Postscript

BBC REWRITES TOM JONES’S ILLEGITIMACY

Although the tradition of the obligatory transformation of female bastards into foundlings may have ebbed by the 1810s, representations informed by that tradition still resonate with us today in unexpected and subtle ways. Consider the flashback at the end of the BBC 1998 production of *Tom Jones*, which shows Tom’s late parents, Miss Bridget Allworthy and Mr. Summer, smiling at each other and very much in love. The next shot is a mercifully brief close-up of Mr. Summer’s face disfigured by disease as he lies dead in the parish church with Bridget crying over his body. We learn from a voice-over supplied by Tom’s presumed mother, Jenny Jones, that on the very day Mr. Summer was to ask for Bridget’s hand from her brother, Mr. Allworthy, “he was taken with a small-pox and passed away by the following morning,” leaving Miss Allworthy pregnant with his child and terrified at the impending loss of her reputation.

The revelation that Tom’s parents would have married had it not been for Mr. Summer’s untimely death is the invention of this particular movie. In the book, Bridget is not at all inclined to wed her lover, who is handsome and genteel but poor. As the thunderstruck Allworthy reminisces at the end of the story, “I confess I recollect some passages relating to that Summer, which have formerly gave me a Conceit that my Sister had some Liking to him. I mentioned it to her: For I had such a regard for the young Man, as well on his own account, as on his Father’s, that I should willingly have consented to a Match between them; but she expressed the highest Disdain of my unkind Suspicion, as she called it, so that I never spoke more on the Subject” (833).
Henry Fielding’s Bridget, vehemently disclaiming any tenderness for an indigent son of a clergyman, is very different from the BBC Bridget, crying over Mr. Summer’s body on the very day when he would have revealed their mutual attraction to Mr. Allworthy. More is at stake here, however, than simply transforming a hypocritical stuck-up character into a sympathetic suffering one. What Fielding has emphatically refused to do and the movie sheepishly does is mitigate Tom’s illegitimacy and his mother’s sexual trespass by implying that his parents were almost as good as married because they planned to get married. In fact, sociologists studying early modern illegitimacy put such “courtship pregnancies” in a class by themselves, implying that the charge of promiscuity could not be leveled against a couple whose marriage plans were disrupted through no fault of their own.1

The introduction of the “courtship pregnancy” motif into the narrative can lead to certain misunderstandings. The picture closes with a moving tribute to Fielding, which includes the mention of a “scandal” surrounding the first publication of Tom Jones. Based on what they have just seen, some viewers account for that controversial reception by the sexual explicitness of the novel, amplified by several nude scenes in the BBC production.2 In reality, however, the scandal was precipitated not only by the characters’ sexual escapades but also by Fielding’s audacity in leaving his hero a bastard. Jacobite critics claimed “that an earthquake that threatened London and other cosmic disorders were God’s punishment for this indecency,” and, generally, the offended first readers of the novel wished that Fielding had “revealed a secret marriage between Bridget and her illicit lover, who had died anyway.”3 The BBC producers’ tampering with Tom’s irredeemable illegitimacy caves in to that old wish, but the only apparent benefit of this “improvement” is that Bridget comes off as more virtuous—a curious instance of prudishness on the BBC’s part. Why not leave the foundling hero a bastard, since Fielding himself did?

It seems that removed as we are from the anxieties surrounding the issue of illegitimacy in the days of Fielding, we could still be made to respond to representations engendered by those anxieties. It mattered then whether Tom was legally conceived or not, and, judging by the movie’s tiptoeing around the issue, it may still matter now. The twentieth- and twenty-first-century audiences may be unaware of the socioeconomic conditions (i.e., the importance of inheritance for one’s economic survival and the grave threat represented by a bastard sibling’s claim on that inheritance) that fueled the demonization of bastards for
many centuries, but the echoes of that demonization still haunt our cultural imagination. Tom’s considerable personal charms apparently acquire a different slant if he is perceived as a bit less of a “bastard” and a bit more of a love child deprived by a fluke of fate of a loving two-parent family.

The final scene of the movie amplifies the stakes of this tacit shift in perception. We see Tom riding up to his house in a carriage together with Allworthy, the older man snuggly dozing off now and then, the younger man gazing at him with tenderness. The carriage stops, and Tom’s family—Sophia and their two children, Tom and Bridget—joyfully welcome him at the door. Amidst their happy domestics, there is another married couple, Honour and Partridge, and as they turn around to enter the house behind their masters, we see their hands sliding quietly toward each other’s bottoms. Tom is thus firmly ensconced in his role as paterfamilias; Allworthy does not have to keep an eye on him and can afford to nod off; Bridget Allworthy’s memory is sanctified by her grandchild being named after her (note that the novel itself does not specify the name of Tom’s daughter); and sex, particularly of a playful, non-procreative kind, is displaced onto the comic couple of a lower social standing.

Tom, the movie implies, has shaken off rakishness (and some of his libido?) together with his bastardy, or is it that his former rakishness was an expression of his bastardy? BBC’s Tom Jones seems to be implicitly playing off the old association of bastardy with unruly sexual appetite, which is deeply ironic because this is an association that Fielding himself sought to subvert by populating his novel with numerous bastards and refusing to see their bastardy as a meaningful common denominator explaining their behavior. The BBC’s Tom is the virtuous son of the virtuous mother, his new respectability guaranteed through the use of the same representational strategy that the eighteenth-century writers relied on to guarantee the respectability of their female protagonists. The old transformation of female bastards into foundlings becomes an equal opportunity endeavor.

The “rewriting” of early modern bastardy thus goes on, even in a culture that has lost most, if not all, of the former socioeconomic incentives for monitoring the legitimacy of its citizens. To me it indicates that one of the key endeavors of my study—to uncover the mundane and thus poignant existence of eighteenth-century illegitimate men and women from under the agglomeration of cultural fantasies about “bastards” and “foundlings”—remains a project in progress. Although we
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may never be able—and, in fact, would not even want—to postulate a certain cutoff point at which the “real” experience of bastardy ends and its cultural reimagining begins, we should at least be aware of our enduring tendency to ignore the former and to overprivilege the latter in our ongoing reconstruction of early modern cultural history.