

TOM JONES

BY

HENRY FIELDING



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HENRY FIELDING

HENRY FIELDING, born at Sharpham Park, near Glastonbury, Somerset, on 22nd April 1707, was son of a military officer who was related to the Earls of Denbigh. After being educated at Eton, he was sent to Leyden to study law ; but he soon settled down in London to a literary career. He began by writing a series of comedies, farces, and burlesques, which then formed the most profitable branch of literature. He made a hit with his farce of *Tom Thumb* in 1730. Six years later he opened the Haymarket Theatre as manager, producing another farce, *Pasquin*, which attacked the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, so severely as to lead to the passing of the Act, which is still in force, requiring a license from the Lord Chamberlain for dramatic performances. Fielding's efforts as a playwright and theatrical manager were thereby brought to an end. He then studied for the Bar, and engaged in journalism for a livelihood. It was the sentimentality and prudery of Richardson's novel of *Pamela*, published in 1740, which led Fielding to try his hand at novel-writing. The result was *Joseph Andrews*, which appeared in 1742. His ironical study of the biography of *Jonathan Wild the Great* came out in 1743. His greatest novel, *Tom Jones*, followed in 1749, and his last work of fiction, *Amelia*, in 1751. Meanwhile, in 1748, he was appointed a Justice of the Peace for Westminster, and afterwards

in addition for Middlesex, becoming as Justice for Middlesex Chairman of Quarter Sessions (1749). His time was thenceforth largely occupied by judicial duties, which he performed with a rough-and-ready vigour, without much regard for judicial dignity. He did much to put down crimes of violence in London streets. Extravagant by nature and with little business aptitude, he was perpetually struggling with pecuniary embarrassments. Early excesses had injured his health, and after experimenting in various remedies he sailed for Lisbon on 26th June 1754. He died there the following 8th October, aged 47.

Tom Jones, the longest of Fielding's novels, is also his greatest contribution to English fiction. In spite of the large number of characters and the many changes of scene, the plot is constructed with great care. Coleridge asserts (with perhaps a touch of exaggeration) that there are only two better plots in existence, those of *Œdipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles and the *Alchemist* of Ben Jonson. Throughout, the atmosphere is charged with healthy vitality. Fielding's realistic fidelity to life brings, in fact, into his picture much that is coarse and even disgusting. His intense sympathy with his hero Tom Jones, who is clearly a presentment of the novelist himself in his youth, leads him to treat indulgently many masculine failings. But Fielding never hides the fact that misery is the fruit of dissipation. To downright vice or hypocrisy he gives no quarter. The personal reflections in which the book abounds are among its chief attractions, and betray the superlative robustness of the author's thought and sentiment. Alike in the course of his autobiographic meditations and in the current of his narrative he pays repeated homage to

PREFATORY NOTE

vii

Shakespeare and Cervantes, whose excellences he fervently admired. His insight into human nature and the power which *Tom Jones* displays to perfection of deducing episodes without strain from idiosyncrasies of character, give him some claim to rank beside his literary masters.

The text used in this edition is that of the first collected edition of 1762, corrected by the third edition of 1750.

SIDNEY LEE

TO THE HONOURABLE
GEORGE LYTTLETON, ESQ;

ONE OF THE LORDS COMMISSIONERS OF THE TREASURY.

SIR,

NOTWITHSTANDING your constant refusal, when I have asked leave to prefix your name to this dedication, I must still insist on my right to desire your protection of this work.

To you, Sir, it is owing that this history was ever begun. It was by your desire that I first thought of such a composition. So many years have since passed, that you may have, perhaps, forgotten this circumstance: but your desires are to me in the nature of commands; and the impression of them is never to be erased from my memory.

Again, Sir, without your assistance this history had never been completed. Be not startled at the assertion. I do not intend to draw on you the suspicion of being a romance writer. I mean no more than that I partly owe to you my existence during great part of the time which I have employed in composing it: another matter which it may be necessary to remind you of; since there are certain actions of which you are apt to be extremely forgetful; but of these I hope I shall always have a better memory than yourself.

Lastly, It is owing to you that the history appears what it now is. If there be in this work, as some have been pleased to say, a stronger picture of a truly benevolent mind than is to be found in any other, who that knows you, and a particular acquaintance of yours, will doubt whence that benevolence hath been copied? The world will not, I believe, make me the compliment of thinking I took it from myself. I care not: this they shall own, that the two persons from whom I have taken it, that is to say, two of the best and worthiest men in the world, are

strongly and zealously my friends. I might be contented with this, and yet my vanity will add a third to the number; and him one of the greatest and noblest, not only in his rank, but in every public and private virtue. But here, whilst my gratitude for the princely benefactions of the Duke of Bedford bursts from my heart, you must forgive my reminding you that it was you who first recommended me to the notice of my benefactor.

And what are your objections to the allowance of the honour which I have solicited? Why, you have commended the book so warmly, that you should be ashamed of reading your name before the dedication. Indeed, sir, if the book itself doth not make you ashamed of your commendations, nothing that I can here write will, or ought. I am not to give up my right to your protection and patronage, because you have commended my book: for though I acknowledge so many obligations to you, I do not add this to the number; in which friendship, I am convinced, hath so little share: since that can neither bias your judgment, nor pervert your integrity. An enemy may at any time obtain your commendation by only deserving it; and the utmost which the faults of your friends can hope for, is your silence; or, perhaps, if too severely accused, your gentle palliation.

In short, sir, I suspect, that your dislike of public praise is your true objection to granting my request. I have observed that you have, in common with my two other friends, an unwillingness to hear the least mention of your own virtues; that, as a great poet says of one of you, (he might justly have said it of all three), you

"Do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame."

If men of this disposition are as careful to shun applause, as others are to escape censure, how just must be your apprehension of your character falling into my hands; since what would not a man have reason to dread, if attacked by an author who had received from him injuries equal to my obligations to you!

And will not this dread of censure increase in proportion to the matter which a man is conscious of having afforded for it? If his whole life, for instance, should have been one continued subject of satire, he may well tremble when an incensed satirist takes him in hand. Now, sir, if we apply this to your modest aversion to panegyric, how reasonable will your fears of me appear!

CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFATORY NOTE	V
DEDICATION	xxvii

BOOK I

CONTAINING AS MUCH OF THE BIRTH OF THE FOUNDLING AS IS NECESSARY
OR PROPER TO ACQUAINT THE READER WITH IN THE BEGINNING OF
THIS HISTORY

CHAPTER I

The introduction to the work, or bill of fare to the feast .	I
--	---

CHAPTER II

A short description of Squire Allworthy, and a fuller account of Miss Bridget Allworthy, his sister	3
--	---

CHAPTER III

An odd accident which befell Mr. Allworthy at his return home. The decent behaviour of Mrs. Deborah Wilkins, with some proper ani- madversions on bastards.	5
---	---

CHAPTER IV

The reader's neck brought into danger by a description; his escape; and the great condescension of Miss Bridget Allworthy	7
--	---

CHAPTER V

Containing a few common matters, with a very uncommon observation upon them	10
--	----

CHAPTER VI

Mrs. Deborah is introduced into the parish with a simile. A short account of Jenny Jones, with the difficulties and discouragements which may attend young women in the pursuit of learning	11
---	----

CHAPTER VII

Containing such grave matter, that the reader cannot laugh once through the whole chapter, unless peradventure he should laugh at the author	14
---	----

CHAPTER VIII

A dialogue between Mesdames Bridget and Deborah; containing more amusement, but less instruction, than the former	18
--	----

CHAPTER IX

Containing matters which will surprise the reader	PAGE 20
---	------------

CHAPTER X

The hospitality of Allworthy; with a short sketch of the characters of two brothers, a doctor and a captain, who were entertained by that gentleman	21
---	----

CHAPTER XI

Containing many rules, and some examples, concerning falling in love: descriptions of beauty, and other more prudential inducements to matrimony	24
--	----

CHAPTER XII

Containing what the reader may, perhaps, expect to find in it	28
---	----

CHAPTER XIII

Which concludes the first book; with an instance of ingratitude, which, we hope, will appear unnatural.	30
---	----

BOOK II

CONTAINING SCENES OF MATRIMONIAL FELICITY IN DIFFERENT DEGREES OF LIFE; AND VARIOUS OTHER TRANSACTIONS DURING THE FIRST TWO YEARS AFTER THE MARRIAGE BETWEEN CAPTAIN BLIFIL AND MISS BRIDGET ALLWORTHY	
--	--

CHAPTER I

Showing what kind of a history this is; what it is like, and what it is not like	33
--	----

CHAPTER II

Religious cautions against showing too much favour to bastards; and a great discovery made by Mrs. Deborah Wilkins	35
--	----

CHAPTER III

The description of a domestic government founded upon rules directly contrary to those of Aristotle	36
---	----

CHAPTER IV

Containing one of the most bloody battles, or rather duels, that were ever recorded in domestic history	40
---	----

CHAPTER V

Containing much matter to exercise the judgment and reflection of the reader	43
--	----

CHAPTER VI

The trial of Partridge, the schoolmaster, for incontinency; the evidence of his wife; a short reflection on the wisdom of our law; with other grave matters, which those will like best who understand them most	48
--	----

CONTENTS

xi

CHAPTER VII

	PAGE
A short sketch of that felicity which prudent couples may extract from hatred : with a short apology for those people who overlook imperfections in their friends	53

CHAPTER VIII

A receipt to regain the lost affections of a wife, which hath never been known to fail in the most desperate cases	56
--	----

CHAPTER IX

A proof of the infallibility of the foregoing receipt, in the lamentations of the widow ; with other suitable decorations of death, such as physicians, etc., and an epitaph in the true style	57
--	----

BOOK III

CONTAINING THE MOST MEMORABLE TRANSACTIONS WHICH PASSED IN THE FAMILY OF MR. ALLWORTHY, FROM THE TIME WHEN TOMMY JONES ARRIVED AT THE AGE OF FOURTEEN, TILL HE ATTAINED THE AGE OF NINETEEN. IN THIS BOOK THE READER MAY PICK UP SOME HINTS CONCERNING THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

CHAPTER I

Containing little or nothing	62
--	----

CHAPTER II

The hero of this great history appears with very bad omens. A little tale of so <i>low</i> a kind that some may think it not worth their notice. A word or two concerning a squire, and more relating to a gamekeeper and a schoolmaster	63
--	----

CHAPTER III

The character of Mr. Square the philosopher, and of Mr. Thwackum the divine ; with a dispute concerning—	68
--	----

CHAPTER IV

Containing a necessary apology for the author ; and a childish incident, which perhaps requires an apology likewise	70
---	----

CHAPTER V

The opinions of the divine and the philosopher concerning the two boys ; with some reasons for their opinions, and other matters	72
--	----

CHAPTER VI

Containing a better reason still for the before-mentioned opinions	76
--	----

CHAPTER VII

In which the author himself makes his appearance on the stage	79
---	----

CHAPTER VIII

A childish incident, in which, however, is seen a good-natured disposition in Tom Jones	PAGE 80
---	------------

CHAPTER IX

Containing an incident of a more heinous kind, with the comments of Thwackum and Square	82
---	----

CHAPTER X

In which Master Blifil and Jones appear in different lights	84
---	----

BOOK IV

CONTAINING THE TIME OF A YEAR

CHAPTER I

Containing five pages of paper	87
--	----

CHAPTER II

A short hint of what we can do in the sublime, and a description of Miss Sophia Western	89
---	----

CHAPTER III

Wherein the history goes back to commemorate a trifling incident that happened some years since; but which, trifling as it was, had some future consequences	92
--	----

CHAPTER IV

Containing such very deep and grave matters, that some readers, perhaps, may not relish it	94
--	----

CHAPTER V

Containing matter accommodated to every taste	96
---	----

CHAPTER VI

An apology for the insensibility of Mr. Jones to all the charms of the lovely Sophia; in which possibly we may, in a considerable degree, lower his character in the estimation of those men of wit and gallantry who approve the heroes in most of our modern comedies	101
---	-----

CHAPTER VII

Being the shortest chapter in this book	105
---	-----

CHAPTER VIII

A battle sung by the muse in the Homeric style, and which none but the classical reader can taste	106
---	-----

CHAPTER IX

Containing matter of no very peaceable colour	110
---	-----

CONTENTS

xiii

CHAPTER X

PAGE

- A story told by Mr. Supple, the curate. The penetration of Squire Western.
His great love for his daughter, and the return to it made by her . 112

CHAPTER XI

- The narrow escape of Molly Seagrim, with some observations for which we
have been forced to dive pretty deep into nature . . . 116

CHAPTER XII

- Containing much clearer matters ; but which flowed from the same fountain
with those in the preceding chapter . . . 119

CHAPTER XIII

- A dreadful accident which befell Sophia. The gallant behaviour of Jones,
and the more dreadful consequence of that behaviour to the young
lady ; with a short digression in favour of the female sex . 122

CHAPTER XIV

- The arrival of a surgeon. His operations, and a long dialogue between
Sophia and her maid . . . 124

BOOK V

CONTAINING A PORTION OF TIME SOMEWHAT LONGER THAN
HALF A YEAR

CHAPTER I

- Of the *serious* in writing, and for what purpose it is introduced 130

CHAPTER II

- In which Mr. Jones receives many friendly visits during his confinement ;
with some fine touches of the passion of love, scarce visible to the
naked eye . . . 133

CHAPTER III

- Which all who have no heart will think to contain much ado about nothing 137

CHAPTER IV

- A little chapter, in which is contained a little incident . . . 139

CHAPTER V

- A very long chapter, containing a very great incident . . . 142

CHAPTER VI

- By comparing which with the former, the reader may possibly correct some
abuse which he hath formerly been guilty of in the application of the
word LOVE . . . 148

CHAPTER VII

- In which Mr. Allworthy appears on a sickbed . . . 151

CHAPTER VIII

Containing matter rather natural than pleasing	PAGE 156
--	-------------

CHAPTER IX

Which, among other things, may serve as a comment on that saying of Æschines, that "drunkenness shows the mind of a man, as a mirror reflects his person"	161
---	-----

CHAPTER X

Showing the truth of many observations of Ovid, and of other more grave writers, who have proved beyond contradiction, that wine is often the forerunner of incontinency	164
--	-----

CHAPTER XI

In which a simile in Mr. Pope's period of a mile introduces as bloody a battle as can possibly be fought without the assistance of steel or cold iron	167
---	-----

CHAPTER XII

In which is seen a more moving spectacle than all the blood in the bodies of Thwackum and Blifil, and of twenty other such, is capable of producing	170
---	-----

BOOK VI

CONTAINING ABOUT THREE WEEKS

CHAPTER I

Of love	174
-------------------	-----

CHAPTER II

The character of Mrs. Western. Her great learning and knowledge of the world, and an instance of the deep penetration which she derived from those advantages	176
---	-----

CHAPTER III

Containing two defiances to the critics	181
---	-----

CHAPTER IV

Containing sundry curious matters	184
---	-----

CHAPTER V

In which is related what passed between Sophia and her aunt	186
---	-----

CHAPTER VI

Containing a dialogue between Sophia and Mrs. Honour, which may a little relieve those tender affections which the foregoing scene may have raised in the mind of a good-natured reader	190
---	-----

CHAPTER VII

A picture of formal courtship in miniature, as it always ought to be drawn, and a scene of a tenderer kind painted at full length	192
---	-----

CONTENTS

XV

CHAPTER VIII

The meeting between Jones and Sophia	PAGE 196
--	-------------

CHAPTER IX

Being of a much more tempestuous kind than the former	197
---	-----

CHAPTER X

In which Mr. Western visits Mr. Allworthy	201
---	-----

CHAPTER XI

A short chapter ; but which contains sufficient matter to affect the good-natured reader	205
--	-----

CHAPTER XII

Containing love-letters, etc.	206
---------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIII

The behaviour of Sophia on the present occasion ; which none of her sex will blame, who are capable of behaving in the same manner. And the discussion of a knotty point in the court of conscience	210
---	-----

CHAPTER XIV

A short chapter, containing a short dialogue between Squire Western and his sister	213
--	-----

BOOK VII

CONTAINING THREE DAYS

CHAPTER I

A comparison between the world and the stage	215
--	-----

CHAPTER II

Containing a conversation which Mr. Jones had with himself	218
--	-----

CHAPTER III

Containing several dialogues	220
--	-----

CHAPTER IV

A picture of a country gentlewoman taken from the life	224
--	-----

CHAPTER V

The generous behaviour of Sophia towards her aunt	226
---	-----

CHAPTER VI

Containing great variety of matter	228
--	-----

CHAPTER VII

A strange resolution of Sophia, and a more strange stratagem of Mrs. Honour	232
---	-----

CHAPTER VIII		PAGE
Containing scenes of altercation, of no very uncommon kind		236
CHAPTER IX		
The wise demeanour of Mr. Western in the character of a magistrate. A hint to justices of peace, concerning the necessary qualifications of a clerk; with extraordinary instances of paternal madness and filial affection		239
CHAPTER X		
Containing several matters, natural enough perhaps, but low		242
CHAPTER XI		
The adventure of a company of soldiers		246
CHAPTER XII		
The adventure of a company of officers		249
CHAPTER XIII		
Containing the great address of the landlady, the great learning of a surgeon, and the solid skill in casuistry of the worthy lieutenant		255
CHAPTER XIV		
A most dreadful chapter indeed; and which few readers ought to venture upon in an evening, especially when alone		260
CHAPTER XV		
The conclusion of the foregoing adventure		265

BOOK VIII

CONTAINING ABOUT TWO DAYS

CHAPTER I		
A wonderful long chapter concerning the marvellous; being much the longest of all our introductory chapters.		268
CHAPTER II		
In which the landlady pays a visit to Mr. Jones		273
CHAPTER III		
In which the surgeon makes his second appearance		276
CHAPTER IV		
In which is introduced one of the pleasantest barbers that was ever recorded in history, the barber of Bagdad, or he in Don Quixote, not excepted. . .		278
CHAPTER V		
A dialogue between Mr. Jones and the barber		281

CONTENTS

xvii

CHAPTER VI

	PAGE
In which more of the talents of Mr. Benjamin will appear, as well as who this extraordinary person was	285

CHAPTER VII

Containing better reasons than any which have yet appeared for the conduct of Partridge; an apology for the weakness of Jones; and some further anecdotes concerning my landlady	288
--	-----

CHAPTER VIII

Jones arrives at Gloucester, and goes to the Bell; the character of that house, and of a pettifogger which he there meets with	291
--	-----

CHAPTER IX

Containing several dialogues between Jones and Partridge, concerning love, cold, hunger, and other matters; with the lucky and narrow escape of Partridge, as he was on the very brink of making a fatal discovery to his friend	295
--	-----

CHAPTER X

In which our travellers meet with a very extraordinary adventure	299
--	-----

CHAPTER XI

In which the Man of the Hill begins to relate his history	305
---	-----

CHAPTER XII

In which the Man of the Hill continues his history	313
--	-----

CHAPTER XIII

In which the foregoing story is farther continued	317
---	-----

CHAPTER XIV

In which the Man of the Hill concludes his history	323
--	-----

CHAPTER XV

A brief history of Europe; and a curious discourse between Mr. Jones and the Man of the Hill	328
--	-----

BOOK IX

CONTAINING TWELVE HOURS

CHAPTER I

Of those who lawfully may, and of those who may not, write such histories as this	333
---	-----

CHAPTER II

Containing a very surprising adventure indeed, which Mr. Jones met with in his walk with the Man of the Hill	337
--	-----

CHAPTER III

- The arrival of Mr. Jones with his lady at the inn; with a very full description of the battle of Upton PAGE
340

CHAPTER IV

- In which the arrival of a man of war puts a final end to hostilities, and causes the conclusion of a firm and lasting peace between all parties 345

CHAPTER V

- An apology for all heroes who have good stomachs, with a description of a battle of the amorous kind 348

CHAPTER VI

- A friendly conversation in the kitchen, which had a very common, though not a very friendly, conclusion 352

CHAPTER VII

- Containing a fuller account of Mrs. Waters, and by what means she came into that distressful situation from which she was rescued by Jones 356

BOOK X

IN WHICH THE HISTORY GOES FORWARD ABOUT TWELVE HOURS

CHAPTER I

- Containing instructions very necessary to be perused by modern critics 360

CHAPTER II

- Containing the arrival of an Irish gentleman, with very extraordinary adventures which ensued at the inn 362

CHAPTER III

- A dialogue between the landlady and Susan the chambermaid, proper to be read by all inn-keepers and their servants; with the arrival, and affable behaviour of a beautiful young lady; which may teach persons of condition how they may acquire the love of the whole world 366

CHAPTER IV

- Containing infallible nostrums for procuring universal disesteem and hatred 371

CHAPTER V

- Showing who the amiable lady, and her unamiable maid, were 373

CHAPTER VI

- Containing, among other things, the ingenuity of Partridge, the madness of Jones, and the folly of Fitzpatrick 377

CHAPTER VII

- In which are concluded the adventures that happened at the inn at Upton 380

CONTENTS

xix

CHAPTER VIII

	PAGE
In which the history goes backward	383

CHAPTER IX

The escape of Sophia	387
--------------------------------	-----

BOOK XI

CONTAINING ABOUT THREE DAYS

CHAPTER I

A crust for the critics	393
-----------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER II

The adventures which Sophia met with after her leaving Upton	396
--	-----

CHAPTER III

A very short chapter, in which however is a sun, a moon, a star, and an angel	402
---	-----

CHAPTER IV

The history of Mrs. Fitzpatrick	404
---	-----

CHAPTER V

In which the history of Mrs. Fitzpatrick is continued	408
---	-----

CHAPTER VI

In which the mistake of the landlord throws Sophia into a dreadful consternation	412
--	-----

CHAPTER VII

In which Mrs. Fitzpatrick concludes her history	414
---	-----

CHAPTER VIII

A dreadful alarm in the inn, with the arrival of an unexpected friend of Mrs. Fitzpatrick	420
---	-----

CHAPTER IX

The morning introduced in some pretty writing. A stage-coach. The civility of chambermaids. The heroic temper of Sophia. Her generosity. The return to it. The departure of the company, and their arrival at London ; with some remarks for the use of travellers	425
--	-----

CHAPTER X

Containing a hint or two concerning virtue, and a few more concerning suspicion	429
---	-----