

“LAUGHING AT THE VIRTUOUS: HENRY FIELDING AND THE TRUE SENSE OF THE RIDICULOUS”

Amel Ben Ahmed

Teaching Assistant

Higher Institute of Studies Applied in Humanities,

El Kef. Tunisia

amel_ben_ahmed@yahoo.com

Abstract

The exaggerated sense of flawlessness that encloses the description of Henry Fielding's major characters in his novels, namely Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones, discloses the greater moral efficacy of representing excessively imperfect yet highly ludicrous patterns of virtue. The protagonists' excessive spiritual chastity and inflated virtuous attitude are so stressed that they end up figuring as mere nostalgic touchstones of virtuous human values. Laughing at their common devoted striving for virtue, Fielding intends to enable his readers to become more critical and independent, rather than mindlessly absorbed not only by the characters themselves but by any assimilative and consuming ideological pretensions of an absolutely pure and trustworthy ideal. With reference to Henri Bergson's reflections on the comic character, the present paper will study the author's presentation of his characters in terms of manifestation of excessive goodness and wickedness alike in order to prove that all forms of excess are severely banished from Fielding's moralizing plan in his novels. The aim of the first part would be then to study the way Fielding modulates the disparity between his characters' "lofty" virtue and lived experience in Joseph Andrews, so effectively that however harmonious the picture seems to be, its adjustment to reality is never altogether perfect. The second part will examine the development of the protagonist along his journey in Tom Jones, in order to prove that his heroism is to be delineated against false conventional notions, against the meaningless and distorting application of labels to human character.

Henry Fielding is regarded as one of the major English novelists of the eighteenth century who contributed to the emergence of the novel as an established literary genre. The cleansing effect of the wholesome laughter in his prose fiction is in fact its most underlying characteristic. Describing laughter, in one of the essays that have initiated his beginning as a prose humorist, and which is entitled "The Benefit of Laughing", Fielding states that it is the cure to "all Diseases incident to the Mind and Body of Man." He returned to the subject one decade later "as "Democritus," the laughing philosopher, who writes "in Vindication of

Laughter”; complementing the theme of the earlier essay” (Battestin 246). Laughter is said to fulfil primarily a moral objective mainly by exposing folly and vice.

Fielding’s reflections on the nature and function of laughter culminated in his remarks on the subject in the Preface to *Joseph Andrews*, and principally in the definition of “The Ridiculous”:

The only source of the true Ridiculous (as it appears to me) is Affectation. But tho’ it arises from one Spring only, when we consider the infinite Streams into which this one branches, we shall presently cease to admire at the copious Field it affords to an observer. Now from affectation proceeds from one of these two causes; Vanity, or Hypocrisy [. . .] . From the discovery of this Affectation arises the Ridiculous- which always strikes the reader with Surprise and Pleasure; and that in a higher and stronger Degree when the Affectation arises from Hypocrisy, than when from Vanity: for to discover any one to be the exact Reverse of what he affects, is more surprising, and consequently more ridiculous, than to find him a little deficient in the Quality he desires the Reputation of. (52-53)

The corrective function of comedy is indeed complemented by Henry Fielding’s insistence on the moral utility of the Ridiculous, whose source, he finds, is affectation as manifested in those related forms of excessive self-love, vanity, and hypocrisy.

In fact, Fielding sought to free his virtuous characters from the language of affectation or eccentricity. They speak incisively and their language sets them apart from the false wits and the different grotesque characters. Yet it would be quite misleading to consider them in any way as exemplary characters. Defining the limitations of his protagonists with a detached irony and amused laughter, Fielding allows his readers to admire them but remain aware of their comic shortcomings. We perceive that they usually tend to take themselves too seriously, we laugh at times at the necessary intricacy of their manoeuvrings but this is inevitably related to the perception of virtuous men forced to interact with an artificial and hypocritical way of life. Fielding’s main achievement is basically his truthful depiction of the characters’ interaction with an inadequate society in order to understand the complexities of life itself and expose the folly and vice of society. With reference to Henri Bergson’s reflections on the comic character, the present paper will study the author’s presentation of his characters in terms of manifestation of excessive goodness and wickedness alike in order to prove that all forms of excess are severely banished from Fielding’s moralizing plan in his novels. The aim of the first part would be then to study the way Fielding modulates the disparity between his characters’ “lofty” virtue and lived experience in *Joseph Andrews*, so effectively that however harmonious the picture seems to be, its adjustment to reality is never altogether perfect. The second part will examine the development of the protagonist along his

journey in *Tom Jones*, in order to prove that his heroism is to be delineated against false conventional notions, against the meaningless and distorting application of labels to human character.

Though distinguished by their virtues of charity and good nature, Parson Adams and Joseph Andrews, the two main protagonists of the book fail to adjust to their social conditions. Adams the “good man whose true qualities are either misapplied or misconstrued” (Coley, 231), is formally and reliably introduced at the beginning of the novel as an excellent scholar, one who “had applied many years to the most severe study, and had treasured up a fund of learning rarely to be met with in a university” (65), and also as:

A man of good sense, good parts and good nature but was at the same time as entirely ignorant of the ways of the world as an infant just entered into it could possibly be. As he never had any Intentions to deceive, so he never expected such a Design in others. He was generous, friendly and brave to an Excess. (65)

This description deliberately constructs Parson Adams in terms of his exaggerated absent-mindedness and innocence. By presenting him as a very simple, generous figure and by stressing his insusceptibility to the point of excess, Fielding has so valorised his good nature that he deflated true good action itself to ridicule and laughter.

Along the novel, Parson Adams is delightfully presented as moving from one adventure to another, wandering from inn to inn, being mocked, ill used and distressed by the realities he has neglected; meanwhile, claiming more knowledge and more faith in his own assumptions and principles. Though it is his own gloriously exaggerated innocence that always brings about his ludicrous mishaps, Parson Adams carries on his running dialogues about proper conduct and moral commitment in spite of his failure to profit from his own adventure.

In Book II Chapter 16, for instance, Adams awaits, with Joseph and Fanny, the assistance of a wealthy man who has suddenly departed and, unlike his companions; he fails to discern the implications and imagines illness or sudden calamity as the cause. Even when he discovers that the gentleman’s promises have proved to be false and that he has been comically fooled, he simply claims that “the Disappointment may perhaps, be intended for my Good” (122). Though he defends the dignity and virtue of his hero, Fielding seems to laugh at his vanities and affectations. Indeed, in such a ridiculous but lovable figure, so innocent in heart and flawless in motives, there is still the weakness of human nature, vanity and self deception. In the scene at Wilson’s house when the latter relates his story and enlarges on the subject of vanity and its effect on human life, Adams ironically breaks into a bitter lament that he has not got “his masterpiece”, a sermon on vanity, on him. He regretfully

says: "Fie upon it, fie upon it", "why do I ever leave that sermon out of my pocket; I wish it was within five Miles, I would willingly fetch it, to read it to you." Even when the gentleman, in very polite indifference, answers that "he was cured of the passion", Adams carries on saying "And for that very reason," quoth *Adams*, 'I would read it for I am confident you would admire it: indeed I have never been a greater enemy to any passion than that silly one of vanity' " (223).

This satirical scene, amusing enough for the fact that Adams is ready to walk ten miles just for Mr. Wilson to admire his denunciation of vanity, is also more entertaining when related to the latter's reaction. Mr. Wilson simply smiles because Parson Adams is guilty of the very passion he wants to expose, that is vanity. Such contradictions and precisely Adams's unawareness of them make him very humane, lovable though laughable and ridiculous. In this regard, Bergson argues that: "a character cannot be comical unless there be some aspect in his character of which he is unaware, one side of his character which he overlooks, on that account alone does he makes us laugh" (146). The combination of folly and virtue in such a ridiculous manner arouses laughter but, more significantly, shocks the reader into realising that in Adams's illusion lies the very truth of human nature. In the short poem "To John Hayes, Esq," Fielding described human nature in terms of conflicting humours stating:

How passions blended on each other fix,
How vice with virtues, faults with graces mix;
How passions opposite, as sour to sweet,
Shall in one bosom at one moment meet,
With various luck for victory contend,
And now shall carry, and now lose their end. (qtd Battestin 58)

Adams's continuous claims to knowledge of the world are significantly ridiculed when the reader realizes that they do not really conform to his real character and behaviour. By means of excessive but basically laughably misplaced innocence, Adams's absurdity is further highlighted in contrast to affection and deceit and his failure to accept any alternative world but the ideal one he has created out of his own faith. Living according to an untested set of abstractions, Parson Adams fails then to recognize the complexities of human experience, It is in fact his systematic and excessive absent-mindedness to the various oddities and indignities he is made to suffer but more significantly his continuous attempts to adapt his present reality to his classical pretensions that do perfectly ensure his conformity to Henri Bergson's definition of the true sense of an absentminded character:

Attracted and fascinated by his heroes, his thoughts gradually turn towards them [. . .] His actions are distractions. But then his distractions can be traced to a definite positive cause. They are no longer cases of absence of mind, pure

and simple; they find their explanation in the presence of the individual in quite definite though imaginary surrounding. (68)

Fielding modulates the disparity between Adams' profound knowledge of human nature and his lived experience so effectively making the reader not only laugh at Adams's simple, naïve bravery and generosity but also awake in him/her a more critical response. Adams's delight in the pursuit of vanity and in the little ironies of life are so innocent that the reader laughs at them but also ends up liking him more and more, awaiting his appearance with impatience.

The collision between rule and practise is more pronounced in the scenes of consolation. An entertaining episode occurs later in the story, in the parson's house, when Joseph shows great impatience to be married because he thinks he will not feel secure unless Fanny the heroine, is wholly his. Adams responds: "All Passions are criminal in their Excess, and even Love itself, if it is not subservient to our Duty, may render us blind to it" (303). He feels that it is his duty to reprove the lover Joseph in measured terms for his impatience. However, when his wife hears him claim that "Love is foolishness and wrong in itself", she laughably challenges his view and says: "I am certain you do not preach as you practice; for you have been a loving and cherishing husband, that is the truth on't; why you should endeavour to put such wicked nonsense into this young man's head, I cannot devise" (305). Trying to include passion and love within the socially and religiously defined notions of moderation and temperance, Adams has indeed allowed the unswerving thrust of his preaching to govern his will which in turn has paralyzed his intellect and has led to his wilful but ironical denial of experience. Hearing that his youngest child is drowned, the former moralist has suddenly vanished and the affectionate father starts to "deplore his Loss with the bitterest Agony" (303). Though Joseph tries to remind him that he has just given him a sermon on the necessity of "resign[ing] to Providence," Adams falls into bitter lament:

Child, Child', said he, 'do not go about Impossibilities. Had it been any other of my Children I could have born it with patience; but my little Prattler, the Darling and Comfort of my old Age-----the little Wretch to be snatched out of Life just at his Entrance into it; the sweetest, best-temper'd Boy, who never did a thing to offend me. (303)

The humorous way the narrator juxtaposes Adams's sermon on resignation to providence with the brute reality, the news of his son's drowning, significantly illustrates the great contradiction that marks Parson's character. The narrator describes Adams's reaction to Joseph's attempt to comfort him by reminding him of what he has just been claiming, saying: "I believe the Parson did not hear these Words, for he paid little regard to them, but went on lamenting whilst the Tears trickled down into his Bosom" (304). He "puts Adams through his paces to illustrate the great contradiction between his trusting invocations of providence and his rejection of providence's traditional consolations when personally faced with evil"

(Rosengarten 65). Adams's sermon, as the narrator ironically presents it, is then ultimately removed from the immediate reality. Fielding continuously multiplies contradictions in the presentation of his protagonist Adams in order to effectively master the excess he breeds.

Adams proclaims his true nature as an ordinary man but his moral over voice enlarges the disparity between pedantic knowledge and lived experience. In two different ways, both Parson Adams and the main protagonist Joseph Andrews are shaped not to be taken by the reader as exemplary objects of identification. Joseph is guilty neither of Adams' stupidity nor absentmindedness; but he still remains for the most part nothing more than the amusing figure of the young lover. Joseph is the first to appear, and his Christian name identifies him with the biblical Joseph. He appears as almost the reification of the ideal Christian and this toponymic association establishes him as the representation of chastity.

Joseph, the main protagonist around whom the main story revolves, is introduced in terms of a deliberately humorous exaggerated fantasy of male attractiveness, the parody male version of what Fielding perceives to be an improbable character: Richardson's Pamela. In Book I Chapter 8, Joseph appears as the figure of the heroic youth. His toughness, manliness and prowess are emphasised to the extent that he appears "something of a sex object" (Shesgreen 75):

Mr Joseph Andrews was now in the one and twentieth Year of his Age. He was of the highest Degree of middle Stature. His Limbs were put together with great Elegance and no less Strength. His legs and thighs were formed in the exactest Proportion. His Shoulders were broad and brawny, but yet his Arms hung so easily, that he had all Symptoms of Strength without the least clumsiness. His hair was of a nut-brown Colour, and was displayed in wanton Ringlets down his Back. His Forehead was high, his eyes dark, and as full of Sweetness as of Fire. His nose a little inclined to the Roman. His Teeth white and even. His Lips full, red and soft. His Bread was only rough on his Chin and upper Lip; but his Cheeks, in which his Blood glowed, were overspread with a thick Down. His Countenance had a Tenderness joined with a Sensibility inexpressible. Add to this the most perfect Neatness in Dress, and in Air, which to those who have not seen many Noblemen, would give an idea of Nobility. (78)

This detailed description, which focuses exclusively on Joseph's body, so much stresses his masculinity and youthful strength that it has comically idealised him. Such an excessively perfect and coherent picture, yet devoid of motion and full of breathless phrases, does no more than set Joseph before the reader in a very humorous manner.

Early in the novel, his beauty so powerfully attracts Betty the chambermaid that he is forced to throw her out of the room to protect his chastity; a burlesque of Richardson's Pamela's virtuous attitude which is ridiculed by Fielding as a folly so excessively detached from any realistic context. Similar actions during his early encounters with Mrs Slipslop and Lady Booby: while they disclose an obvious and ridiculous attachment to virtue, they do not have the moral significance of common attitudes. We do therefore laugh at Joseph's behaviour because his humorous devotion to chastity can by no means be taken seriously.

His chastity, in the face of Lady Booby as well as all other women in the novel, seems excessively magnified. The way he resists her sexual advances and spurs Betty's and Mrs. Slipslop's seductions is both ridiculous and absurdly chivalrous. "Laughter" as Bergson argues, "is inseparable from social life, although insufferable to society, capable of being tacked on to all vices and even to a good many virtues." (171) His male chastity as Robert Alan Donovan asserts "though inherently ridiculous, becomes absurd when it is insisted upon in apparent forgetfulness that it is not subject to the same threat of forcible privation as female chastity. A man who lives in fear of rape is inherently ridiculous" (71). Joseph is always presented as the "abstractly innocent" victim (Murry 92). The exaggerated sense of flawlessness that encloses any description of Joseph throughout the book, discloses the "greater moral efficacy of imperfect patterns of virtue" (Battestin 39), or as Henri Bergson states, "make[s] manifest to our eyes the distortions which he [the humorist] sees in embryo." (77)

Presented to the reader as a whimsical character, Adams's childish innocence and endearing honesty are so stressed that he figures as a nostalgic touchstone of virtuous human values. Joseph's exaggerated spiritual chastity further uncovers this sense of imperfection. They both appear, in their common devoted striving for virtue, as different variations on imperfect human nature. In this regard, Simon Varey proclaims that:

Such weaknesses in other characters usually dominate or define their temperament and action. The major difference between Adams and his opponents is not expressed as a distinction between perfect and imperfect: everyone in this novel is imperfect. The difference is that Adams, Joseph, Fanny, and those who help them are natural, but among those whom they encounter, the proud, vain hypocritical, and evil are unnatural, or artificial. (65)

Like Joseph's constancy, Adams's true modesty and the charity of chambermaids, innkeepers' wives, hosts, and peddlers, who take pity on them, proceeds from instinctive good nature, rather than precept or example; and those who give their greed, cruelty, or vanity absolute control, act spontaneously on their *wicked* inclinations.

Fielding maintains his central moral concerns by drawing sharper pictures of contrasts between the virtuous characters and the hypocritical but still frivolous intriguers. He engages the two main protagonists in a number of direct conflicts with these deceitful figures, sometimes causing them to face several moral decisions in order to demonstrate the value of their honesty and virtue when set against the affectation and hypocritical attitude of these characters. In fact, the necessity to observe the manners of men as one great source of the knowledge of human nature emerges more explicitly and more effectively enlightening with *Tom Jones*. Much similarly to *Joseph Andrews*, in this novel a wide variety of those who proclaim good principles turn out to be, at worst frank hypocrites, at best excessively rigid in their judgements. The hero's virtuous impulses are given ample demonstration; but in this novel, they operate within a highly stylised comic comparative pattern, the protagonist Tom is to be perceived in relation to a more complex system of contrasts and foils. Fielding's "art of contrast" (137) in *Tom Jones*, as Charles Trainor suggests in his book *The Drama and Fielding's Novels* "provides a panorama of human behaviour and helps give his novels a breadth, a scope, an inclusiveness" (154). The continuous comparative ironical sketches of psychological characterisation between Tom and Blifil the villain in the novel, are not exclusively meant to set up a transparently contrast between the notions of villainy and goodness but rather to prove that though good nature is the essential requisite for a good character it should be balanced with the guard of reason, the spur of religion and the practicability of experience. Extremes of worldly vanity and vice and unreasonable virtue and corrupted hypocrisy would similarly result in deficiencies and social ills. All forms of excess are severely banished from Fielding's moralizing plan in his novels. In his earliest definition of good nature in *The Champion*, Fielding stressed the importance of rational faculty asserting that: "Good nature requires a distinguishing faculty, which is another word for judgement, and is perhaps the sole boundary between wisdom and folly; it is impossible for a fool, who hath no distinguishing faculty to be good-natured." (qtd Battestin 74)

Tom's dramatic characterisation throughout the novel presents him as a very frank and honest person, standing for the exemplary hero of major Sentimental comedies such as Steele's *Conscious Lovers* (1722), though he remains on the whole no model of human perfection. In *Tom Jones*, the unalloyed idealised hero is no longer a viable character. There has been a significant but intricate movement away from idealisation towards a more inward, less active view of the hero. Tom Jones appears in terms of an ironically exaggerated good-natured disposition but also in a very overwhelming attractiveness that posits him as the worthy ideal hero, but only of an idealised romance.

Tom's distinguished appearance and aristocratic aspect are stressed by the "flattering, generalised description" (Shesgreen 125) of the following passage: "Indeed he was a charming figure, and if a very fine person, and a most comely set of features, adorned with youth, health, strength, freshness, spirit and good nature, can make a man resemble an angel, he certainly had that resemblance" (342). The excessive emphasis on his positive qualities is

solely designed to further comically highlight the failure of his inner goodness to accurately determine his outward actions throughout the novel. Tom's agreeable natural good innocence is therefore heroically delightful but it remains insufficient to declare that he is a fully-developed hero-model. Though often in the wrong, Tom is basically good. When he was convicted of three robberies, "viz of robbing an orchard, of stealing a duck out of a farmer's yard and of picking Master Blifil's pocket of a ball" (68), he declared "atrocious wickedness" (69), rather laughably reveals his compassion and goodness. His excessively imprudent goodness and continuous trust of others make it all too easy for his enemies to deceive him. He confides to one that his pocket is full of money, to another that he is in love with an heiress, or that he has found favour in the eyes of a pretty woman. In fact, he gives himself away to such an extent that anyone can easily take advantage of him. "The comic is [therefore] that element by which the person [Tom] unwittingly betrays himself -- the involuntary gesture or the unconscious remark" (Bergson 155). Tom's good hearted imprudence has then ironically led to his disgrace, his expulsion from the Allworthy household and the subsequent calamities on the road to, and in, London.

However, Fielding recommends the villainous character Blifil, the very kind of prudence which Jones, with his credulous trust in the goodness of others, ridiculously lacks. No one in *Tom Jones* acts more prudently than Blifil himself, and the evil he intrudes upon Tom results from extremely prudent actions. While the hero's rhetoric remains ironically displaced by innocence and neutralised by raw emotions. The "naturally devious politician" (Varey 98), Blifil intelligently though maliciously adapts the language of wit in order to serve his evil intentions. But, whenever he gets into a tricky situation, he simply remains silent:

Master Blifil, on the contrary, had Address enough at sixteen to recommend himself at one and the same Time to both these opposites [that is, Thwackum and Square]. With one he was all Religion, with the other he was all Virtue. And when both were present, he was profoundly silent, which both interpreted in his Favour and in their own. (79)

From his early youth, Blifil exhibits a singularity of action and purpose, demonstrating a brilliantly prudent mastery in his consummate manipulation of the very different teachers Thwackum and Square, while Tom finds himself roughly tossed between Thwackum's theological discipline and Square's heartless stoicism.

Defending his choice, the pretender at wit; the rake hero, Blifil, expresses himself with analogy, contrast, comparison and exaggeration. This language of wit, double, as it functions by determining the relationship between things and identifying one thing in terms of another proves that his witty mask conceals rather a duplicitous character. His pretentious or affected language works largely through misplaced hyperbole, absurdly inappropriate exaggeration, and a thorough confounding of the trivial with the elevated. His false wit and affected behaviour have allowed him to enjoy a good reputation especially among women but

his true nature is greedy, false and profligate. Blifil, for instance, artfully defends his wickedly motivated liberation of Sophia's pet bird by arguing from "the Law of Nature", the universal "Right to Liberty" and Christian principle (99). Such "profoundly comic sayings are those artless ones in which some vice reveals itself in all its nakedness" (Bergson 155). While Blifil invents this slick and flair rationalisation for setting Sophia's bird free, Tom is impetuously and ridiculously attempting to return it back to her, "immediately stripping off his coat, he applied himself to climbing the tree to which the bird escaped. Tom had almost recovered his little namesake, when the branch on which it perched, and that it was perched, and that hung over a canal, broke, and the poor lad plumped over head and ears into the water." (99) Tom's goodness has, therefore, nothing to do with deliberation and eloquence, but rather with laughable passionate action and spontaneous feeling. Bergson argues in this regard that "whether a character is good or bad, is of little moment; granted that he is unsociable: whether serious or trifling, it is still capable of making us laugh, provided that care can be taken not to arouse our emotions: unsociability in the performer and insensibility in the spectator." (155)

When, for instance, Blifil cleverly prosecutes Jones before Allworthy, and the latter confronts the accused with charges, Jones, who "could say nothing for himself", laughably forsakes the multitude of strategies for mitigating guilt and receiving pardons. Fielding artfully mocks not only Tom's failure to decode Blifil's real motive but mainly the self-defending process he marshals by stressing its emotional static character. "Like a criminal in Despair", Jones merely "[throws] himself upon Mercy" (209). Tom, as Michael L. Hall asserts, "has disguised his goodness as effectively [and humorously] as Blifil has hidden his wickedness" (104). "Laughter" as bergson argues, is inseperable from social life, although insufferable to society, capable of being tacked on to all vices and even to a good many virtues." (171)

By contrasting his hero to Blifil, Fielding has achieved the comic element best by using hypocritical affectation as one of the principal sources of laughter in this novel. When he opposes Blifil's excessive intellectual aggressiveness or "bombast greatness" (qtd. Coley 230) to Tom's own excessive good natured impulses, he has strongly advocated his conscious intention to correct and instruct all human follies and vices.

According to Fielding, all manifestations of excessive good natured behaviour and wicked attitude are forms of affectation that need to be ridiculed in order to be "cured." Characters, such as, Tom, who do follow their natures into spontaneous activity, love and faith are represented ridiculously regardless of their virtue and morality in the conventional senses of the words. Blifil, the hero's counterpart, is wickedly powerful yet astonishingly intelligent. Not only does he represent a serious threat to the union between Tom and Sophia but he has enough vitality to eclipse the lovers and drop the marriage plot in the novel to a position of secondary interest. His plans are always impressive but his pursuit of Sophia remains immoral and must exclusively be stopped. Fielding is concerned with maintaining

the equilibrium between outward action and inner goodness in order to ensure that human behaviour is solely moral. According to him, by allowing virtue to develop too enthusiastically, virtuous men can become too ridiculous and fail to communicate their goodness. And by allowing the villainous to manipulate the innocent and the good, vice would destabilise the society's order. Characters such as Bifil in *Tom Jones*, who represents an obstacle to the attainment of matrimony, maintain the comic tone as they are granted the license to deviate from the norms of society. Their excessiveness, by the mechanical nature of behaviour and by their hypocrisy, poses ridiculous threats to the good forces embodied in the lovers in the play. Their ridiculous "villainy" is finally handled in order to insure the comedy. Their goals are hardly the most serious in nature.

The exaggerated sense of flawlessness that encloses the description of Henry Fielding's major characters in his novels, namely *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, discloses the greater moral efficacy of representing excessively imperfect yet highly ludicrous patterns of virtue. The protagonists' excessive spiritual chastity and inflated virtuous attitude are so stressed that they end up figuring as mere nostalgic touchstones of virtuous human values. Laughing at their common devoted striving for virtue, Fielding intends to enable his readers to become more critical and independent, rather than mindlessly absorbed not only by the characters themselves but by any assimilative and consuming ideological pretensions of an absolutely pure and trustworthy ideal. Both the absence of effectiveness in virtuous acts, and the distance between the conduct of vicious characters and the Christian and classical heroic models that the virtuous characters in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* exemplify, establish their proximity to those models -- a point only underlined by the fact that they more than once fail to act in accordance with them. Conversely, they serve as the standard against which English society's distance from Christian or heroic models are measured. Fielding's comic and satiric portrayal of these personalities enables the reader to become critical and independent, rather than mindlessly absorbed not only by the characters themselves but by any assimilative and consuming ideological pretensions of an absolutely pure and trustworthy ideal. In this way, the laughter that Fielding makes his readers experience and live out, through these characters, is "above all corrective" (Bergson 187) or as he describes it himself the "Delight [which] is mixed with Instruction, and the reader is almost as much improved as entertained" (62). Fielding's novels undoubtedly maintain a moralizing plan, but not because it recommends and shows the practicality of virtue. His novels are moral because, without recommending vice, they show its ubiquitousness, its pretences and defences, highlighting at the same time the general inefficacy of conventional injunctions to goodness when they are applied to the actuality of man's nature. Fielding's virtuous finally survive all dangers because their disposition is toward good; and all through their felicity or lack of it seems dependent exclusively on their consciousness of having acted well or ill. The characters and their actions are primarily comments on the consequences of folly and vice; while everything is providentially made right and proper in the end.

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