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AMELIA / Henry Fielding

Whatever is wicked, hateful, absurd, or ridiculous, must be exposed and punished before this Nation is brought to that Height of Purity and good Manners to which I wish to see it exalted.

Henry Fielding, The Champion, No. 16

For most of the eighteenth century, social criticism in the English novel is clearly to be distinguished from revolution. It is not until the hope of persuasion to reform fades that, with Godwin, a revolutionary posture becomes unavoidable. Social problems, like human relationships, are complex, and matters are further complicated because failures in the social system magnify faults in the individual. Thus a relatively small misstep by an individual can bring disaster when social institutions are unresponsive, if not simply and blatantly corrupt. Fielding’s Amelia explores this interaction between individual and social weakness.

Henry Fielding, though a social critic, was certainly no more a revolutionary than were Daniel Defoe, John Gay, Samuel Richardson, or Tobias Smollett. Fielding’s social commentary—the Covent Garden Journal, the essays on Provision for the Poor and The Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers, the satirical plays, the novels Jonathan Wild, Tom Jones, and, most of all, Amelia—describes and criticizes social faults which Fielding saw in common with many of his contemporaries. Like Addison and Steele and Pope, he was concerned with corruption in manners and in politics; like Smollett, he blamed many social ills, from unrest to robbery, on a meretricious desire for “luxury;”1 like Gay, he wrote about the abuses of the legal and penal systems as man-
manifestations of broader social problems. Much of Fielding’s writing, like that of his contemporaries, is concerned with the exposure of social faults, and in Amelia, his last novel, Fielding brought many of these common concerns to bear in his story of the deserving but long-suffering couple, the Booths.

Fielding’s comment in The Champion that “whatever is wicked, hateful, absurd, or ridiculous, must be exposed and punished before this Nation is brought to that Height of Purity and good Manners to which I wish to see it exalted,” suggests that he takes upon himself the tasks of setting standards and exposing faults; as George Sherburn and others have pointed out, Fielding’s writing is consciously moral. For the most part, Fielding’s morality is very practical. A pamphlet such as On the Late Increase of Robbers is as characteristic as Tom Jones. In both, Fielding exposes faults in his society and suggests solutions to these problems.

The social concern of Amelia is made plain in its opening chapters. Fielding introduces us to the legal and penal systems of England, devoting nearly two hundred pages to a detailed description of the workings of these institutions. The novel portrays specific social ills: the inequities of justice for the poor, especially laws regarding debt; unjust social policies that fail to provide adequate pensions for soldiers; and corruptions of human institutions and relationships on every level of society, particularly the treatment of the needy by the rich.

The predominant mood of Amelia is suspended fear; the characters live on the edge of a precipice of penury and, even worse, in imminent danger of arrest for debt. We learn in the first pages of the novel that a man (or woman) can be thrown into prison by circumstances as capricious as walking on the wrong street or becoming involved in someone else’s problems. Fielding’s opening sets the narrow emotional range of the work, encompassing only the most basic human emotions. There are few gradations of character, and little growth. Even Booth, who could be expected to learn from his various follies (particularly after he repeatedly brings his family to the very brink of ruin and has to be saved by others each time), shows no
real change. He does have a rather sudden religious conversion at the end of the novel, but the conversion, as critics have noted, is not convincing.

In spite of the title, Fielding focuses at least as much on institutions as on characters. The novel is a portrait in fiction of the current social institutions—but it is not a fictional portrait. Virtually every abuse described is documented by historians and by Fielding himself in his pamphlets and periodical prose. This is not a “problem novel,” as it has been called; it is not a “falling off of power in his last novel.” Rather, Amelia is a different kind of novel from what we have met in Fielding before. To the detriment of plot and characterization, Fielding concentrates on, as it were, current events. We should not be surprised to find him preoccupied with real social problems, for in Jonathan Wild Fielding had already moved the novel into the realm of social criticism, although the criticism is reserved more for the bad character than for the bad institution. But we see quite enough of bad institutions in that book for it to be clear that there is an intimate relationship between one and the other. The obviously satiric tone in Jonathan Wild allows the social criticism to be cutting yet not unduly disturbing. It is perhaps hard to tell to what degree Fielding is being witty rather than simply angry at any given point: Heartfree is the positive character, the one the reader hopes will come to no harm, but he is not the hero—in fact, he is so naive that the reader is inclined, with Wild, almost to feel that Heartfree gets what he deserves.

The case is quite different in Amelia, where the character who suffers is the heroine, and where plaints against injustice are directly stated. When Fielding writes here about how the evil take advantage of the good, he remarks in his own voice that the good are victimized by the bad simply because their minds do not run in the same nefarious paths as their more evil acquaintances:

The Truth is, that it is almost impossible Guilt should miss the discovering of all the Snares in its Way; as it is constantly prying closely into every Corner, in order to lay Snares for others. Where-
as Innocence, having no such Purpose, walks fearlessly and carelessly through Life; and is consequently liable to tread on the Gins, which Cunning hath laid to entrap it. . . . it is not Want of Sense, but Want of Suspicion by which Innocence is often betrayed. . . . many an innocent Person hath owed his Ruin to this Circumstance alone, that the Degree of Villainy was such as must have exceeded the Faith of every Man who was not himself a Villain. 

That Fielding largely avoids satire in *Amelia* makes his criticism relatively straightforward, without a stylistic intermediary between the author’s voice and the reader. Reading the book for its blunt statements on social questions does much to lessen our struggles with it as a problem novel. The first chapters of *Amelia* make Fielding’s plan quite clear. Although these early chapters seem almost like a separable section of the book, they are part of Fielding’s larger structure: he does not change his method in the novel after he closes the introductory prison scenes, but, on the contrary, he keeps to the same mode for four volumes.

As we know from scholars such as Dorothy Marshall and E. P. Thompson, eighteenth-century England was not kind to the poor. The laws and the legal system severely aggravated, rather than ameliorated, social problems. Fielding’s chapter one of *Amelia* is a statement that living conditions are created by men themselves, and that it is not “Providence” but men who are responsible for them. The magistrate Fielding surely had seen enough evidence firsthand of the social and legal abuses he was to chronicle in *Amelia* to be able to write: “To speak a bold Truth, I am, after much mature Deliberation, inclined to suspect, that the Public Voice hath, in all Ages, done much Injustice to Fortune, and hath convinced her of many Facts in which she had not the least Concern. I question much, whether we may not by natural Means, account for the success of Knaves, the Calamities of Fools, with all the Miseries in which Men of Sense sometimes involve themselves by quitting the Directions of Prudence . . . .” (vol. I, pp. 1–2).

As if to prove the point, having paused for this comment right at the beginning, Fielding opens the second chapter by getting into the action. The action is not domestic, nor even
social—it is legal: "On the first of April, in the year ——, the Watchmen of a certain Parish (I know not particularly which) within the Liberty of Westminster, brought several Persons whom they had apprehended the preceding Night, before Jonathan Thrasher, Esq; one of the Justices of the Peace for that liberty" (vol. I, pp. 3–4). Chapter two surveys some of the abuses of the legal system. The next chapters are scenes of prison life; we do not get out of the prison until the third chapter of Book the Fourth, an entire volume later.

Booth, Amelia’s husband, is a poor soldier on half pay (his inadequate pension itself is one of the injustices Fielding notes), and his poverty is exacerbated by his several failings. An inclination to gamble and a rather innocent attitude allow him to be taken advantage of at every turn by those of greater means and fewer scruples. Amelia is a good and understanding woman, but, as a woman, she can do little more than scrimp, pawn her extra nightdress, and say forgiving words. Both Amelia and her husband are good people. And yet they will be in trouble with the law for most of the book. Though respectable, they are poor—and thus at the mercies of their creditors and the courts. Fielding wants his readers to be aware both of the quality of impending disaster that such a lifestyle presupposes and of the gross callousness, not to mention unfairness, of the judicial and punitive system that is in the background. It is not accidental that Fielding opens his book with such a long section of court and prison scenes: the reader’s perception of the situation of the protagonists is colored by the same awareness of looming disaster under which they suffer.

Amelia insists that the human condition is a fragile one, but Fielding sees this fragility not in terms of an unavoidable human fate but of a correctable social system. Justice Thrasher’s court is a glaring example of that corrupt system:

Mr. Thrasher . . . had some few Imperfections in his magistratical Capacity. I own, I have been sometimes inclined to think, that this Office of a Justice of Peace requires some Knowledge of the Law: for this simple Reason; because in every Case which comes before him, he is to judge and act according to Law. Again, as these Laws
are contained in a great Variety of Books; the Statutes which relate to the Office of a Justice of Peace making of themselves at least two large Volumes in Folio; and that Part of his Jurisdiction which is founded on the common Law being disbursed in above a hundred Volumes, I cannot conceive how this Knowledge should be acquired without reading; and yet certain it is, Mr. Thrasher never read one Syllable of the Matter. (vol. I, pp. 7–8)

Not simply ignorant, Justice Thrasher is also unfeeling, blind to reason, and open only to arguments of class. Fielding states his case against Thrasher so strongly that he seems to be drawing a caricature. If it were not for the work of scholars such as Marshall and Thompson, we might think Fielding is exaggerating. He is not; Thrasher must be based on many a “Justice” whom Fielding had known. Fielding continues that Justice Thrasher’s never having read any law

perhaps was a Defect; but this was not all: for where mere Ignorance is to decide a Point, it will always be an even Chance whether it decides right or wrong: but sorry am I to say, Right was often in a much worse Situation than this, and Wrong hath often had Five hundred to one on his Side before that Magistrate; who, if he was ignorant of the Law of England, was yet well versed in the Laws of Nature. He perfectly well understood that fundamental Principle so strongly laid down in the Institutes of the learned Rochefoucault; by which the Duty of Self-love is so strongly enforced. . . . To speak the Truth plainly, the Justice was never indifferent in a Cause, but when he could get nothing on either Side. (vol. I, p. 8)

The ignorance and venality which Fielding records in Justice Thrasher were quite common, as B. M. Jones has documented in some detail. Jones shows that these shameful faults in the legal system were a recurring theme for Fielding, as in Tumble-Down Dick, or Phaeton in the Suds (1736), and he reminds us that Fielding was “unsparing in his denunciation of the ignorance, dishonesty, corruption and partiality of the ‘trading justices’: ‘Sir, that’s a Justice of the Peace; and the other is a school-mistress teaching the Justice to spell; for you must know, Sir, the Justice is a very ingenious man and a very great scholar, but
happen'd to have the misfortune in his youth never to learn to read'" (Tumble Down Dick). Jones continues, "In Justice Squeezum (the forerunner of Justice Thrasher in Amelia), Fielding has given us a picture of a justice of the time, who decides all cases brought before him only after his clerk has informed him whether the accused has offered a sufficient bribe [and] who is obsequious to men of fashion." So bad was the repute in which the office was held that Fielding actually suffered opprobrium when he took it on, and he found it necessary to vindicate his character. I should note that it was only the corrupt justice who found the office lucrative; Fielding himself had to request an additional magistracy in order to increase his income.

In earlier books like Joseph Andrews and Jonathan Wild, Fielding had made reference to the weaknesses and corruptions of the legal system; most obviously, there are recurring references in Jonathan Wild to the blindness of the law and to its virtual prejudice against the honest (but poor) citizen. The law is only one of many targets Jonathan Wild satirizes, the reader's attention being divided over a number of objects. In Amelia, the reader's attention focuses directly on the legal and penal systems. The novel, having disposed of the idea that providence causes all men's evils and having presented Justice Thrasher to prove the point, introduces us to the course of justice which Justice Thrasher oversees: the first case is that of a man who, streaming with blood and clearly the worse for wear, is accused of battery against a much stouter man who bears no mark of violence. The accused pleads to be allowed to bring forward witnesses in his defense, "but the justice presently interrupted him, saying, "Sirrah, your Tongue betrays your Guilt. You are an Irishman, and that is always sufficient Evidence with me" (vol. I, p. 10). The second case concerns a maid servant who was arrested for street walking when she was found outside her house during the night. Her explanation that she was seeking a midwife for her mistress is ignored and she, too, is sent off to jail. Next, a pair of genteel people are brought before the jus-
British justice of the time apparently was much like this. Treatment hung on appearance—appearance of the ability to pay a bribe or a fee; some of the "trading justices" would even order mass false arrests in order to take fees and bail money (which they kept) from those arraigned. Thus the case of poor Booth when he comes before the justice in Amelia should be no surprise to us, and surely was not to any reader of Fielding's time who was even minimally aware of legal goings-on. Booth is accused of "beating the watchman in the execution of his office." The justice is able to decide the case without any fuss: "The Justice, perceiving the Criminal to be but shabbily drest, was going to commit him without asking any further Questions" (vol. I, p. 13). Booth insists on being heard, however, and tells his story: on his way home, he saw two men beating a third; he stopped to help the person being beaten and was, with the original three combatants, arrested by the watch. The two assailants bribed the officers and were released; he was offered liberty "at the Price of Half a Crown," but he unfortunately had no money on his person. Justice Thrasher is far too venal to listen to such a story. "In short, the Magistrate had too great an Honour for Truth to suspect that she ever appeared in sordid Apparel; nor did he ever sully his sublime Notions of that Virtue, by uniting them with the mean Ideas of Poverty and Distress" (Vol. I, p. 9). So both Booth and the man he had tried to help are sent off to prison. The assailants never even come before the justice.

Just as Fielding chronicles real abuses when he describes the proceedings in Justice Thrasher's court, so he writes of current practice when he comes to the prison scenes. Prisons are not correctional institutions designed to aid society by reshaping its untoward members; they are profit-making concerns, there to make as much money as possible for their (unsalaried) heads. All of the abuses Fielding had described more than twenty-five years earlier were still current in 1777 when John Howard wrote *The State of the Prisons*. Howard, who visited the prisons
himself, recorded and publicized his findings. His testimony moved Parliament to make a few, but largely insufficient, reforms. (I discuss some of his most shocking findings as verification of the details in the prison scenes in Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*; the following details are specifically relevant to *Amelia*.15)

Prisoners were subject to a range of fees—fees upon entry, fees upon leaving (even if he were acquitted of any wrongdoing, a man could not leave until he had paid all the accumulated fees), fees for the putting on and taking off of chains, fees for room, fees for the privilege of having guests, and most horribly, fees for food and drink. One of Howard’s major complaints is that the keepers are permitted to sell food and drink to the prisoners and are therefore essentially keeping a public house; it is in their interest to encourage consumption, especially of liquor, and therefore to contribute to the degeneracy of their charges. The man without money might just about starve, since almost no food was provided for him by law. Debtors, obviously, would be hard put to pay for themselves; absurdly, in many cases the law specifically omitted debtors from provisions made for the support of felons. Beyond the many fees demanded by keepers, the prisoner was also subject to garnish, the fee demanded of incoming prisoners by those already in jail. If the newcomer had no cash, he was obliged to give up some part of his clothing. Finally, on the subject of fees, Howard objects also to the “extortion of bailiffs. These detain in their houses (properly enough denominated spunging-houses), at an enormous expense, prisoners who have money.”16

Howard complains also about laxness of discipline, promiscuity, and gambling. “The prisoners,” he says, “spend their time in sloth, profaneness and debauchery, to a degree which, in some of those houses that I have seen, is extremely shocking.”17 All sorts of prisoners, he complains, are confined together: “debtors and felons, men and women, the young beginner and the old offender . . . .”18 Riot and drunkenness thrive, encouraged by the jailor’s sale of spirits. In addition,
"gaming in various forms is very frequent: cards, dice, skittles... abound as accomplished gamblers ply their trade." The whole is a scene of "such confusion and distress, and such shrieks and outcries, as can be better conceived than described," with "numbers of both sexes... shut up together for many days and nights in one room."20

Fielding's drawing of prison life in *Amelia* corresponds in every point to conditions documented by Howard. Fielding closes chapter two by dispatching the "delinquents" to prison. The first sentence of chapter three, "Containing the Inside of a Prison," deals with garnish; Booth immediately is accosted and garnish demanded of him. "Garnish," Fielding explains, is the custom that requires every incoming prisoner "to give something to former Prisoners to make them drink" (vol. I, p. 16). When Booth explains that he has no money, he is stripped of his jacket.21 Thus begins chapter three, which largely catalogs the abuses in the penal system. The prison crowds human beings together without regard to sex, physical condition, or even crime. The first offender, or the simply unfortunate, resides with the most hardened criminal, resulting in an increase in the criminality of those who had perhaps only come to prison by accident in the first place. Fielding inveighed against this practice not only in *Amelia* but in his legal writings. In *Amelia* he slowly and carefully sets these and other horrors of the system before us.

Not least of these is the fact that the punishments seem to afflict the least criminal man much more heavily than the hardened felon. In chapter four, "Disclosing further Secrets of the Prison-House," Fielding sends Booth on a tour of the prison, during which we meet all classes of men. (Note that Booth, like most of the other prisoners, has a great deal of freedom within the prison.) First, he meets three men in fetters, "who were enjoying themselves very merrily over a Bottle of Wine, and a Pipe of Tobacco" (vol. I, p. 24). These are three street robbers, "certain of being hanged the ensuing Sessions" (vol. I, p. 24). Their impending fate clearly makes no difference to their present enjoyment. "A little farther [he] beheld a Man prostrate on
the Ground, whose heavy Groans, and frantic Actions, plainly indicated the highest Disorder of Mind” (vol. I, p. 25). Was this a repentant felon, castigating himself for his crimes? “This person was, it seems, committed for a small Felony; and his Wife, who then lay-in, upon hearing the News had thrown herself from a Window two Pair of Stairs high, by which means he had, in all Probability, lost both her and his Child” (vol. I, p. 25).

Among the women it is the same—the hardened criminals find incarceration a joke; the innocent and unfortunate find it a horror. Booth passes a street walker who “as she past by Mr. Booth . . . damn’d his Eyes, and discharged a Volley of Words, every one of which was too indecent to be repeated” (vol. I, p. 25); on the other hand, he passes “a little Creature sitting by herself in a Corner and crying bitterly.” Also a street-walker? No, she “was committed, because her Father-in-Law, who was in the Grenadier Guards, had sworn that he was afraid of his Life, or of some bodily Harm, which she would do him, and she could get no Sureties for keeping the Peace: for which Reason Justice Thrasher had committed her to Prison” (vol. I, pp. 25–26).

The imprisonment itself is as unjust as the commitment process. Money buys not only privilege but also freedom from punishment. At the same time, prisoners often take matters into their own hands in the case of crimes odious to themselves and may nearly put an end to transgressors against their community’s rules before any authority bothers to intervene. Thus, Booth sees a man prepared for whipping as a punishment for petty larceny; the man pays an additional sixpence and is saved. He sees a man being set upon by several of the prisoners; only at the latest moment is he rescued from them by the authorities. If commitment and punishment are unjust, equally so are the bail laws. Booth notices a “young Woman in Rags sitting on the Ground, and supporting the Head of an old Man in her Lap, who appeared to be giving up the Ghost.” He learns that they are father and daughter, “the latter . . . committed for stealing a Loaf, in order to support the former, and the former for receiving it knowing it to be stolen” (vol. I, pp. 26–27). At the
same moment, Booth notices a well-dressed man walk by and is
told that this man's crime was "a most horrid Perjury"—he is
expected to be bailed that same day. The "horrid" crime of the
"gentleman" is bailable; that of the father and daughter is not.
Even worse, because perjury is bailable, "methods are often
found to escape any punishment at all" (vol. I, p. 27).

Finally, there is the case of the veteran, who "hath served his
Country, lost his Limb, and received several Wounds at the
Seige of Gibraltar. When he was discharged from the Hospital
abroad, he came over to get into that of Chelsea, but could not
immediately, as none of his Officers were then in England; in
the mean time, he was one Day apprehended and committed
on suspicion of stealing three Herrings from a Fishmonger. He
[had been] tried several Months ago for this Offence, and ac­
quitted; indeed his Innocence manifestly appeared at the Trial;
but he was brought back again for his Fees, and here he hath
lain ever since" (vol. I, pp. 28—29). Fielding ends Booth's survey
of the prison with reference to one of the unfairest practices of
all—the taking of fees that could keep a man in prison even
when no charges were outstanding against him. As I noted
earlier, because prisons levied fees on every necessity and act,
without money a man could not leave even on acquittal. The
prisoner with money could have all the comforts; the poor
prisoner might even starve. The poor were often imprisoned
on the strength of their appearance or their circumstances;
once there, they had neither redress nor escape.

At the end of Booth's tour, he notices a woman prisoner
being introduced to the prison. Some time later, he ascertains
that she is Miss Mathews, a lady with whom he had formerly
been on somewhat friendly terms. She soon arranges that they
spend the night together and seduces the good Booth into an
affair. Aside from the moral implications for Booth's character
(he longs for his virtuous wife all the while he is having the
affair with Miss Mathews), these seduction scenes show that,
among the amenities money could purchase in prison, not the
least of them was the right to a private chamber where fellow
prisoners or guests from outside could be entertained. Promis-
cuity among the prisoners, thefts of each other’s goods, mixing hardened criminals with first offenders—or even totally innocent persons—and, not least, the gross cupidity of the jailors make the prison system that Fielding details in *Amelia* a clear target for reform. Indeed, as Jones shows in his chapter on “Fielding and Prison Reform,” Fielding was strongly concerned to implement, or at least to make public the necessity for, reform. As Howard’s *The State of the Prisons* attests, little was to change in the next quarter of a century.

But the question in dealing with the novel *Amelia* is to discover not what attempts at reform Fielding made in the course of his career as magistrate, but to determine why he would begin his novel with such a detailed account of the inequities, injustices, and evils of the judicial and penal system. The helplessness of the individual in the face of corrupt institutions is in large part the subject of the book, and although Fielding in later chapters deals with the individual as he relates to various social institutions, it is clearly the legal and penal system that is most threatening. Once this framework has been established, it stands as a necessary backdrop to the action, for we as readers must—and do—feel the same sense of danger that haunts Booth and his Amelia.

Fielding explores the relationship between faulty societal institutions and the people whose lives are shaped by them. The characters always act within an institutional context: just as we watch Booth and Miss Mathews within the confines of the prison in the early chapters, we watch Booth and Amelia as they struggle with patrons, pawnbrokers, and bailiffs throughout the later ones. The sense of threat is always present and always external to the relationship. Fielding defines very supportive human relationships for his protagonists, yet society’s institutions keep them constantly in a state of anguish.

Most frighteningly, the evils that engulf them are not of their own making. Booth may be weak, and he loses the little money he and Amelia get together. But they never can acquire enough money to be safe; no matter what they do, debt is always a spectre that any misstep turns into a reality. Similarly, Booth
first finds himself in jail through no fault of his own. All of Booth's troubles, including that first conviction, come about because he is poor in the first place. He is convicted, we remember, because he does not look respectable. His very poverty is a social injustice: although he has served his country well, he has been retired on a most insufficient half pay. Fielding emphasizes that one injustice leads to another. Because Booth is poor, he is at the mercy of creditors and his wife is at the mercy of great men; when he is robbed by a dishonest servant girl, the little he had is too small an amount to be covered by law. Booth and Amelia are a deserving couple. Why should they suffer poverty, and, further, why should they constantly be exploited by others who are clearly less virtuous and even less wise? Fielding is explicit. Merit should be, but is not, rewarded by society; vice can triumph over virtue because virtue is not prepared to recognize the devious traps which vice manufactures. Fielding is blunt in saying that, on virtually every front, merit is not properly rewarded by society. Booth's inadequate half pay and the treatment of the soldier who was imprisoned because he could not get into a hospital are two examples. Later, after the reader has met a number of such cases, Fielding explicitly comments that the rewards in society ought to go to the deserving rather than the insistent. The first context is literary; later, Fielding returns to the topic in a more general setting.

The earlier discussion takes place, as so much of the novel does, in the bailiff's house as Booth awaits the posting of bail. He has been treated to a lengthy conversation with an "author," a man of no particular learning or talent, who asks Booth to subscribe to his newest work, and Booth avoids doing so. When Booth’s two friends, the Colonel and Sergeant Atkinson, come to post bond, the "author" asks the colonel to subscribe, and without any consideration, the colonel hands over double the subscription rate. Booth is distressed by this clear reward for lack of merit and by the social implications of the act; he apologizes to the colonel:
"it may look uncharitable in me, to blame you for your Generosity; but I am convinced the Fellow hath not the least Merit or Capacity; and you have subscribed to the most horrid Trash that ever was published."

"I care not a Farthing what he publishes. . . . Heaven forbid, I should be obliged to read half the Nonsense I have subscribed to."

"But, don't you think . . . that by such indiscriminate Encouragement of Authors, you do a real Mischief to the Society? By propagating the Subscriptions of such Fellows, people are tired out, and with-hold their Contributions to Men of real Merit. . . ."

"Pugh . . . I never consider these Matters. Good or bad, it is all one to me. . . ." (vol. III, pp. 155-56) [italics mine]

This indifference to quality, whether in the treatment of a soldier or a writer, a rich man or a poor one, is disturbing to Fielding on two grounds: the deserving are not rewarded, and even more importantly, society as a whole may lose the services of the good and the competent, to be left impoverished "with all the Scurrility, Indecency, and Profaneness with which the Age abounds . . ." (vol. III, p. 156).

When Fielding returns to this theme later, he is even more forceful. Here it is Dr. Harrison (always the approved voice of Fielding) and a "nobleman of his acquaintance" who discuss at length the system of reward prevailing in society. The nobleman argues that merit can have little relation to reward in a real, as opposed to an ideal, society. The doctor, of course, argues on the other side. Dr. Harrison has come to the nobleman to ask a favor—that a young soldier of considerable merit (Booth) be placed back on full pay so that he can support his wife and children. After the requisite social amenities,

the Doctor open'd his Business, and told the Great Man, that he was come to him to solicit a Favour for a young Gentleman who had been an Officer in the Army, and was now on Half-Pay. "All the Favour I ask, my Lord . . . is, that this Gentleman may be again admitted ad eundum. I am convinced your Lordship will do me the Justice to think I would not ask for a worthless Person; but indeed the young Man I mean hath very extraordinary Merit. He was at the Seige at Gibraltar, in which he behaved with distinguished Brav-
The doctor's argument rests solely on merit. Booth is deserving, even his wife is deserving; justice demands that they be aided. The nobleman's answer is instructive. He tells the doctor that he needs his help in getting a friend elected. When the doctor protests that he cannot work in the cause of that particular man, the nobleman says he cannot help Booth. Dr. Harrison responds, "Is his own Merit, then, my Lord, no Recommendation?" (vol. IV, p. 125).

Clearly the nobleman and the doctor are talking at cross purposes, the one viewing reward only in terms of bargains reached, the other in terms of absolute worth. The remainder of the rather long scene is a debate between the two points of view. Note that Fielding chooses for his debators the middle-class doctor and the aristocratic nobleman who clearly represents the socially destructive power of an insensitive aristocracy. George Sherburn reminds us that we should look at these scenes within the literary context of the time:

*Amelia* was published in December, 1751. Its attack on the aristocracy for callousness and lack of recognition of merit was, of course, nothing new. About two months before the death of Alexander Pope, much of whose writing decries the bad taste and corruption of the aristocracy, Dr. Johnson had published his *Life of Richard Savage*, which told a story motivated much as Booth's was to be. In 1748 in *Roderick Random* Smollett had displayed the acidity of his heart in the story of the difficulties of Melopoyn in securing a patron for his tragedy—transparently the story of Smollett's own difficulties over his *Regicide*. Four years after *Amelia*, Dr. Johnson penned his famous letter to the Earl of Chesterfield about patronage, and in 1759 Goldsmith's *Enquiry* reiterated this tale of the lack of recognition of merit. In brief, this sort of thing, always evident in literary circles, was in the eighteenth century by way of becoming an agent to dissipate respect and regard for noble lords.22
Fielding's attack may not have been new, but it was certainly angry. None of the aristocratic characters in Amelia comes off with high marks, and the nobleman with whom the doctor discusses this issue of rewards in society is no exception. Fielding, through Dr. Harrison, insists that merit must be rewarded, both for the sake of the individual and for the health of the community. The nobleman argues that the doctor's position is hopelessly idealistic, that in the real world merit and reward simply do not presuppose one another.

The doctor notes that Booth is an excellent officer.

"Very probably!" cries my Lord. "And there are Abundance with the same Merit, and the same Qualifications, who want a Morsel of Bread for themselves and their Families."
"It is an infamous Scandal on the Nation. . . ."
"How can it be otherwise?" says the Peer. "Do you think it is possible to provide for all Men of Merit?"
"Yes, surely do I," said the Doctor. "And very easily too."
"How, pray?"—cries the Lord. "Only by not providing for those of none." (vol. IV, pp. 126–27)

For the doctor, the relation between the individual and society as a whole is very close indeed:

"to deny a Man the Preferment which he merits, and to give it to another Man who doth not merit it, is a manifest Act of Injustice. . . . Nor is it only an Act of Injustice to the Man himself, but to the Public, for whose Good principally all public Offices are, or ought to be instituted. Now this Good can never be completed, nor obtained, but by employing all Persons according to their Capacities. Wherever true Merit is liable to be superseded by Favour and Partiality, and Men are intrusted with Offices, without any Regard to Capacity or Integrity, the Affairs of State will always be in a deplorable Situation." (vol. IV, pp. 130–31)

Thus, injustice to the individual is always injustice to the society at large. But lack of reward for merit has even worse consequences: "it hath a manifest Tendency to destroy all Virtue and all Ability among the People, by taking away all that Encouragement and Incentive, which should promote Emulation, and
raise Men to aim at excelling in any Art, Science, or Profession” (vol. IV, p. 131). The lack of moral integrity and the destruction of ambition, again, have broad consequences, for such a nation becomes “contemptible among its neighbours” (vol. IV, p. 131).

This theme of the interdependency between morality and government, between individual and society, had already begun to be explored by Fielding in Jonathan Wild. In that earlier novel, Fielding repeatedly seems to suggest that evil usually lives better than good, and that, therefore, to borrow a phrase, the times are out of joint. Fielding’s criticism of governmental corruption is obviously more intense in Jonathan Wild—in some scholars’ readings it is the subject of the book. That is not the case in Amelia; Fielding’s range of social targets is broader in Amelia than in Jonathan Wild. But government is central to that range because so many personal misfortunes can be traced to corrupt, or at best, wrong-headed government policies. Thus, amelioration of the social situation requires the improvement of government, which Dr. Harrison sees as not only simple but natural. Dr. Harrison tries to convince the nobleman that virtue in a minister of government is not only socially useful but politically expedient:

“But if . . . he will please to consider the true Interest of his Country, and that only in great and national Points; if he will engage his Country in neither Alliances nor Quarrels, but where it is really interested; if he will raise no Money but what is wanted; nor employ any civil or military Officers but what are useful; and place in these Employments Men of the highest Integrity, and of the greatest Abilities; if he will employ some few of his Hours to advance our Trade, and some few more to regulate our domestic Government: If he would do this, my Lord, I will answer for it he shall have no Opposition to baffle. Such a Minister may, in the Language of the Law, put himself on his Country when he pleases and he shall come off with Honour and Applause.” (vol. IV, pp. 133–34)

The nobleman cannot believe that “there ever was such a Minister, or ever will be.” The doctor responds, “Why not . . . It
requires no very extraordinary Parts, nor any extraordinary Degree of Virtue. He need practise no great Instances of Self-denial. He shall have Power, and Honour, and Riches, and perhaps all in a much greater Degree than he can ever acquire, by pursuing a contrary System” (vol. IV, p. 134). If this is true, that expediency so neatly fits with honor, why then are there so many corrupt men, especially corrupt politicians? Or, as his lordship asks, “Do you really believe any Man upon Earth was ever a Rogue out of Choice?” To which the good doctor has to reply, “I am ashamed to answer in the Affirmative; and yet I am afraid Experience would almost justify me if I should” (vol. IV, p. 134).

This interchange is central to Fielding’s moral explorations in the book, for from this discussion it seems quite clear that morality consists simply in the doing of meritorious acts by the individual and the rewarding of those acts by the society. On every level, from the personal to the societal, good and expediency should go together—that is, not only honor but reward should dictate that a man choose to act according to the highest standards. Evil and injustice on any level, therefore, cannot be ignored simply because “that is the way things are.” Whatever is, clearly is not right; rather, much of what is wrong results from manmade error or corruption, and that corruption needs to be addressed by men of good will. Jonathan Wild and Amelia seem to indicate that Fielding would like to apply himself to reform on a much grander scale than he had ever been able to do as magistrate at Bow Street.

The question of why the good always seem to lose to the bad is a nagging one. Amelia and Booth do not thrive, as Heartfree does not in Jonathan Wild; Fielding has observed that such people are always at the mercy of the unscrupulous. Fielding answers the question directly. Why are the bad able to hoodwink the good?

It is not, because Innocence is more blind than Guilt, that the former often overlooks and tumbles into the Pit, which the latter foresees and avoids. The Truth is, that it is almost impossible Guilt should miss the discovering of all the Snares in its Way; as it is
constantly prying closely into every Corner, in order to lay Snares for others. Whereas Innocence, having no such Purpose, walks fearlessly and carelessly through Life; and is consequently liable to tread on the Gins, which Cunning hath laid to entrap it. To speak plainly, and without Allegory or Figure, it is not Want of Sense, but Want of Suspicion, by which Innocence is often betrayed. Again, we often admire at the Folly of the Dupe, when we should transfer our whole Surprize to the astonishing Guilt of the Betrayer. In a word, many an innocent Person hath owed his Ruin to this Circumstance alone, that the Degree of Villainy was such as must have exceeded the Faith of every Man who was not himself a Villain. (vol. III, pp. 190–91)

Fielding does not discount individual evil; he recognizes it and rather wryly wishes good men could protect themselves somewhat more effectively from it. But he also recognizes that, on the individual level, the good have at least some chance against evil designs. Although Colonel James, under cover of his friendship for Booth, attempts to seduce Amelia, she can and does defend herself: she refuses to go to the masquerade, and she will not stay as a guest in his house. Booth, were he a bit stronger of character, could have withstood Captain Trent’s invitations to the card table and not fallen into his debt. On the individual level, the possibility exists that one can ward off the blows. Fielding reserves most of his anger for societal corruptions and for legal injustices because, on that institutionalized level, the individual stands no chance at all. Clearly, for Fielding, institutionalized evil is far more dangerous than mere human weakness.

As we have seen, the law in Amelia operates with little regard to justice. Often worse than arbitrary, it is at times ridiculous. For example, at the end of the novel, it is discovered that Amelia’s property had been fraudulently taken from her upon the death of her mother. The relevant deeds are locked in the home of Murphy, the unscrupulous lawyer who had engineered the plot. But there is no legal way to search for the papers. Papers, even if they are worth huge sums of money, cannot be stolen property. Fortunately, the papers are in a worthless box that is property, and therefore everything can be recovered.
Recovery of stolen goods, too, is subject to arbitrary and unfair treatment by the law. When Booth's servant runs off with the paltry goods he and Amelia have left after their financial embarrassments, neither she nor the pawnbroker to whom she sells the goods can be taken to task because the goods are not quite worth the legal amount (arbitrarily set at forty shillings) for "stolen goods under a servant's care." The girl is discharged, much to Booth's dismay, and

"If the Girl is discharged," cries the Justice, "so must be the Pawnbroker: For if the Goods are not stolen, he cannot be guilty of receiving them, knowing them to be stolen. And besides as to his Offence, to say the Truth, I am almost weary of prosecuting it; for such are the Difficulties laid in the Way of this Prosecution, that it is almost impossible to convict any one on it. And to speak my Opinion plainly, such are the Laws, and such the Method of Proceeding, that one would almost think our Laws were rather made for the Protection of Rogues, than for the Punishment of them." (vol. IV, pp. 183-84)²⁴

The great punishable crime seems to be lack of money. Being in debt is not socially frowned on; neither the debt nor going to prison for it carries much (if any) moral sanction. It is not shameful when Booth has to hide in his house to avoid his creditors. Booth and Amelia are not embarrassed in the face of their friends, and the friends are not embarrassed either. As Sherburn has pointed out, debtors for Fielding are a group for which he had "an especial sympathy."²⁵ Although debt carries little moral onus, it is punishable by imprisonment at the instigation of the creditor. In prison, unless the debtor has friends outside, nothing can be earned toward the paying of the debt. And so the punishment of the debtor becomes not a matter of justice but of vengeance. Arrest, bail bond, and imprisonment become parts of a nightmarish game in which the only people who stand to win are the officers of the law. In the prison scenes of the early part of the novel, Fielding emphasizes the corruption of the judicial and penal systems—both judge and jailor, clearly, are unfit to bear their offices—but, ironically, with "things as they are," the corrupted fit perfectly
into the present state of corruption. The other link in the chain, arrest and internment, is equally bad. It is as if the entire legal system has nothing to do with justice but merely with profit. At every level, from the street, to the bar, to the prison, the evil-doer may escape punishment by paying, while the innocent will suffer simply through lack of funds.

Fielding portrays those who represent the system of justice as crafty and grasping creatures who make up in cupidity what they lack in humanity. Booth, for example, is called from his house on the pretext that his wife suddenly has been taken gravely ill. In reality, he is the victim of a bailiff’s ruse to lure him from the safety of his home. Apprehended, he is taken by cab to the bailiff’s house—and charged double the legal rate for cab hire. At his request, he is placed in a room by himself—and informed that he must buy refreshments whether he wants them or not because the bailiff “can’t afford Gentlemen a Room to themselves for nothing” (vol. III, p. 112).

Fielding’s account of Booth at the hands of the bailiff epitomizes his plaint against bad institutions and those whose corruption serves to exacerbate already bad conditions. In the eyes of Booth’s jailor, respect is due only to those who can pay for it, and Booth’s misfortunes are made even heavier by the bailiff’s treatment. Because he cannot hope to gain much money from Booth in the way of incidental expenses, the bailiff’s only interest is to find additional actions against him, and he tries to keep Booth as long as possible. Jones has reminded us that for each “action” charged to the debtor, the bailiff was entitled to an additional fee, so it is in his interest to detain the debtor, neither to send him on to prison nor to release him. When Booth’s friends come to serve bail for him, the bailiff manages to put off his release for one extra night and, in the meantime, finds an additional writ against Booth. He treats Booth more and more disrespectfully as he realizes how little he can expect to extort from him. When it becomes impossible to hold him any longer, “the Bailiff stepped up to Booth, and told him he hoped he would remember Civility Money” (III,
Booth, remarking on the many incivilities he had endured at the man's hands, refuses to honor the custom.  

Thus the debtor, by definition poor, has no right to dignity or fair treatment. He is almost entirely at the mercy of the representatives of society, and those are, Fielding clearly shows us, not of the highest sort. The lack of logic shown by society in arresting a man for debt, so that he has no means of earning the money to pay that debt, is too obvious to require comment. Fielding contents himself only with the observation that, as Booth notes, "by the old Constitution of England . . . Men could not be arrested for Debt" (vol. III, p. 117).  

Amelia has been viewed by critics as Fielding's "problem novel" because it is so different from his other works, but the significant difference is not of form or even topic, but of tone. Amelia is an angry book; Fielding has written a relatively straightforward account of the social and legal injustices with which he was so intimately involved in his work as magistrate. He accounts for the distortions of relationships caused by human weaknesses, as when the colonel pursues his friend Booth's wife. But such social explorations are present in other novels of the century as well. Fielding's extended depiction of institutionalized injustice, coming as early as it does, is unique. The book has a vaguely nightmarish tone throughout, which, as I have noted, initially is struck in its earliest chapters. There is constant danger—as if to walk outside one's house is to invite disaster.  

Fielding indeed recognizes that there are wonderful human relationships (friend, wife, husband) that improve the human condition. The relationships between Dr. Harrison, Sergeant Atkinson, and the Booths, or between Booth and Amelia, are all warm, caring, and virtually ideal. Amelia is always ready to support Booth. When she learns that he has had an affair with Miss Mathews, when she learns that he has gambled away the last money they have, Amelia's only concern is that her dear husband should not bear any additional guilt. She defends him from any pain she can; she willingly does without even food as
long as he is with her. Booth returns her affection; to him she is the perfect woman, and (his lapse with Miss Mathews notwithstanding) his life and desires revolve around her well-being. Amelia and Booth are not so fortunate only in their relations with each other, for they have friends who are almost as loving and supportive to them as they are within their marriage. Sergeant Atkinson and his wife are important characters in the book, as is Dr. Harrison. All of them would, indeed on more than one occasion do, give the Booths their last reserves of money. When Sergeant Atkinson thinks he sees a suspicious character near the Booths' house, he offers to stand guard—and does. When Booth is arrested, Sergeant Atkinson runs up and down the town finding people to stand bond, keeps Amelia informed, and so on. Whatever small sums of money he has are at the disposal of the Booths at any time. Dr. Harrison is an equally good friend; it is he who stands bail for Booth, up to his own financial limits. Not only his money but his guidance are at Booth's disposal, and he tries in all ways to advance the welfare of the young couple, even, as I have noted, by trying through political means to secure a post for Booth. Although Fielding does include a number of unpleasant portraits, generally of the aristocracy, he gives most of the novel's attention to these relationships between friends and spouses. The overwhelming impression, looking at the Booths, the Atkinsons, and Dr. Harrison, is that human relationships are for the most part positive.

Then how is it that the impression of the book as a whole is one of unease, even of fear? Even the best of relationships, Fielding seems to say, cannot protect us from our faulty institutions; at best, they can afford us temporary buffers. Booth and Amelia cannot escape their situation by their own exertions, not even with all the goodwill and help of their friends. In order to give the novel a happy ending, Fielding has to drag in a deus ex machina: Amelia wonderfully enough comes into the fortune that had been stolen from her years earlier, and so all is saved. Fielding the moralist gives his book a moral ending. When Amelia regains her fortune, virtue is rewarded. All of her suffering, all of the Booths' distresses, are somehow repaid. Field-
ing ends his novel by assuring the reader that “as to Booth and Amelia, Fortune seems to have made them large Amends for the Tricks she played them in their Youth. They have, ever since the above Period of this History, enjoyed an uninterrupted Course of Health and Happiness” (vol. IV, p. 295). Each of the other characters, we learn in this last chapter, is rewarded according to his merits as well. It is a very moral—and a very neat—ending for the novel.

But Fielding is not being entirely serious as he accounts for the fates of his heroes and his villains, for Fielding the realist, Fielding the magistrate, knew well that such neat apportioning of rewards and punishments is more pleasing than true. And he expects his readers to know it, too. At least, his hint is broad enough. For if on the last page of his novel Fielding tells us that “Fortune seems to have made [Booth and Amelia] large Amends for the Tricks she played them in their Youth,” he expects us to remember that on the very first page of the novel he had warned:

To speak a bold Truth, I am, after much mature Deliberation, inclined to suspect, that the Public Voice hath in all ages done much Injustice to Fortune, and hath convicted her of many Facts in which she had not the least Concern. I question much, whether we may not by natural Means account for the Success of Knaves, the Calamities of Fools, with all the Miseries in which Men of Sense sometimes involve themselves...; in short, for all the ordinary Phenomena which are imputed to Fortune; whom, perhaps, Men accuse with no less Absurdity in Life, than a bad Player complains of ill Luck at the Game of Chess.

But if Men are sometimes guilty of laying improper Blame on this imaginary Being, they are altogether as apt to make her Amends, by ascribing to her Honours which she as little deserves. (vol. I, pp. 1–2)

Fielding, however, has no other way to account for the change in Booth and Amelia’s life, except for a change of “Fortune,” for they have done nothing in particular to regain Amelia’s inheritance. It is only by accident that they are saved, and so the accident must seem contrived. We have seen throughout
the novel that none of their own efforts, nor those of their friends, could otherwise save them. Ironically, the very falsity of the ending proves the truthfulness of the book, for Fielding has so accurately reproduced for us the corruptions of his age that we, like his characters, can see no way out.


6. Robert Alter titles his chapter on Amelia “Fielding’s Problem Novel,” and he begins his discussion with the following definition: “Fielding’s last work of fiction can be thought of as a problem novel in much the same way that the troubled comedies of Shakespeare’s middle period are often regarded as problem plays. One gets a disconcerting sense that the tone of the writing is not always fully under the writer’s control . . .” (p. 141). J. Paul Hunter in *Occasional Form: Henry Fielding and the Chains of Circumstance* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975) argues more convincingly that we should not take “the easy view . . . that Fielding’s talent was, sadly, depleted at the age of forty-four” in trying to understand Amelia, but that we should realize that “the radically different tone of Amelia . . . involves a diminished vision of rhetorical possibility rather than talent gone soft or just gone” (p. 193).


9. *Henry Fielding: Novelist and Magistrate* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1933). Jones does not do a great deal in the way of critical reading; rather, his accomplishment is to make much of the relevant historical information available in one essay and to suggest some of the many correspondences between fact and fiction in Fielding's world.


12. Jones, p. 119; see also pp. 113–27 passim.


14. Ibid.


19. Howard, p. 11.


21. John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* presents a picture of prison life which corresponds on many points to Fielding's. In addition to the general corruption of Peachum and Lockit and the freedom of movement and action they allow their charges, compare specifically Gay's reference to the custom of garnish with Fielding's. The scene is Macheath's entrance to Newgate (Act II, scene vii).

    *Lock.* Noble Captain, you are welcome. You have not been a Lodger of mine this Year and half. You know the custom, Sir. Garnish, Captain, Garnish. Hand me down those Fetters there.

    *Mach.* Those, Mr. Lockit, seem to be the heaviest of the whole sett. With your leave, I should like the further pair better.

    *Lock.* Look ye, Captain, we know what is fittest for our Prisoners. When a Gentleman uses me with Civility, I always do the best I can to please him.—Hand them down . . . I say.—We have them of all Prices, from one Guinea to ten, and 'tis fitting every Gentleman should please himself.

    *Mach.* I understand you, Sir. [Gives Money.] The Fees here are so many, and so exorbitant, that few Fortunes can bear the expense of getting off handsomely, or of dying like a Gentleman.


23. Sherburn in “Fielding’s Social Outlook,” (p. 5) notes that “Fielding’s central idea... concerning the relation of the classes to each other would be the concept of all classes working together for the good of the whole.”

24. Fielding devotes an entire chapter of An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers to the problem of punishing “Receivers of Stolen Goods” (p. 68 ff.). His conclusions are precisely those he states here in Amelia.


26. The bailiff’s distortion of perspective is complete:

[the bailiff] acquainted [Booth] that one of the Prisoners was a poor Fellow. “He calls himself a Gentleman... but I am sure I never saw any thing genteel by him. In a Week that he hath been in my House, he hath drank only part of one Bottle of Wine. I intend to carry him to Newgate within a Day or two, if he can’t find Bail. ... He hath run out all he hath by Losses in Business, and one way or other; and he hath a Wife and seven Children.—Here was the whole Family here the other Day, all howling together. I never saw such a beggarly Crew; I was almost ashamed to see them in my House. ... To be sure, I do not reckon him as proper Company for such as you, Sir; but there is another Prisoner in the House that I dare say you will like very much. He is, indeed, very much of a Gentleman, and spends his Money like one. I have had him only three Days, and I am afraid he won’t stay much longer. They say, indeed, he is a Gamester; but what is that to me or any one, as long as a Man appears as a Gentleman? I always love to speak by People as I find. And, in my Opinion, he is fit Company for the greatest Lord in the Land; for he hath very good cloaths, and Money enough. He is not here for Debt, but upon a Judge’s Warrant for an Assault and Battery... (vol. III, pp. 118-19).


29. Fielding begins An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers with references to the “constitution,” and the whole of the work is sprinkled with allusions to this institution. Battestin notes that for Fielding “the term implies not only the laws of the nation but the essential spirit and character” (p. 3).

30. In every case the good characters, Fielding tells us, live happy, healthy lives—the unpleasant or evil characters all suffer just fates. In a particularly characteristic twist, for example, the false witness Robinson, who had helped Murphy steal Amelia’s fortune years before, repents and is instrumental in helping the Booths to reclaim it. “The Witness for some Time seemed to reform his Life, and received a small Pension from Booth; after which he returned to vicious Courses, took a Purse on the Highway, was detected and taken, and followed the last Steps of his old Master [i.e. Murphy, who had been ‘hanged at Tyburn’]” (vol. IV, pp. 293-94).