Narrative Concepts in the Study of Eighteenth-Century Literature

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Formalism and Historicity Reconciled in Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*

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Every student of Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* quotes Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s remark in his *Table Talk*: ‘What a master of composition Fielding was! Upon my word, I think the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the *Alchemist*, and *Tom Jones*, the three most perfect plots ever planned’ (Coleridge, 1856, p. 521). The novel’s justly-celebrated plot with its twists and turns and surprises seems to involve for readers a series of uncertainties about the ultimate fates of its characters. And yet Fielding’s plot is distinct from what we now think of as ‘plot’. For one thing, the narrative unfolds in a supremely leisurely and digressive fashion, lacking the ‘structuration’ that contemporary narratologists see as the essence of plot. To quote a representative definition by Karin Kukkonen, plot ‘designates the ways in which the events and characters’ actions in a story are arranged and how this arrangement in turn facilitates discussion of their motivations and consequences’. Kukkonen adds that ‘these causal and temporal patterns can be foregrounded by the narrative discourse itself or inferred by the reader’. Plot, the expanded definition continues, can be ‘progressive structuration’, as readers perceive ‘connections between story events, motivations and consequences’, and it can also be part of ‘authorial design’ whereby the author structures the narrative ‘to achieve particular effects’ (Kukkonen, 2014). That is to say, plot in narratological analysis is a cognitive tool whereby the matter of the narrative – the nature of the characters (psychological, socio-historical, and so on) – the events and sequences that flow from those characters and their experiences, creates through the narrator’s arrangement and the reader’s interpretation a meaningful whole.

But narratological analysis of the elusive aspect of narrative we label plot runs up against Fielding’s undermining of plot in *Tom Jones* in our current sense of the term. Even though readers know that the narrator is completely in control (how could he be otherwise!), withholding for a time crucial facts and details about the sequence of events that constitute the story but occluding the links and characters’ motives that in fact connect those events, Fielding poses as merely the teller of a tale or the relator of a simple story (a ‘History’), facetiously minimizing his role as inventor of the narrative, creating a supervising suspense or suspicion about the ultimate fates of
his main characters, especially Tom. To be sure, the sobriquet that the title
gives Tom, ‘a Foundling’, is a broad hint to the alert reader of the novel’s
ultimate revelation, since foundlings in myth and romance are always more
than they seem to be (Oedipus, Moses, for example), although Tom even in
his exalted final restoration to grace is still a bastard, a fact that cannot be
erased even by the romantic ending of the novel. That is to say, there is a
generic inevitability in Fielding’s implicit evocation (strongly promoted by
the word in his title, ‘a Foundling’) that reassures the alert reader (we cannot
of course be sure just how alert or fully aware of the literary-historical
ironies in his subtitle his initial readers were) about Tom’s ultimate fate and
the resolution of the novel’s events. Contemporary narratological generali-
ties are insufficient or indeed irrelevant in the face of Fielding’s playful
comedy in which plot in any stable sense is undermined. For Fielding, we
may say, plot is a rhetorical device tied to the generic inevitabilities of the
comic romance tradition in which he is operating. Plot in Tom Jones is a
visible rhetorical artifice rather than an unfolding or exploration of the
uncertain destinies or developing identities of his characters.

Moreover, Fielding’s coy sub-title for his book, a ‘comic epic in prose’,
seeks to dilute plot in its technical narratological sense but also crucially,
I want to argue, to modify the playful generic features of comic romance
by its frequent elaboration of socio-economic actualities. In its way, Tom
Jones is a panoramic view of mid-eighteenth-century England, and that
representational fullness is sometimes in tension with the artificialities and
rhetorical playfulness of comic romance. That is to say, there are problemati-
cal aspects of actual mid-eighteenth-century English life that rear their ugly
head when the novel may be said to go just a bit too far into situations or
facts (or in the case I have in mind in presenting characters) that resist full
or seamless absorption into comic artifice. Certain representations in Field-
ing’s novel may be said to leave traces of a somewhat intractable or in point
of practice an actuality beyond the artifice of comic romance. Fielding both
offers glimpses of this historicity and withdraws from its articulation or full
exploration as he pursues his comic and moral symmetries. His narrative
method provides socio-historical knowledge such as other sorts of novels,
including his own Amelia (1751) and of course Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa
(1747–1748), are uniquely equipped and designed to offer. But in his first two
‘novels’, Joseph Andrews (1742) and here in Tom Jones he at times occludes
or appropriates such socio-historical facts by literary transformations that
are part of his comic romance.

Critical approaches to Fielding’s Tom Jones, exemplified by classic and
still influential essays by R.S. Crane and Ralph Rader, stress either the
artifice and control of the narrator (Crane, 1957) or the rich and varied socio-historical representations the novel features even as it creates a comic artefact (Rader, 2011). Crane’s analysis of the plot of Fielding’s novel stresses its organizing comic form whereby our anxiety over Tom’s fate ‘is the comic analogue of fear’, comic because there are plenty of narrative signals that all will be well in this basically benign world that Fielding evokes and controls. But despite his rigorous attention to the formal devices of Fielding’s novel, even Crane refers at times to a gap, which we don’t feel in other comic works such as Oliver Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer*, between this form and an implied world of, shall we say, socio-historical reality just beyond the novel’s representations: ‘We are not disposed to feel’, Crane admits, ‘when we are done laughing at Tom, that all is right with the world or that we can count on Fortune always intervening, in the same gratifying way, on behalf of the good’ (Crane, 1952, p. 84). I would revise Crane’s comment drastically to say that in fact the fortunate fate the plot of *Tom Jones* arranges for its hero dramatizes that Fortune in the actual world will never intervene on the side of the angels, that the good will almost invariably meet an undeserved bad end. For his part, Rader in his essay, ‘*Tom Jones*: The Form in History’ takes Tom’s distinctive and spontaneous goodness that for Crane provides readers with comic security about the hero’s ultimate fate and locates it ideologically and historically in Fielding’s reading of the Latitudinarian preachers of the day. And he also asks among other pertinent questions why a novel centred on a single protagonist should ‘have in it such a wealth of characters from all levels of society?’ and ‘why in purely artistic terms should it include glimpses of and encounters with the Jacobite rebellion of 1745?’ (Rader, 2011, p. 246).

I want in what follows to try to answer or at least to explore these two questions Rader asks of Crane’s approach to *Tom Jones* (and in the process to speculate about why Crane admits that there is a limit to our confidence in the novel’s comic resolutions), since I think that Fielding’s unresolved socio-historical representations appear most clearly through a few minor or peripheral characters who function to a greater or lesser extent as part of the narrative structure, those tangled circumstances that will resolve Tom’s dilemma and in the end reward him as he deserves. To the extent that *Tom Jones* is panoramic or epic in scope, by the way, it resembles equally ambitious nineteenth-century novels, which as Alex Woloch observes shrewdly in their proliferation of characters are often ‘structurally destabilized’ by too many people ‘who are incompletely pulled into the narrative’ and hang between allegorical generality and a particularity of reference that in its fullness should by rights belong only to the major characters (Woloch, 2003,
But in *Tom Jones* at least some of these minor characters also acquire in the course of events a kind of virtual independence and disruptive socio-historical resonance that the main characters do not possess. Paradoxically they have a particularized reference, a socio-historical specificity that exceeds that of major characters with quasi-allegorical names like Allworthy and Squire Western or Thwackum and Square, or of minor characters like the many comic servants and innkeepers, for example. Some minor characters can be said to mark the limits of Fielding’s comic artifice or at least of his full narrative interest in articulating their histories.

To be sure, just about all the time, Fielding in *Tom Jones* smoothly manages these potentially problematical aspects of socio-historical representation perfectly well by establishing a jokey complicity with his readers, a form of reassuring comic universalizing in which we wait for the working out of the amusing inevitabilities of frail or corrupt human nature and the interlocking of events in the movement of the plot as they manifest themselves toward a long-delayed resolution, which is of course insured by the generic form of the comic romance. For an instance of a series of events and characters that will allow me to illustrate how such representation is managed smoothly in Fielding’s characteristic fashion even as it exposes the problematics of socio-historical representation, I want to consider the introduction of a company of soldiers in Chapters 11 and 12 of Book VII, as Tom tries to find the road to Bristol in order to seek his fortune after being banished from Paradise Hall. These soldiers are on their way northward to take on the Jacobite rebels led by Bonnie Prince Charlie. A look at this scene will respond to Ralph Rader’s question of why that specific historical moment is inserted into Fielding’s novel. As Martin Battestin notes in the Wesleyan edition of the novel, Fielding places the action very precisely in November 1745 when the Duke of Cumberland had been appointed commander of the forces at a crisis point: the rebel army had penetrated into England as far as Derby, before beginning their retreat back to Scotland and eventual decisive defeat at Culloden in April 1746 (Battestin, 1975, p. xxxviii). Late at night when Tom is asleep in an armchair in the tavern where the suspicious host will not allow him a proper bed, the soldiers burst in and demand drink from the landlord. Tom awakens, joins in the revelry, and in fact pays the reckoning at the end when a dispute arises over who owes how much, some of the soldiers having decamped to avoid paying their share. So this historically resonant – and in 1749 very recent – moment of national crisis begins in comic boisterousness and predictable lower-class self-seeking and petty cheating, which tells us a great deal about the dominance of comic form in the novel:
The Company having now pretty well satisfied their Thirst, nothing remained but to pay the Reckoning, a Circumstance often productive of much Mischief and Discontent among the inferior Rank of Gentry; who are apt to find great Difficulty in assessing the Sum, with exact Regard to distributive Justice, which directs, that every Man shall pay according to the Quantity which he drinks (TJ, p. 327).19

The son of a soldier, Fielding portrays here and elsewhere in *Tom Jones* the eighteenth-century English army as the imperfect, not to say laughably corrupt and inefficient, institution it may to some extent have been, staging at some length for comic effect the ignorance and loutishness, here and elsewhere, of the common soldiery, who are no different and possibly worse in their thoughtless brutality and self-seeking than the other plebeians he represents in the novel. (I should insert here that whether this depiction of a key institution is driven by literary or ideological motives is a good question without a clear answer. Why, to ask Rader’s question again, is the 1745 Jacobite rebellion, a very recent and deadly serious political crisis, inserted and then withdrawn from the novel? Why is the focus in this scene as Tom volunteers to fight against the rebels on the comic and corrupt aspects of military life? What does such a depiction of the military tell us about Tom’s heroic and somewhat embarrassingly self-conscious patriotism as he joins the forces?) The sergeant of the company, for example, is a minor *miles gloriosus*, telling Tom ‘many entertaining Stories of his Campaigns, tho’ in Reality he had never made any; for he was but lately come into the Service’ and as the narrator tells us ascended to his rank ‘by his Merit in recruiting, in which he was most excellently well skilled’ (TJ, pp. 328–29). Fielding’s readers then and perhaps now are certain to know that military recruiting in the eighteenth century was often enough a matter of trickery and false promises, so our sergeant is very much a rogue, comic enough in the narrative (he later tries to sell Tom a sword for the astonishing sum of twenty guineas but relents quickly when challenged and says that he meant twenty shillings!), but in actual practice as a recruiter he would be a symptom of corrupt, devious, and often brutal military custom for filling the ranks. Indeed, much later in the novel Lady Bellaston proposes to Lord Fellamar that Tom can be legally pressed into the navy, and she’s right. Martin Battestin’s note in the Wesleyan edition of the novel explains that in 1744 a new law went

19 All further quotations from *Tom Jones* in the text are from Penguin edition of the novel edited by Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely.
into effect that any able bodied male who had no visible trade or means of support could be conscripted.\(^{20}\)

But at the end of this chapter of Book VII, as Tom meets the officers of the company, he is greeted gallantly by the senior of the group, a sixty-year-old lieutenant (an unlikely age for a soldier, especially then), who sees ‘a remarkable Air of Dignity in [Tom’s] Look, which is rarely seen among the Vulgar, and is indeed not inseparably annexed to the Features of their Superiors’ (TJ, p. 329) and invites him to dine with the rest of the officers. This courtly lieutenant provides an exemplary military case history that can only be meant to illustrate the moral corruption and misuse of power in the army, which is surely Fielding’s point in offering his story in some detail: promoted to lieutenant from ensign personally, we are told, by the Duke of Marlborough for his bravery after the battle of Malplaquet, the lieutenant has remained at this rank for forty years because his wife (unbeknownst to him) has refused to prostitute herself to the colonel who is his superior officer. As the narrator reports, this lieutenant had served near forty Years; during which Time he had seen vast Numbers preferred over his Head, and had now the Mortification to be commanded by Boys, whose Fathers were at Nurse when he had first entered into the Service [...] This unfortunate Officer (for so I think he may be called) had many good Qualities, besides his Merit in his Profession; for he was a religious, honest, good natured Man; and had behaved so well in his Command, that he was highly esteemed and beloved, not only by the Soldiers of his own Company; but by the whole Regiment (TJ, pp. 330-31).

In this and the chapters that follow, the lieutenant proves himself in the context of an institution like the army that denies him advancement a noble and upright exception to its moral laxity, reproaching his junior officers for their ignorance and profanity and serving as a kind of temporary father figure for Tom after he is nearly killed in a cowardly assault by one Ensign Northerton in a quarrel a few chapters later, as Northerton, presumably drunk, after Tom has proposed a toast to Sophie Western, swears that ‘Tom French of our Regiment had both’ Sophia Western and her aunt at Bath (TJ,

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20 "Though the impressment of recruits for the Navy had been practiced in England since the thirteenth century, in 1744 a new law went into effect (17 George II, cap. 15) explicitly empowering local authorities to conscript as soldiers or marines all “such able-bodied Men as do not follow any lawful Calling of Employment, or have some other lawful and efficient Support and Maintenance” (Fielding, pp. 863-64).
p. 334). When Tom calls him an impudent rascal, Northerton fells Tom with a bottle to the head.

The officers’ dinner where we meet those ensigns under the command of the noble lieutenant is a riotous scene such as Fielding, who after all began literary life as a dramatist, loves to set up throughout the novel. It features his characteristically comic babble of voices and accents, a rich variety of idiolects for the members of the company, in which self-serving and boastful ignorance, profanity, and loutish behaviour collide not only with the lieutenant's nobility and generosity but with Tom's reverential evocation of Sophia and his heroic sentiments at the prospect of defending his country and his religion against the Jacobite menace. As he exclaims at one point over dinner:

'I don't know, Gentlemen,' says Jones, ‘what may be your Opinion; but I think no Man can engage in a nobler Cause than that of his Religion; and I have observed in the little I have read of History, that no Soldiers have fought so bravely, as those who have been inspired with a religious Zeal: For my own Part, tho' I love my King and Country, I hope, as well as any Man in it, yet the Protestant Interest is no small Motive to my becoming a Volunteer in the Cause’ (TJ, p. 332).

Such high flown, even priggish sentiments sound fairly odd in this profane and riotous company, where a bit earlier Northerton has aggressively displayed his ignorance after Tom describes the ‘Merriment’ that had passed among the soldiers with whom he arrived and avers that, nonetheless, “they will behave more like Grecians than Trojans when they come to the Enemy.” “Grecians and Trojans!” says Ensign Northerton, “who the Devil are they? I have heard of all the Troops in Europe, but never of any such as these” (TJ, p. 331). Despite having been at school and even after being reminded by the lieutenant of Pope's translation of Homer, Northerton is not at all embarrassed by his ignorance, and his exuberant defiance of cultural and linguistic decorum pits his racy and irreverent manner of speaking against Tom's and the lieutenant's decorous pieties and sober conversation:

'D___n Homo with all my Heart,' says Northerton, ‘I have the Marks of him in my A___ yet. There's Thomas of our Regiment, always carries a Homo in his Pocket: D___n me if ever I come at it, if I don't burn it. And there's Corderius, [Mathurin Cordier, author of a Latin textbook] another d___n'd Son of a Whore that hath got me many a Flogging’ (TJ, p. 331).
Northerton continues in the same vein, swearing as he recalls his father’s
desire that he should be a clergyman (hence his being sent to school), and
the lieutenant cautions him to watch his language and to avoid abusing
the clergy: ‘Scandalous Names and Reflections cast on any Body of Men,
must be always unjustifiable; but especially so, when thrown on so sacred
a Function’ (TJ, p. 332). The lieutenant is like Tom: except for a pardon-
able failing (despite his piety, he believes in a soldier’s right to defend his
honour by duelling) he is a paragon, both morally and linguistically, and his
proprieties we might add make him a kind of straight man for the slangy
and irreverent Northerton.

In the shadow of what his original audience would have known was the
nearly successful 1745 Jacobite rebellion, Fielding’s evocation of the English
armed forces with a cast of characters like this is a distracting mixture of
possibilities, of traditional comedy and satiric exposure, comic indignation
or simply amusement at predictable knavery and hypocrisy, we might
want to call it, coexisting with what can only be read as satisfaction in the
historical outcome in which this institution worked well enough in defeating
the rebels. Except for the odd panegyric like Addison’s ‘The Campaign’
about the victorious Marlborough, or Defoe’s embarrassing tributes to the
military triumphs of his hero, King William, it is hard to find among major
eighteenth-century English writers any glorification of military life and its
leaders, and Fielding is no exception. Implicit in the standing army debates
in England going back to the late seventeenth century is an anti-militarism
that Fielding seems to share. But any systematic critique of arbitrary and
unjust standards for military advancement implied by the lieutenant’s
career is diluted by the private sexual melodrama that we are told has
held him back, although Fielding’s original audience would have been well
aware that commissions were legally purchased, with power and social
privilege rather than military capacity or skill at the core of the English
officer class, at least at the lower levels. The injustice perpetrated by the
lieutenant’s libidinous superior is chalked up to the moral inevitabilities
of unchecked power in corrupt individuals rather than to the nature of
an institutional culture that permits such abuses or at least does nothing
to prevent them.

From scenes like this, one can generalize outward and say that Tom
Jones offers, in its broad representational sweep, a fairly complete survey of
English institutions, which are if one stops to think about it, the sources of
its plot complications – the church and the clergy, the judiciary, the game
laws, the rural gentry who exploit and administer that law, the army, an
often corrupt and immoral aristocracy in the persons of Lady Bellaston
and Lord Fellamar, the upper financial bourgeoisie like Nightingale's father, social welfare and the regulation of the poor (consider Black George, Allworthy's gamekeeper and his impoverished family), and many other aspects of mid-eighteenth-century English society, including the lack of vocational opportunities for young, educated but impecunious men like Tom – all these institutions and social classes governing mid-eighteenth-century life are represented both seriously and comically as deeply flawed, but they do provide material for a series of good jokes, serving as occasions for severe critique, laughter accompanied by sentimental regret and even outrage at injustice, implicit indignation at downright exploitation and abuse of power. And yet ridicule and contempt are held within a controlling and reassuring comic understanding, the scandalous socio-historical particulars balanced by a universalizing and uniformitarian psychology and history. Fielding’s subject as he tells us in his opening chapter is after all primarily human nature rather than the condition of England in the mid-1740s.

In his tracking in these chapters from the feckless common soldiers, to the roguish other ranks, up to the often treacherous and ignorant lower office corps, Fielding displays his talent for comprehensiveness and inclusiveness; the canvas is Hogarthian, the effect is comic plenitude through varieties of demotic speech, regional accents and cross-class mixtures, especially in the fascinating character of Northerton, a ruthless and reckless parvenu who will shortly play what will turn out to be a key and indeed totally unexpected role in the working out of the intricate twists and turns of Fielding’s plot. If we think about Ensign Northerton as a character when we first meet him in the officers’ dinner scene and in his subsequent actions in the narrative – his treacherous, thoughtlessly or perhaps just spontaneously brutal behavior in the chapters that follow his introduction – Northerton resonates beyond his socio-economic and linguistic place; he is both an interesting occasion for social satire, an illustration in his precise class history of the ignorance, the self-seeking corruption and casual brutality of the lower officer corps. But in the end he turns out to be much more important as a key cog in the mechanism of the plot. For one thing, his assault on Tom keeps him from taking part in the expedition to Scotland against the Jacobites. Bribing the landlady of the inn where he is being held prisoner by the lieutenant for that nearly fatal assault, Northerton escapes and as the narrator informs us in Book IX, Chapter 7 he hastens to a rendezvous with his mistress, none other than Jenny Waters, formerly known as Jenny Jones, common-law wife of his fellow soldier, one Captain Waters and of course the woman who
confessed to Allworthy that Tom was her illegitimate son. Concubinage and casual sexual connections and temporary relationships among the soldiery are about as realistically sordid a detail as one can imagine, but Northerton brings murderous violence and theft to the mix, as well let it be noted an apparent sexual dynamism that prompts Mrs. Waters to abandon her captain for him. But at the bottom of Mazard-Hill, he attempts to murder his mistress and relieve her of a valuable ring and ninety pounds with which he plans to make his escape from England from one of the Welsh ports, thereby betraying the lady who had agreed to desert her military ‘husband’ Captain Waters and flee the country with him.

Fielding’s evocation of his sudden impulse for murderous treachery is worth quoting for the narrator’s refusal to speculate about Northerton’s pre-meditation and its implication, given his previous outburst of rage against Tom, that his violence is more or less automatic and spontaneous. That is to say, Fielding avoids granting Northerton a coherent character or personality that explains his violent treachery; his effort seems to be to make him simply part of the hidden mechanism of the plot, although at this point a reader cannot possibly know that.

Whether the execrable Scheme which he now attempted to execute, was the Effect of previous Deliberation, or whether it now first came into his Head, I cannot determine. But being arrived in this lonely Place, where it was very improbable he should meet with any Interruption; he suddenly slipped his Garter from his Leg, and laying violent Hands on the poor Woman, endeavoured to perpetrate the dreadful and detestable Fact, which we have before commemorated, and which the providential Appearance of Jones did so fortunately prevent (TJ, pp. 457-58).

Tom happens to be sitting nearby with the Man of the Hill, and he intervenes to save Mrs. Waters in the nick of time. The coincidences and relationships in this violent intersection of three people are multiple, even for the reader and certainly for Tom, since he has never met or known about the woman who admitted to Allworthy that she was the foundling’s mother. So this key moment in the plot is not understood by readers and characters for what it is. Instead, it is at first a dramatization of Northerton’s villainy and Tom’s selfless heroism. Every reader of the novel will remember the rest, as Tom takes the terrified and nearly bare-breasted lady to the inn at Upton to complete her rescue. Fielding goes on to dwell upon the circumstances that led Northerton to this violence:
We have opened to thee a Scene of Folly, as well as Villainy, which we could scarce have believed a human Creature capable of; had we not remembered that this Fellow was at that Time firmly persuaded that he had already committed a Murder [that is of Tom at the officers’ dinner], and had forfeited his Life to the Law. As he concluded that his only Safety lay in Flight, he thought the possessing himself of this poor Woman’s Money and Ring, would make him Amends for the additional Burthen he was to lay on his Conscience (TJ, p. 458).

One wonders whether Fielding wants us to believe that Northerton has a conscience! He goes on to say that since Northerton ‘had neither the Birth nor Education of a Gentleman’ he was not fit to be an officer in the army, and that if ‘his Baseness can justly reflect on any besides himself, it must be only on those who gave him his Commission’ (TJ, p. 458). Given what we have learned about some English officers such as the colonel who has opposed the saintly lieutenant’s promotion because his wife would not prostitute herself to him, this is a fairly empty protest on Fielding’s part. The fact is that having invented Northerton in all his elemental viciousness as a crucial and hidden link in his plot, Fielding finds it difficult to account for his character. He cannot fully accommodate a character like this to his comic vision, but as we shall see we need him for a key twist in the plot.

Had it not been for this incident and Tom’s subsequent liaison with this woman, the quondam Jenny Jones, later Waters, he comes to fear is his mother, his real identity might never have emerged in the tangled series of events that is the novel’s plot. So Northerton’s compulsions, his sexual history and his spontaneous violence, are the secret essence of Fielding’s famous clockwork plot, a crucial cog in its workings, and yet given what Northerton has told us of himself he is something more than that, not only pathologically violent but a significant case history, a ‘character’ whose story has various potentially realistic and socio-historical dimensions that do not fit into the comic symmetries Fielding cultivates in his adherence to the comic romance genre.

This elusive and ruthless Northerton, resisting the upward mobility his parents had in mind when they sent him to school and designed him for a clergyman, grabbing pleasure, enjoying defiance, sowing destruction and disorder as he goes, is not quite an incidental picaro, since his origins and social trajectory are carefully noted; he has a history and Fielding sees that readers are informed of it: the child of parents who hoped through their son to ascend socially. This is what he says earlier in the dinner scene when the lieutenant asks him if he has been at school:
'Ay d___n me have I,' answered he, 'the Devil take my Father for sending me thither. The old Put wanted to make a Parson of me, but d___n me, thinks I to myself, I'll nick you there, old Cull: The Devil a Smack of your Nonsense, shall you ever get into me. There's Jimmey Oliver of our Regiment, he narrowly escaped being a Pimp too; and that would have been a thousand Pities: For d___n me if he is not one of the prettiest Fellows in the whole World; but he went farther than I with the old Cull: For Jimmey can neither write nor read' (TJ, pp. 331-32).

In his subversively malevolent energies, his self-destructive rejectionism, his reckless denial of moral and social decorum, his contempt for the social ambitions his father had for him, Northerton might well be a comically sinister figure out of a nineteenth-century realistic novel by Stendhal or Balzac or Thackeray or Dickens. But for Fielding in Tom Jones he is primarily a functional figure in the clockwork complicated mechanism of his plot and only secondarily part of the socio-economic/institutional landscape, the historical knowledge that Fielding to some extent delivers, but to an important extent fashions for his own literary and comic purposes: first, Northerton helps move along the Hogarthian comedy and the satire of the eighteenth-century army, but his much more important – if implicit – function comes in his serving as the subversive double of Tom Jones, the bastard born to be hanged as everyone said, the drunken and irresponsible ward of the lord of the manor who is expelled from Paradise Hall for his behaviour. But in point of fact Northerton’s dependable villainy, his amoral resiliency and elusiveness, as well as his energetic profanity are the realistic opposites of Tom’s instinctive and improbable virtue and fine speeches, although later in the novel he and Tom will be more or less equal in the eyes of the law, both suspected of felonious assault. To some extent at first glance, Northerton’s demonic personality and brutal history are efficiently absorbed by the demands of the novel’s moral and comic symmetry in which characters tend to be balanced in pairs. But as we contemplate his actions there is a surplus energy and expressiveness in Northerton as Fielding represents him that erodes or eludes that symmetry.

As an instance of military incompetence as well as thoroughgoing villainy, Northerton is indeed part of what I am calling Fielding’s critical examination of eighteenth-century institutions. His villainy is not derived overtly from his occupation, although the implication is that fecklessness like his thrives in a specific eighteenth-century English military context. In his predictable and amoral viciousness, Northerton is of a piece with the other villains in the narrative, although he is crude and overt where Tom’s half-brother
(as he turns out to be in the end), Blifil is subtle and cunning, but like the latter's lies and distortions Northerton's actions create what turn out to be temporary obstacles and in paradoxically happy fact essential contributions to Tom's progress toward his ultimate happy ending. Northerton's character is precisely problematical in that one can derive it from his socio-economic circumstances that locate him within the limited possibilities for movement upwards for young men without connections or wealth in eighteenth-century English society, as his subversion of morality and discipline might well be seen as the negative reaction to his privileged education, just as Tom's essential decency might be related to Allworthy's disastrous choice of tutors for him and Master Blifil, with Tom reacting against their absurd and inflexible teachings and Blifil manipulating both of his tutors for his own advantage. Of course, I am highlighting and isolating what Fielding only touches on in passing, uninterested as he seems to be in deriving character from circumstances, or at least as later novelists would in seeking to understand the relationship between character and socio-economic circumstances; but if we read as it were against the comic grain of the narrative, Northerton as a character is instructively distinct from what will emerge as Tom's privileged and magical status as the true heir to the Allworthy estate, the folk tale foundling (to be sure still a bastard, conceived out of wedlock), the hero of a modern romance, however modified from the traditional simplicities of that genre. Northerton's story is, from this perspective, the realistic or malevolently picaresque alternative to the comic romance embodied in the charming and sweet person of Tom Jones. Northerton's amoral and destructive energies are in an important sense a dramatization of what Tom would most likely have become without the literary transformations wrought by Fielding's comic narrative in which Tom, as Rader pointed out, is a benevolent, generous embodiment of Latitudinarian goodness.

To be sure, as a minor character who is almost purely functional in Fielding's complicated plot, Northerton is as Alex Woloch says of the implied person behind any minor novelistic character, not so much reflected in the text as 'partially inflected', radically contingent within the story as a whole (Woloch, 2003, p. 13). There is a fascinating if unresolvable excess in Northerton; he is in Woloch's terms inflected but we can't be said to have any clear sense of what his deviations (that is to say, his inflections, his singular markings) from moral and social norms actually signify. What, in other words, drives this character to commit various forms of mayhem? Fielding doesn't bother to explore it; he ignores it or claims that it is opaque and mysterious, and Northerton is simply part of the comic and brutal English soldiery, although as later events prove he is not simply that.
It is quite otherwise for Fielding as he presents Tom’s other, more obvious evil twin, Blifil, who is a major character in the novel and thereby far less elusive than Northerton in the sense that the reader is instructed to understand him and Tom in their relationship as half-brothers, with Blifil as Tom’s moral and emotional opposite. Blifil’s place in the comic and moral symmetries of Fielding’s novel, then, is absolutely clear, dictated by the balancing of characters into opposing pairs. Whereas Northerton as he himself presents his history is in one sense completely forthright in his impulsive violent urges and amoral movements, Tom Jones is transparent in his public persona, ingenuous and open, generous and spontaneous for better and sometimes for worse. Blifil, however, in his capacity as Tom’s opposite, is decidedly not what he seems to be to other characters in the novel; he is manipulative, devious, and self-serving, opaque to others, indeed possessed of the secret upon which the plot turns, Bridget Allworthy’s admission on her deathbed that Tom is her son by the late Mr. Summer. And yet both young men have, as we learn at the end, the same mother, and they have identical childhoods, the same loving uncle and aunt and the same tutors, although Tom is slightly older. The balancing symmetries of the romance plot, here and elsewhere overrule such naturalistic possibilities.

Since a minor character like Northerton turns out to be essential for the working out of the plot of *Tom Jones*, I want, then, to consider as well how the plot of Fielding’s comic romance is served in other senses by a few major characters who are in one respect similar in villainy to him, although totally different in their self-presentation and self-consciousness – all three Blifils, the uncle, Dr. Blifil, the father, Captain Blifil, and Blifil (who is never given a first name) the son of the marriage between Captain Blifil (another soldier, as it turns out) and Bridget Allworthy. Dr. Blifil is part of the Allworthy household we meet in the opening chapters, the recipient of Allworthy’s patronage as someone who is unable to support himself in the medical profession his father forced him to study. This Blifil, Fielding tells us, had ‘a great Appearance of Religion’, and he adds, his tongue firmly in his cheek, ‘Whether his religion was real, or consisted only in Appearance, I shall not presume to say, as I am not possessed of any Touchstone, which can distinguish the true from the false’ (TJ, p. 60). In Fielding’s transparent irony, his disingenuous pseudo-ignorance, this means that Dr. Blifil is a hypocrite, a Tartuffe of the first order. Noting quickly that the sexually eager Bridget Allworthy (Fielding’s embarrassing joke about plain spinsters ready to marry any warm body is what drives this part of the plot, and it is distasteful to modern readers) would provide him with an avenue to possession of the Allworthy estate, he finds that, as Fielding renders his
thoughts, there is one obstacle to this opportunity: ‘an unfortunate Accident which had happened to him about ten Years before; namely, his Marriage with another Woman, who was not only still alive, but what was worse, known to be so by Mr. Allworthy’ (TJ, p. 61). Fielding’s narrator pretends to validate Dr. Blifil’s frame of reference, although the effect is to dramatize it comically as the character’s moral nullity. So Dr. Blifil remembers, in Fielding’s ingenuous tracing of knavery, ‘that he had a Brother who was under no such unhappy Incapacity’ (TJ, p. 61). Thus Captain Blifil enters the novel, invited by his brother to court Bridget as a means of acquiring the Allworthy estate. Here in part is his history and his portrait, what for Northerton by significant contrast Fielding never provides:

This Gentleman was about 35 Years of Age. He was of a middle Size, and what is called well built. He had a Scar on his Forehead, which did not so much injure his Beauty, as it denoted his Valour (for he was a half-pay Officer.) He had good Teeth, and something affable, when he pleased, in his Smile; though naturally his Countenance, as well as his Air and Voice, had much of Roughness in it, yet he could at any Time deposite this, and appear all Gentleness and good Humour. … in his Youth had abounded in Sprightliness, which, though he had lately put on a more serious Character, he could, when he pleased, resume. […] He had purchased the Post of Lieutenant of Dragoons, and afterwards came to be a Captain; but having quarrelled with his Colonel, was by his Interest obliged to sell; from which Time he had entirely rusticated himself, had betaken himself to studying the Scriptures, and was not a little suspected of an Inclination to Methodism (TJ, pp. 61-62).

The ironies in these evocations of the Blifil brothers are as thick as they are obvious. In their self-seeking hypocrisy and careful scheming for advantage, they represent the dominant opposition to the virtuous and the deserving in Fielding’s comic universe, where the prevailing mode of conceptualization of characters is comic opposition. The Blifils are poised for comic effect in the Somersetshire countryside against, Tom, Sophia, and Allworthy. We wonder, perhaps, why Allworthy and others are fooled by these knaves and by similar bad actors such as the two tutors of the boys, Thwackum and Square. But Fielding warns us that life is not like his comic novel:

the Reader is greatly mistaken, if he conceives that Thwackum appeared to Mr. Allworthy in the same Light as he doth to him in this History; and he is as much deceived, if he imagines, that the most intimate
Acquaintance which he himself could have had with that Divine, would have informed him of those Things which we, from our Inspiration, are enabled to open and discover (TJ, p. 123).

But the hypocrisies of his father and uncle are nothing compared to the self-seeking and scheming for advantage of the youngest Blifil, who succeeds where they do not. For one fiendishly clever and indeed crucial instance of his scheming, consider the moment in Book VI, Chapter X when Blifil maliciously reports that Tom was drunk on the day that Allworthy fell ill and was thought to be in danger of dying: ‘in the very Day of your utmost Danger, when myself and all the Family were in Tears, he filled the House with Riot and Debauchery. He drank and sung and roared’ (TJ, p. 275), and that day Blifil and Thwackum surprised Tom in amorous embrace in the woods with Molly Seagrim. But of course readers already know that Tom was drunk when he celebrated Allworthy’s recovery. The narrator tells us very precisely that Thwackum had wanted to tell Allworthy that very day of Tom’s drunken behaviour, and he explains Blifil’s strategy:

In Reality, Blifil had taken some Pains to prevail with the Parson, and to prevent the Discovery at that Time; for which he had many Reasons. He knew that the Minds of Men are apt to be softened and relaxed from their usual Severity by Sickness. Besides, he imagined that if the Story was told when the Fact was so recent, and the Physician about the House, who might have unraveled the real Truth, he should never be able to give it the malicious Turn which he intended. Again, he resolved to hoard up this Business, till the Indiscretion of Jones should afford some additional Complaints; for he thought the joint Weight of many Facts falling upon him together, would be the most likely to crush him; and he watched therefore some such Opportunity as that with which Fortune had now kindly presented him (TJ, p. 276).

The cold calculation in this is chilling and of course tremendously effective for the key event in the novel’s plot, since it leads to Tom’s banishment from Paradise Hall and the beginning of his adventures and travails. Blifil we may say is like a playwright or a novelist; he is aware of an audience, in this case Allworthy, and alert to the timing and thus the effect of his words, which he uses here and elsewhere to manipulate others rather than like Tom and other characters who speak to express an opinion or an emotion. To some extent, Blifil is like Fielding’s narrator in this regard; he withholds information and times its partial revelation precisely in order to produce
actions and consequences. But Blifil is not writing a comic romance; he is rather manipulating others for his own advantage and not like Fielding for his readers’ amusement and instruction. Blifil is in this light a demonic parody of the Fieldingesque narrator.

A comparison of Blifil and Northerton is thus instructive. Northerton's actions and words are spontaneous and unplanned and to some extent self-destructive, purely revealing of a rapacious self and nearly demented and out-of-control personality. His spontaneity makes him much more like Tom than like Blifil. The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling depends upon a host of secrets, of the narrator's withholding or suppression of information, the most important of which if one thinks about the title is exactly Tom's mysterious paternity, a secret that Blifil possesses and also suppresses. Northerton has no secrets, but unlike Tom he has an identity and a personal history that place him in a profession that he has recklessly chosen over the career his father planned for him. He has a demented and reckless agency, whereas Tom is as he goes manipulated by events that Fielding’s plot arranges, his agency compromised by the circumstances of the plot, Northerton's cowardly attack on him at the inn among the most important. Northerton, however, is not a figure out of romance, like Tom the foundling, but a representation of social possibility and active, purposeful, self-destructive moral failure. Blifil’s schemes propel Tom into his adventures in the world, and Northerton's actions are part and parcel of those adventures, in fact the key impetus to the resolution of the plot and the exposure of Blifil's careful conspiracy. But Northerton does not know that he is a crucial cog in the plot (how could he?). Blifil, on the other hand, deliberately and carefully attempts and almost succeeds in controlling for his own evil ends the plot of the novel.

Overall, Tom Jones is nearly representational in the full latter-day novelistic sense: offering readers comprehensive, moral-satiric knowledge of a whole range of characters within social institutions in their historical unfolding, and articulating them across a wide spectrum of comic idiolects from different professions and the entire gamut of English mid-eighteenth-century social groups and positions. Fielding subordinates many of the socio-historic actualities of his day to his fashioning of a moral and aesthetic artefact we know as Tom Jones that exploits but foreshortens or abridges or simplifies these actualities to shape the ideal movement of his comic epic plot. Ensign Northerton's history and character play a crucial part in the plot but also mark an unresolved contingency in that shaping, marking Fielding’s mostly unrealized (or pointedly neglected) potential for conveying to his readers insights into how character and personality are immersed in
socio-historical circumstances. Northerton is an instance of how a more or less accurate or realistically disturbing rendition of a character in a particular historical moment is accommodated to the comic necessities of the all-encompassing final structure of the plot in its final resolution, even if there remains a residue of unassimilated characterological substance within that rendition. Blifil and his father and uncle, by contrast, are completely assimilated character types, along with a whole host of other characters such as the Allworthys, Thwackum and Square, Partridge, Jenny Jones, the Seagrim family, Squire Western and his sister, Di Western, Lady Bellaston, Lord Fellamar, as well as Tom and Sophia. In their different ways, these characters fit into the workings required by the genre of comic romance and also serve that social comprehensiveness Fielding's novel adds to that pattern. When we finish the novel we know their interlocking fates, which form a comic mosaic, a happy and satisfying whole.

Northerton is, as it were, borrowed from outside the realm of social and moral types who populate the novel; he is simply himself and in that reckless self-assertion he helps move the plot along. But whatever becomes of the deserter and moral desperado? What indeed in the novel's moral economy and comic resolution could become of such a personage? We'll never know, since he is simply dismissed from the novelistic scene thanks to Tom's typical carelessness: he ties his hands but not his legs. So this murderous Northerton simply walks away from Mazard-Hill, out of the novel into some indeterminate future while Tom is mesmerized by Mrs. Waters'exposed breasts, and their subsequent tryst in the inn at Upton is a crucial prelude, if at first with temporarily disastrous consequences, to his eventual redemption, possession of his Sophia, and return to Paradise Hall. Tom's sexual spontaneity is part of the essential movement of the plot; through his brief affair with Mrs. Waters he begins the chain of events that lead to his deliverance.

By virtue of his irrepressible, gratuitous villainy, Northerton is crucial to the workings of Fielding's plot. But he is, it would seem, simply an instrument or device to move things crucially along, and Fielding as we have seen declares himself unable to explain the motives in his mayhem. In some actual world or in another kind of novel distinct from Fielding's comic romance novelistic plot in our current sense would demand that he be accounted for in some way, that his actions and his ultimate fate be explained or explored. In Tom Jones, however, he remains a key but unwitting actor, as well as a unique loose end in an otherwise completely tidy summing up for all the characters at the end of the novel. In short, Northerton is never absorbed by the resolving final structure of Fielding's plot, and his
disappearance from the reader’s ken marks him as intractable, incapable of transformation by comic form or assimilation into the concluding symmetry and reformed community the plot creates. Northerton belongs to another kind of novelistic plot such as contemporary narratology understands it in which characters are situated in and derived from the specific events and circumstances that constitute the plot. Northerton stands apart from those events and circumstances.

Works Cited


