

CHAPTER IV
JONATHAN WILD & AMELIA



Jonathan Wild is the integration of the biography of thieves and exciting and romantic incidents from the picaresque tales with Fielding's ironic attitude towards morality. The moral intention is obvious; the theme is the disparity between goodness and greatness. The story is not a presentation of criminality but a social reflection. Wild, the hero, is a representative symbol standing for the great; and Heartfree, the innocent jeweller, represents the good. But the whole narrative does not only concern Wild and Heartfree, it is concerned with eighteenth-century society. Fielding refers to a group of the great men like Alexander, Charles I, Charles II and Walpole whose greatness is based on ambition, violence and the suffering of mankind. Ambition, selfishness, hypocrisy, cruelty and cunning are ironically the qualities of greatness. Fielding's real intention is to attack all rulers who are greedy for power and personal success at the expense of other men.

From the very beginning, Fielding puts forward his ironic attitude. Wild is only a thief or vagabond but Fielding says that he is about to tell the history of a great man. Jonathan Wild is a complete great man and even more perfect than Alexander because Alexander's greatness is mixed sometimes with comparative goodness but Wild's is never spoiled by any one good action. He is completely wicked from his birth to his death. It is a convention to compare the conqueror to the thief but Fielding makes a reversal by treating Wild as if he is a fine gentleman. Throughout the story, the tone suggests Fielding's admiration of Wild's ingenuity and successes.

Fielding provides heroic qualities for Wild. His ancestors were experts at thivery. He is a young genius in his schooldays. One day he meets a certain Count La Ruse and plays cards with him. Wild cheats him; but the count admires his ingenuity instead of being annoyed. Both of them have a philosophical debate. The count advises Wild to work in the government office because a good thief's job and a Prime Minister's are just the same; besides, the Prime Minister has less chance of being punished. Wild ironically equalizes both professions and suggests that the thief is happier than the Prime Minister because the thief steals only a few shillings and therefore does not feel very guilty, whereas the Prime Minister's conscience reminds him that he has ruined the fortunes of thousands of people.

Fielding is able to gather all these scattered elements into a harmonious unity. He regards Wild as a type and presents roguery, not a rogue. Fielding declares in Joseph Andrews that he is writing a novel; in Jonathan Wild, he also avoids providing an atmosphere of reality. Fielding says that; "My narrative is rather of such actions which he might have performed, or would or should have performed, than what he really did; and may in reality as well suit other such Great Men as the person himself whose name it bears." Coleridge also comments that Fielding puts into the mouth of his hero speeches which the real Jonathan Wild would never have uttered, for these speeches and reflections conform to the author's secret purpose of making his story unreal in order to give a transcendental reality to the truths which he wishes to convey.¹

The first book is vividly filled with Wild's story. He finds that men are divided into two groups: those who work themselves, and those who make others work. He himself belongs to the second group. New characters and adventures are introduced in the second and following books. At the beginning of the second book, Heartfree and his wife are presented. They are firstly presented only in relation to Wild but they gradually become more and more interesting. In Book II Wild robs Heartfree and causes him to be imprisoned. He also takes away Heartfree's wife with him on a ship. The ship is seized but Wild luckily gets back to England. The third book portrays the progress of Wild's greatness, but the fourth book is a sudden reversal. Wild is arrested and hanged because of Mrs. Heartfree's return after having been lost for a long time.

Heartfree, who represents goodness, is introduced as a foil to Wild. He is like Parson Adams who does not understand the wickedness and hypocrisy of the world. One of Fielding's characteristic methods is to present two contrasting characters: an honest man and a rascal. The contrast between Heartfree and Wild is like that between Tom and Blifil. The good seems to be wrong and the wicked appears to be right. The honest man often suffers from his honesty whereas the wicked man is admired. However, the good always triumphs over the wicked in the end. The difference between Jonathan Wild and Tom Jones is that in Jonathan Wild, the bad man attracts the artistic and moral interest whereas in Tom Jones, the honest man is morally and psychologically interesting.

Fielding's moral ideas are not found only in his ironic portrayal of Wild's greatness, but also in Heartfree's story; Fielding

positively suggests that goodness brings more happiness than greatness. Heartfree also gives moral teachings and these direct didactic passages destroy the ironic force of the whole narrative. Besides this weakness, Arnold Kettle also comments that the basic weakness of Jonathan Wild is that no one on the "good" side really fights for human values; therefore it is the rogues, not the good men, who have all the life.²

Amelia has been interpreted in many ways: the presentation of matrimony and the virtue of woman, the failure of courts to give true justice, the story of an exposed and neglected wife, a memory of the author's first wife. Compared with Fielding's early novels, Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones, Amelia is much more serious and less lighthearted. Fielding intends to make it serious so he often quotes the classics. There are a lot of Latin and Greek quotations which sometimes are not translated into English. The seriousness of the novel is also seen in his imitation of the classical epic, the Virgilian epic; for example, Booth, the hero tells Miss Matthews about his past fortunes as Aeneas does to Dido. Moreover, the theme of the novel is also serious: To bring back the ill consequences of foolish conduct and by struggling manfully with distress to overcome it is one of the noblest efforts of wisdom and virtue. This theme is not new and was established long before Fielding's time.

Before Amelia, there was no novel that dealt with two people after their marriage, who have to bear the heavy burden and res-

possibilities to live together. Fielding thinks of this couple as worthy; this is stated in the first sentence:

The various accidents which befel a very worthy couple after their uniting in the state of matrimony will be the subject of the following history.

Amelia is really worthy: she comes from a gentle family and is a good Christian. But Booth is arrested three times. The first time, he is mistakenly seized; the second time is caused by his neighbours' wickedness and the third time by the trickery of his friend, Captain Trent. Fielding tries to present Booth's noble quality. Differing from most of his friends who are self-interested, he is a devoted husband and all of his faults are those of the eighteenth century gentleman, including his relation with Miss Matthews in Newgate. However, Booth is blamed for his belief that men act from passions, not from reasons. He says;

"... that, as men appeared...to act entirely from their passions, their action could have neither merit not demerit."
(Book XII, chap. V)

Booth thinks that goodness is not encouraged by religion. He says of his friend, Colonel James:

The behaviour of this man alone is a sufficient proof of the truth of my doctrine, that all men act entirely from their passions; for Bob James can never be supposed to act from any motive of virtue or religion, since he constantly laughs at both; and yet his conduct towards me alone demonstrates a degree of goodness which, perhaps few of the votaries of either virtue or religion can equal.

(Book III, chap. V)

This idea scares Amelia; that her husband is like an atheist. But Fielding proves him unguilty of this by telling the reader at the beginning of the story:

... as to Mr. Booth, though he was in his heart an extreme well-wisher to religion (for he was an honest man), yet his notions of it were very slight and uncertain.

(Book I, chap. III)

Fielding converts Booth in a rather incredible way by making him read Dr. Barrow's sermons and he immediately sees his mistakes.

Like Tom Jonas, Amelia is not only concerned with Booth and his wife, but also with the typical miseries and sadness of mid-eighteenth century London life. Fielding states at the beginning of his Dedication that he has a purpose "to expose some of the most glaring evils, as well as private, which at present infest this country." He relates public to private experience. In the early parts of the novel, Fielding portrays the mistakes in judgement of the courts of law and in later parts, he often refers to the upperclasses' indifference to other people's suffering and to their selfishness and lack of benevolence. For example, a Colonel at Gibraltar first allows Booth to borrow his money because he thinks that Booth has married a rich wife; but when Booth really wants the money, he does not help him (Book III, chap. VII). Fielding's successful presentation of the social panorama of his age disgusts Richardson. He disapproves of "low" settings like Newgate and the bailiff's house in Amelia. His disapproval of Amelia can be seen in his letter to Fielding's sister:

I have not been able to read more than the first volume of Amelia. Poor Fielding! I could not help telling his sister, that I was equally surprised at and concerned for his continued lowness. Had your brother, said I, been born in a stable, or been a runner at a sponging house, we should have thought him a genius, and wished he had the advantage of a liberal education, and of being admitted into good company; but it's beyond my conception, that a man of good family, and who had some learning, and really is a writer, should descend so excessively low in all his pieces. Who can care for any of his low people?³

In Amelia, Fielding presents his characters by leaving most of the commentary to the reader's imagination. John Coolidge nicely describes Fielding's new method of presenting character in Amelia:

"People come into the story in the same way that people come into our lives.... Our knowledge of a personal character is always provisory pending further discovery. A new word or act may bring a new revelation, causing a shift in our interpretation and evaluation of person's character."⁴

The absence of the narrator causes the novel to become more dramatic. We know the characters by what they say and think or by how they are thought of by the others: the conversation between Booth and Miss Matthews:

"O, Mr. Booth! I know not what I was going to say - What - Where did you leave off? I would not interrupt you - but I am impatient to know something,"

"What, madam?" cries Booth, "if I can give you any satisfaction -"

"No, no," said she, "I must hear all; I would not for the world break the thread of your story. Besides, I am afraid to ask - Pray, pray, sir, go on."

(Book III, chap. V)

Fielding was impressed by Richardson's Clarissa so greatly that it had some influence on Fielding's imagination of Amelia. In Fielding's earlier novels, the heroine is virtuous, strongly energetic and rarely sentimental. But in Amelia, although the heroine is strong enough to stand all troubles in her life, she several times possesses a delicate female sensibility or weakness, such as shocks and fainting.

In Amelia, the scene is so sombre and distressed that it suggests a tragic conclusion. But Fielding brings the story to a happy ending with the recovery of Amelia's fortune. This happy ending, like in Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews, is the reward of Booth's virtuous actions; only the good people win at the end. Fielding wrote in the Covent - Garden Journal for January 28, 1752 that Amelia is his favourite child; but many critics regard Amelia as much inferior to his early work. Andrew Wright comments that Amelia is deeply flawed because Fielding abandons the tools of his trade. He loses his most ambitious battle and like the parent of a defective child loves it with a special and touching affection.⁵