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Jonathan Wild and
the Voyage to Lisbon

JONATHAN WILD
THE VOYAGE TO LISBON



HENRY FIELDING

LONDON: J. M. DENT & SONS LTD.
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FICTION

JONATHAN WILD
AND THE VOYAGE TO LISBON
BY HENRY FIELDING · INTRODUC-
TION BY GEORGE SAINTSBURY

HENRY FIELDING, born at Sharpham Park, near Glastonbury, in 1707. Studied law at Leyden; became financially connected with the stage in London; failed, took to law again and was called to the Bar in 1740. Travelled to Lisbon in 1754 for reasons of health, and died there on 8th October.

INTRODUCTION

FIELDING has written no greater book than *Jonathan Wild*, although there can be no doubt that of all his books, which in form and style court at once popularity and the critical verdict, this has been the least general favourite. Appearing as it first did in a collection of *Miscellanies*, before the author had achieved much general approbation, and conjoined with work on the whole inferior, it attracted little attention. It is to be feared that that verdict of "low," which (as we know from divers rather uneasy girds of the author) was levelled at not a little of his work, concerned it more particularly. But this could not long have kept it down. The audacity of its realism may have been a more genuine motive; but I suspect that even this is not the true reason, which may be reached anon. For the moment it is sufficient to say that it has had some hearty condemnation, much silent omission, and little enthusiastic praise. Hazlitt, the least superfine of critics, passes it over in his remarks on Fielding in the *English Comic Writers*. Scott, though he could not and did not miss some of its excellences, more nearly approaches to the purely unappreciative and unjust in his notice of it than anywhere else in the wide range of his admirable and too little appreciated critical studies. Thackeray, who should have enjoyed it to the full, may be said, using the vernacular, to "shy" at it. Even Austin Dobson, who evidently delights in, and as evidently understands it, passes it over with a kind of word to the wise. And indeed it may be contended that any words to any other than the wise about *Jonathan Wild* are useless enough.

Yet, as I said, Fielding has written nothing greater. It is his *Tale of a Tub*; and though he was not quite so mighty a man as Swift, and had the additional disadvantage of coming after him, I should rank it only second in its own class to that dazzling and blinding masterpiece, and superior to it in a certain unity and completeness, which no doubt depend in part on its much lower aim. It is, save for the

character of Heartfree, compact of almost pure irony. And nothing can be more certain than that pure irony is relished with a genuine and unaffected relish only by a very small number of persons. To those who do relish it, there is nothing quite so delicious. Not only does the special taste of it never pall, but, unlike other special tastes, it communicates to the whole of life a flavour, now of consolation, now of heightening. To the most poignant individual enjoyments of sense or intellect, to the most genuine admiration of beauty or sublimity in the persons, the actions, the works of others, it contributes that reflex sense of the other side, of the drawback, of the end, which is required to save passion from fatuity and rapture from cloying. Disappointment, ill-success, sorrow in personal experience, disgust, contempt, indignation in regarding the works and the ways, public and private, of others, it consoles and sweetens with the other sense of compensation, of comprehension, of the *revanche*. But it is an unusual, and it may be an unhappy, temperament that can always adjust itself to the ironic view. For that view necessitates on one side a certain mystical faith; on another, a readiness to laugh at oneself, the acutest if not the wholesomest of pleasures; on yet another, an extreme tolerance; on another still, an immense pessimism. No one who has not said to himself, when he has just indulged in an expansion of heart or pen, "You idiot!"; no one who, when he has met with a disappointment or an injustice, has not said to himself, "The fools were right after all"; no one who does not feel that if he ever swayed an audience as speaker or actor, obtained a striking success with a book, or in other ways attained greatness, his first reflection would be "O sancta simplicitas!" can thoroughly enjoy *Jonathan Wild*. And whether it is worth going through so much, etc., to borrow a famous phrase, every one must decide for himself.

I at least have no doubt that the book is a very great book. It has been described as "the evolution of a purely intellectual conception." But I think we must add that the purely intellectual conception here puts on robes of fleshly and vital execution. To say that Jonathan is the inferior of Iago, is to say by implication that he is the superior of every one else in his class. Either in different circumstances might have been quite other than a villain. I do not know that any third character of fiction can be

named who, being during the time of his presentment a villain pure and simple, is yet made a perfectly human creature. And they are all human creatures, even Heart-free, who is a kind of idiot. They always keep time and tune. Jonathan is truly "great"; not least great perhaps in those slips and miscalculations which achieve his humanity. But his worthy spouse is not less great than he. I have never desired the more intimate acquaintance of Miss Lætitia, but at a distance I have always admired her infinitely. From her first appearance to that antepenultimate scene in which she makes the immortal protest against being described in terms too unmannerly no doubt, but also far too accurate, she is consistent with herself—she is alive, she is perfect. Shakespeare would have drawn her as she is, had he cared to draw her at all; he would have admitted her as sister of Doll Tearsheet (with worse blood in her than Doll's) as she is. And Miss Doshy, her sister in the flesh, with that saving grace of devotion to stocking-mending which, as we feel beforehand, will land her, a quasi-industrious she-apprentice, in the comparatively good end of making a tolerable wife to a person in Virginia! And Count la Ruse, who is so exceedingly ingenious in bubbling others, that he never thinks of being bubbled himself! And Mr. Bagshot, overcrowded by the superior greatness of Wild! And Miss Straddle, who is drawn merely or chiefly in outline, but who is worthy to rank with the divine Tishy! And Mr. Fireblood and Mr. Blueskin, those greater Bagshots and only inferior Wilds! And Mr. Roger Johnson, that democratic but unsuccessful leader! And last, but almost greatest, the ordinary, whose preference for punch as "a liquor nowhere spoken against in the Scriptures" has conciliated to him even unfriendly minds, but who is constant to himself throughout! The least of these would have had vitality enough to keep any book from putrefaction; how magnificent must be the life of that which contains them all!

We shall never consider *Jonathan Wild* aright, nor do justice to it, unless we take in conjunction the two qualities just named, its irony and its truth to life. It is in the combination of them that it is almost unique. This combination, and the manner in which it is shown, distinguish Fielding in more places than this, and this phase of Fielding especially from almost every other writer. Except in the *Polite Conversation*, which he did not choose

to couch, or did not think of couching, in simple narrative form, Swift adopts styles which, despite his absolute veracity, remove the appearance of his greatest work from real life. Defoe, a master of realism, was only unconsciously and indirectly an ironist at all. Voltaire always had a purpose, and was lacking in greatness. Lucian had the defect of Swift. And when we come to the modern realists who have chosen similar subjects, we find a total want of irony and of intellectual characteristics generally, together with a boring quality, to which Fielding would never have attained. The characters of *Jonathan Wild* are not morally much better than the characters of *La Terre* or *Germinal*, of *Nana* or *La Bête Humaine*; but they have, as positive advantages, ten times the life, bodies instead of sawdust, flesh instead of leather, with or without prunella; and as negative advantages, a total absence of stupid ephemeral theory about heredity and lesion, and Heaven knows what else. No doubt Zola has glimmerings; when *Nana* complained that "*ça ne finissait pas*," she came near to *Lætitia*. But these occasions are rare, and even if they were less rare, the Frenchman lacks utterly, can never and does never attain unto, the Olympian serenity of irony with which Fielding looks down on his creations.

But after all, it may be said here more than in most cases, "What is the good of talking?" *Jonathan Wild* more than almost any book, certainly more than any other of its author's, is one of those which must find fit readers or none. You cannot argue anybody into liking it who is not naturally prepared to do so; all the argument and all the authority in the world will not prevent a person who is naturally inclined to love irony from flying to the book and cleaving to it. One good friend of mine, for instance, who is also a good critic, thinks it a "strain upon the nerves," though he fully sees its greatness, and is of opinion that "no one would go to it for mere amusement." It is to me one of the few thoroughly amusing books I know; a book to which for thirty years I have gone for rest and refreshment. The "lords of human kind" will in a more evil sense than Goldsmith's have "passed by" when there are none left among them to take delight in the masterful and masterly supremacy over the lower side of the nature of man which *Jonathan Wild* shows.

The *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*, if it does not rank

in my estimation anywhere near to *Jonathan Wild* as an example of our author's genius, is an invaluable and delightful document for his character and memory. It is, indeed, our main source of indisputable information as to Fielding *dans son naturel*, and its value, so far as it goes, is of the very highest. The gentle and unaffected stoicism which the author displays under a disease which he knew well was probably, if not certainly, mortal, and which, whether mortal or not, must cause him much actual pain and discomfort of a kind more intolerable than pain itself; his affectionate care for his family; even little personal touches, less admirable, but hardly less pleasant than these, showing an Englishman's dislike to be "done" and an Englishman's determination to be treated with proper respect, are scarcely less noticeable and important on the biographical side than the unimpaired brilliancy of his satiric and yet kindly observation of life and character is on the side of literature.

GEORGE SAINTSBURY.

The following is a list of the works of Henry Fielding:

DRAMATIC WORKS:—*Love in Several Masques*, 1728; *The Temple Beau*, 1730; *Author's Farce*, 1730; *Pleasures of the Town*, 1730; *The Coffee-house Politician*, 1730; *Tom Thumb: a Tragedy*, 1730; *Grub-street Opera*, 1731; *Letter Writers, or a New Way to keep a Wife at Home*, 1731; *The Lottery*, 1732; *The Modern Husband*, 1732; *The Covent Garden Tragedy*, 1732; *Debauchees, or the Jesuit caught*, 1732; *The Mock Doctor*, 1732; *The Miser*, 1733; *Deborah, or a Wife for you all*, 1733; *The Intriguing Chambermaid*, 1734; *Don Quixote in England*, 1734; *An old Man taught Wisdom*, 1735; *The Universal Gallant*, 1735; *Pasquin: a Dramatick Satire on the Times*, 1736; *Historical Register for the Year 1736*, 1737; *Eurydice*, 1737; *Eurydice Hissed, or a Word to the Wise*, 1737; *Tumble-down Dick, or Phaeton in the Suds*, 1737; *Miss Lucy in Town* (only in part by Fielding), 1742; *The Wedding Day*, 1743.

OTHER WORKS:—*Of True Greatness*, 1741; *The Vernoniad* (burlesque epic), 1741; *The Opposition: a Vision*, 1741; *The Crisis: a Sermon*, 1741; *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his friend Mr. Abraham Adams*, 1742; *A full Vindication of the Duchess Dowager of Marlborough*, 1742; *Plutus, the God of Riches*, from *Aristophanes* (with W. Young); *Preface to his sister's novel David Simple*, 1744; *Preface to subsequent collection of Familiar Letters between the Principal Characters in David Simple and some others*, 1747; *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, 1749; *Charge to the Grand Jury of Westminster*, 1749; *A true State of the Case of Bosavern Penlez*, 1749; *An Enquiry into the Causes of the late Increase of Robbers, etc.*, 1751; *Amelia*, 1751; *Examples of the Interposition of Providence in the Detection and Punishment of Murder*, 1752; *Proposals for making an Effectual Provision for the Poor*, 1753; *A clear State of the Case of Elizabeth Canning*, 1753; *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*, by the late

Henry Fielding, with Fragment of a Comment on Lord Bolingbroke's Essays, 1755.

Fielding edited the *Champion* (with James Ralph), 1739-40; *The True Patriot*, 1745-6; *The Jacobite's Journal*, 1747-8; and the *Covent Garden Journal*, 1752.

In 1743 he published *Miscellanies*, 3 vols., containing Poems, Essays, *Journey from this World to the Next*, and *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great*. A play, *The Fathers, or a good-natured Man*, was published posthumously; Garrick wrote a prologue and epilogue for it, and it was acted in 1798.

WORKS:—Ed. by Arthur Murphy, 1762 (with *Memoir*); Among later editions: In 10 vols., ed. with biographical essay by Leslie Stephen, 1882; by Saintsbury, 12 vols., 1893, 1902 (*Temple Fielding*); with Introduction by E. Gosse, 1898-9; by Sidney Lee, 1905, etc.

The *Novels* were published with *Memoir* by Sir W. Scott, 1821; *Miscellanies* and *Poems*, ed. J. P. Browne, 1872.

LIFE:—*Essay on his Life and Genius*, by Murphy, prefixed to *Works*, 1762; W. Watson, 1807; T. Roscoe, prefixed to one volume edition, 1840; Frederick Lawrence, *Life of Henry Fielding*, with notes of his Writings, his Times, and his Contemporaries, 1855; Thomas Keightley, *On the Life and Writings of Henry Fielding* (*Fraser's Magazine*, January and February, 1858); H. Austin Dobson, 1900, and in *English Men of Letters*, 1907 (first published, 1883). See also above (Sir W. Scott, Leslie Stephen) under *Edition of Works*.

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