities in England – driven by prosperous mercantile activity and only slightly marred by its perennially wet and dirty streets. At the heart of the city was the magnificent cathedral, with its surrounding 'close' of substantial houses; here the Fielding sisters went to school, and here prominent local gentry – including Lady Gould – lived. 'The people of Salisbury are gay and rich . . . and there is a great deal of good manners and good company among them', wrote Defoe.¹ The local gentry included several with children around the same age as the Fieldings, and more friendships were formed. James Harris, whose family was related to the Earls of Shaftesbury, and who was later the author of the grammatical treatise *Hermes* and later still a prominent politician, became Fielding's closest friend. The later history of the Collier siblings would also be bound up with that of the Fieldings, for good and ill: Arthur Collier would involve Fielding in financial difficulties; Jane, who lodged with Sarah Fielding and collaborated with her on *The Cry* (1754), was one of the few close friends who saw Henry and his family off on his final voyage to Lisbon in 1754; while Margaret travelled to Portugal as part of Fielding's household.

Despite making friends there, however, Fielding seems to have had no intention of settling in Salisbury. Indeed, immediately after Eton he did not seem to be settling at all. In Lyme Regis in the summer of 1725 he caused mayhem when he attempted to elope with his cousin Sarah Andrew; in London in 1726 he was accused of assaulting one of his father's servants.

However, it must always have been clear that Fielding would need, sooner rather than later, to undertake a profession. The Goulds were fond of the Fielding children, but the Gould fortune was comfortable rather than opulent, and would descend not to the Fieldings but to Lady Gould's son and his children. Edmund Fielding had paid for his son's schooling, and allowed him a modest maintenance for a while afterwards, but Sir Henry's earlier caution seems to have been well justified: though Edmund continued to rise in the

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army, he was never able to hold on to money he earned: he lost one large sum at the gaming tables, and another in the South Sea Bubble. His second wife having died after giving him six sons, he married a third, and though her wealth was said to be significant it was still unequal to his expenses.

Fielding once said that he had a choice between becoming a hackney writer or a hackney coachman.² The word ‘hackney’ – from which the modern term ‘hack’ derives – is telling, since throughout his life Fielding felt ambivalent, at best, about the dignity of writing for a living. He was very conscious of his aristocratic connections, and he had been brought up with boys whose futures as gentlemen, with the financial resources to exercise what political or intellectual interests they chose, were assured; if they indulged in literature it would be as amateur authors. But Fielding’s own family and background was not unlike theirs, and a more realistic choice for a career was not between being a hackney writer or a hackney coachman, but between the army, the profession of his father and paternal uncle (and eventually of his younger brother), and the law, which had been the choice not only of his grandfather, but also of his maternal uncle, and more than one of his cousins on his mother’s side. Whichever of these he chose, family ‘interest’ would have helped him – a very important consideration in a society which largely operated through patronage. In the face of this Fielding’s decision to make his income from the highly precarious profession of writing looks like an act of rebellion against both sides of the family.

He began where he clearly meant to continue, at the centre of things in London, in the momentous year of 1727, as George II acceded to the throne on the death of his father, and the first minister Sir Robert Walpole confounded his rivals by hanging on to office despite the change of regime. Fielding’s first known attempt at authorship was a pamphlet containing two poems, *The Coronation*, *A Poem*, and *an Ode on the Birthday* – which is ironic on two counts, since Fielding would later become notorious for his writings against the government (though not against the king), and he wrote of poetry as a ‘Branch of writing [that] I very little pretend to, and ... very little my Pursuit’.³

London in the early eighteenth century, with a population of around 600,000, was the largest city in Europe and ten times bigger than any other city in Britain; and it was still growing fast. It was essentially two cities, now merging into one as it grew: the City of London, national and international centre of trade and commerce, at the height of its prosperity before the Industrial Revolution diverted investment further north; and Westminster, centred on Parliament, and the king’s court. Everywhere aristocracy and gentry, expanding with wealth and confidence, lived their lives in close proximity to abject poverty, misery, violence, and crime.

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People of all kinds and intentions were drawn to London as by a magnet, and once there they formed a noisy, boisterous, self-confident, and self-centred population. They kept up with the news of the day through a vast range of newspapers and pamphlets, and through discussion and debate at taverns, coffee houses, and drinking clubs. Inhabitants of London loved to see and be seen, whether promenading in the pleasure gardens of Vauxhall and Ranelagh or crowding through the main streets of the city. London was a place of spectacle and public display, from the hangings at Tyburn to the puppet-drolls of Bartholomew Fair, from the playful and dangerous ‘anonymity’ of masquerades to the formal performances of the London theatre, where – partly because the theatres were lit throughout the performance – the audience was as much a centre of attention as the actors or musicians. Only two theatres, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, were officially licensed, though other theatres successfully skirted the law from time to time. During the long theatrical ‘season’ from autumn to midsummer operas were performed, both Italian and English, and ‘the back of Mr Handel’ could frequently be seen in the orchestra pit. And plays were presented, often in very short runs if audiences failed: they included work by Shakespeare and his adaptors, and the still popular playwrights of the late seventeenth century, Dryden, Congreve, and Vanbrugh. New plays had to earn their place in this repertoire, and not many succeeded.

It has been said that of all the Hanoverian kings George II was the least interested in literature or the arts.⁴ Certainly the most prominent writers of the day were out of favour both with the king and with Walpole’s government. And while Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and Alexander Pope’s *Dunciad* (1728) were offering young writers examples to follow in fiction and poetry, the most spectacular success of the late 1720s was a play – not only a new play, but a new dramatic form: in 1728 John Gay’s popular, radical *Beggar’s Opera* astonished everyone with an unprecedented run of sixty-three consecutive performances.

It was into this world that Fielding stepped, and his beginning was auspicious: his first play, *Love in Several Masques*, was performed at Drury Lane in February 1728. Fielding had the support of his cousin Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, but even so, for a twenty-year-old to have his first play produced under the direction of Colley Cibber, the most powerful figure in the London theatre, was an extraordinary achievement. *Love in Several Masques* was not a spectacular success: it ran for only four nights (though it did play past the all-important third night, from which the playwright took the profits, and the playscript was published). Still, Fielding evidently found the dramatic medium congenial, and – after a short break studying at the University of Leiden – he returned to the London stage. For the moment his links with

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established theatre were broken. His second play, *The Temple Beau* (1730), was performed at the new, small Goodman's Fields venue. And with his third play, *The Author's Farce* (also 1730), not only did he change theatres yet again – this time to the Little Theatre, Haymarket – but he turned to a new kind of writing: under the significant signature of 'Scriblerus Secundus' (thus allying himself with the 'Scriblerian' satirists Swift, Pope, and Gay) Fielding now offered an anarchical mix of ballad opera, gossip, satire, and farce which proved enormously popular. From now onwards, while he continued to write conventional five-act plays, and pleased audiences with his adaptations from Molière, *The Mock-Doctor* and *The Miser*, it was with clever comic-satiric burlesques of various kinds that he had his greatest triumphs, most notably perhaps *Tom Thumb* (1730), particularly in its revised version, *The Tragedy of Tragedies* (1731). For several heady years Fielding was the most successful playwright in the British theatre. Not only were his plays and shorter afterpieces widely performed in the London playhouses, but they were also seen, performed by actors or puppets, at the London fairs.

During these years Fielding collaborated with a new group of London people, not just the famous actors of his day – Charles Macklin, James Quinn, Kitty Clive – but also the American-born writer and critic James Ralph, and the artist William Hogarth, who, Fielding wrote in *Amelia*, painted to 'perfection' (Book 1, ch. vi), and whose views on the twin realistic and moral purpose of art and literature were very much in harmony with Fielding's. At the same time Fielding was making his mark not only as a playwright but as a personality, and a controversial one at that.

Bedaub'd o'er with Snuff, and as drunk as a Drum,
And mad as a *March* Hare Beau F[ielding] does come;
He staggers, and swears he will never submit
To correction of (a) Friends, or the Censure of *Pit* ...

(a) This Gentleman is so self-conceited that he quarrels with every one that shews him a Fault.

wrote a waspish commentator in 1730:⁵ a vivid example not only of the speed with which Fielding achieved prominence in the small-town city of London, but also of the extreme responses he attracted throughout his life. Throughout his career he had what his most sensitive recent biographer has described as 'an incapacity to go about the world unobserved'.⁶

There is, alas, no contemporary portrait of Fielding. The most sympathetic description was given by his friend the mild-mannered James Harris, in a biographical essay written in the late 1750s but not published. Harris wrote that Fielding's 'Genius was acute, lively, docile, capable equally both of the Serious and Ridiculous; his Passions vehement & easily passing into Excess;

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his Person strong, large, and capable of great Fatigues; his Face not handsome, but with an Eye peculiarly penetrating, & which during the sallies of wit or anger never failed to distinguish it self'.⁷ Fielding's first official biographer, Arthur Murphy, while also recording Fielding's imposing physical presence – he was over six feet tall, with a 'frame of body large, and remarkably robust'⁸ – was more censorious, at least about Fielding's early activities in London: with a temper 'for the most part overflowing into wit, mirth, and good humour' and 'formed . . . for enjoyment', Murphy opines that the young Fielding 'launched wildly into a career of dissipation' (10, 9).

Clearly Fielding indulged to excess in alcohol and tobacco, and he relished the rich diet of the time – his writings are remarkable for their appreciative references to food, and it is no coincidence that one of his greatest successes was with the song 'The Roast Beef of Old England' (1736). It seems very likely that his dissipations also involved sexual escapades. However, as early as the late 1720s he had been writing sentimental poems to 'Celia', a Salisbury beauty, probably Charlotte Cradock, daughter of one of Lady Gould's neighbours; and in 1734 he married her. Contemporaries acknowledged that he loved her dearly; he later called her 'one from whom I draw all the solid Comfort of my life'.⁹

According to Murphy Charlotte had a dowry of £1,500 on her marriage, and a larger inheritance when her mother died in 1735. And Fielding had accumulated large sums of money from his plays – money relatively easily earned, since he may not have laboured too hard over the playscripts if the story is true that he 'would go home rather late from a tavern, and would, the next morning, deliver a scene to the players written upon the papers which had wrapped the tobacco in which he so much delighted' (27). Nevertheless, whatever else Fielding was accused of, no-one ever alleged that he was mean with his money: as large sums came in, even larger sums slipped away. In the mid-1730s, it was widely believed, when the new-married couple set up home at East Stour Fielding spent his wife's fortune in expansive country living and hospitality.

This left them with the small income from his share of the farm (which was finally sold when the last of the Fielding children, Edmund, reached the age of twenty-one in 1738), and a tiny annuity from an uncle, as all he could hope for from his family. Edmund senior had never been able to hang on to the money he had received; although he had occupied the remunerative office of Acting Governor of Jersey in the late 1730s he became caught up in another financial disaster in London, was reduced to debtors' prison, and when he died in 1742 was said to be worth less than £5. As Fielding's own family began to increase – his first child Charlotte was born in 1736 – his assets diminished, and poverty stared him in the face.

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And in 1737 the Stage Licensing Act ended Fielding's career as a dramatist. In the 1730s Fielding wrote a series of very funny plays, several of which were seen, at least in part, as satires on the shortcomings of Walpole and his government. Walpole had now been first minister for more than twenty years, and was the most powerful politician England had seen for a long time. His professional relationship with Fielding is murky. Through his friendship with George Lyttelton, Fielding was naturally associated with Opposition politicians, and his hits at political corruption inevitably had Walpole in their sights. However, in 1731 *The Grub-Street Opera*, which was known to ridicule Walpole as Robin the butler, somehow never appeared: had the government exerted pressure to stop it, or had Fielding done a deal with Walpole? Such an accommodation might explain Fielding's startling decision to dedicate to Walpole his play *The Modern Husband* (1732, and a most unsuitable title with which to compliment a man with known marital difficulties). Whatever had happened, it did not prevent Fielding from lampooning Walpole again and again. In 1736, he took on a new role as director of 'The Great Mogul's Company of Comedians' (an ungrateful Eliza Haywood, a member of the company, later referred to it as 'F——g's Scandal Shop'¹⁰) and in a series of entertainments – *Pasquin*, *The Historical Register for the Year 1736*, *Eurydice Hiss'd* – Walpole was again a target for ridicule. Judged by present-day standards the satire, though pointed and witty, seems mild – the conventions of the day led to a scatter-gun approach rather than a consistent attack – but although Walpole must have been well used to being pilloried in the press and on stage, by the late 1730s opposition to his authority was becoming more serious, and he was feeling under threat. In these circumstances he moved against the theatres, and a law was passed requiring all new plays to be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain before they could be performed. The ostensible provocation was an anonymous play, *The Golden Rump*, which was said to promise unprecedented hostility to Walpole (though since it was never performed it is impossible to prove this; and some suspected it was a figment created by pro-government interests). It was however widely felt that, whatever justification might be claimed, the legislation was in fact a direct response to Fielding: James Harris declared, loyally and memorably, that 'The Legislature made a law, in order to curb one private man' (fos. 5–6).

Fielding's years as Britain's most popular contemporary dramatist were over as suddenly as they had begun. His income dried up, and the professional skills he had developed were useless to him. In these circumstances he took a decision which was at the same time extraordinary and utterly predictable: at the age of thirty he changed direction completely and decided to train to be a lawyer. Harris recorded that he toiled like a drudge to master the