



# Henry Fielding between Satire and Sentiment

Politeness and Masculinity  
in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Dita Hochmanová



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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2 Ibid., p. 24.

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

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

5 Ibid., p. 2.

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

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

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

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

8 *Ibid.*, p. 232.