

Jonathan Wild lecture

Henry Fielding (1707-54)

Aristocratic descent, educated at Eton. Commenced legal studies in late 1720s. Eventually called to the Bar in 1740, becoming principal Westminster magistrate in 1748. V. dedicated and effective and well respected; v. practical; responsible for creation of first organised police force, the Bow Street Runners. Known in 18th century as much for his legal activities as for his writing of fiction.

***Jonathan Wild* (1743)**

In line with the current popularity of crime narratives which purported to be 'histories' rather than fiction, the narrator insists that he is endeavouring 'to record the truths of history, not the extravagances of romance'(Book 4, ch 4, p.176). *Jonathan Wild* is a critique of the idealizing 'romancing' method of traditional biographies, with their endless lineages, premonitions of greatness, supernatural deliverances and fabricated speeches. Fielding parodies contemporary criminal biographies and in particular the numerous documents on which their claim to historicity depends: letters, Ordinaries' accounts, witness's testimony and journals.

The title

The name Jonathan Wild means nothing to 20th century readers so we need to look briefly at who he was because to an 18th century reader, the name meant a great deal - like mentioning the Krays in England or the Mafia bosses - everyone knew who he was.

Highwaymen were much feared in the 18th century; their attacks were not infrequent. Walpole complained in a letter 'One is forced to travel, even at noon, as if one was going to battle'. In his introduction to *A Voyage to Lisbon*, Fielding congratulated himself on having broken up in 1753, a gang of cut-throats and street-robbers so that he was no longer 'reading of murders and street-robberies in the news almost every morning'.

Wild symbolised all that was wrong in 18th century culture: crime, corruption, violence. J.H.Plumb sums up 18th century culture usefully in his well known book, *England in the 18th Century* (Penguin): 'The age of Walpole was rough, coarse, brutal; a world for the muscular and the aggressive and the cunning. The thin veneer of elegance and classic form obscured but never hid either the crime and dissipation or the drab middle-class virtue and thrift.' It's worth bearing in mind this contemporary association of the middle classes with dull moralism when we look at the virtuous but hardly attractive Heartfreeds.

As far as the economic situation is concerned, Plumb sums it up thus: 'For the majority of England, life was hard and vile, but the expanding world of commerce and the rich harvests brought both prosperity and opportunity, which bred a boundless self-confidence'(last page of ch 3).

Wild headed a vicious gang of criminals but also manipulated the legal system itself; hence a clear parallel, much exploited at the time, with politicians, particularly Walpole.

Wild controlled a gang of thieves who stole at his direction. He received the stolen goods from the thieves and then returned them to their owners for a fee. Thieves who refused to cooperate in some way could easily be delivered to the authorities along with either real or fabricated evidence and would probably be hanged. Wild sent at least 60 men to the gallows; he exploited this apparent success in fighting crime and gave himself the title 'Thief-Taker General'.

We see this in the novel when Wild persuades his enemies to impeach each other. He tells Sly that Fierce might impeach him and 'advise[s] him to be beforehand, to surrender himself to a justice of the peace and offer himself as an evidence'(p.102). Sly is imprisoned and Fierce, 'whom [Wild] resolved to hang' for refusing him his stipulated 'share of the booty' is executed(p.101).

Wild was notorious in reality and his hanging in 1725 was part of living memory. Fielding's Wild is heavily fictionalised - he's interested in Wild not so much as an individual but as a cultural myth he can exploit for political satire. Hence instead of giving us an accurate account of Wild's lineage, he gives him an appropriate mock-heroic ancestry of highwaymen and pickpockets going back to Saxon times (Book 1 ch 2, pp.42-4). The narrator explains that Wild was sent 'abroad for seven years...to His Majesty's plantations in America'(p.58). It was fashionable for young gentlemen to travel in Europe as part of their education - Wild's transportation is amusingly described in the same way - it is of course a particularly fitting education for him!

The real Wild's heritage was somewhat less interesting: according to the *Newgate Calendar*, which gave accounts of famous criminals, Wild's father was a respectable tradesman, who sent Jonathan to school to learn to read, write and do accounts ie to educate him to go into business; he then arranged an apprenticeship to a buckle-maker in Birmingham. You can see why Fielding felt he had to take a bit of dramatic licence!

Yet there are parallels with the account of the real Wild eg Wild's real wife, Mary Milliner, is described in the *Newgate Calendar* as 'one of the most notorious pick-pockets and abandoned prostitutes on the town'. There are also parallels in tone, which will perhaps help you to see how the novel relates to contemporary crime literature. The following sentence comes from the *Newgate Calendar* but could have been drawn straight from Fielding's novel: 'We shall now proceed to a relation of the most remarkable exploits of the hero of these pages'(p.145). The real Wild also tried to commit suicide in prison by taking laudanum: 'however, on account of the largeness of the dose and his having fasted a considerable time, no other effect was produced than drowsiness, or a kind of stupefaction'(p.166).

The birth of heroes is often accompanied in romance by good omens; Fielding has Wild's birth coincide with a plague! He is born, appropriately enough, in a roundhouse or night-prison, described with amusing gravities as 'an house of an orbicular or round form'(p.45). As a child we read that Wild was easily bribed, which made people say 'he was certainly born to be a great man'(p.45); even at that tender age he organises a gang to steal apples. He modeled himself on Alexander and other classical heroes, whose life histories he read as 'testimony of the great antiquity of priggism'(p.46), a slang word for theft.

Wild's function in the novel is partly political and partly fictional, as a rogue hero. Fielding's account perhaps reflects this ambiguity: the basic underlying 'history' is broadly factual, with a specific legal and political context, but he also accommodates elements of myth, with Wild as an embodiment of evil.

The real Wild was an ingenious manipulator, an example of Hobbesian self-interest. Fielding derives comedy from creating a huge gap between popular myths based on the true Wild and his own fictionalised Wild, who is far from what contemporary readers would have expected. Fielding undercuts the powerful cultural image of Wild by his character's frequent comic failures and humiliations, made all the more evident by the narrator's apparently kindly attempts to rescue him with heroic vocabulary which only serves to make him appear even more obtuse. Fielding further undercuts Wild's dignity by giving his most complete description of Wild at the end of the novel - Book 4 ch 15.

The real Wild was cunning and clever; Fielding's Wild is rather stupid. We have a delightful example of this in his letter to Laetitia in Book 3 ch 6, p.140, where he refers to her as 'adwhorable', a term which is as unintentional as it is appropriate! Fielding draws attention to Wild's uneducated style by commenting ironically on the reader's inevitable reaction to it: 'If the spelling of this letter be not so strictly orthographical, the reader will be pleased to remember that such a defect might be worthy of censure in a low scholastic character, but can be no blemish in that sublime greatness of which we endeavour to raise a complete idea'. The implication is that great men are not necessarily educated men of sense. Notwithstanding, I would encourage you to cultivate a 'low scholastic character'!

The novel as satire

Wild's success in the criminal underworld is presented as a parallel to polite society and government and the way in which greatness and power are obtained and then sanctioned by society irrespective of moral values. There are obvious thematic similarities with *The Beggar's Opera*.

We use terms such as satire very readily but we need to think about what we mean and what the writer meant. eg what is satire and what does it do? Satire is a criticism of folly or vice, which it holds up to ridicule or scorn; irony, invective and wit are its main weapons. Something like *The Beggar's Opera* may be described as burlesque or mock heroic because caricature and farce predominate over morality. Satire presupposes a shared set of values between writer and reader, by which folly and vice can be measured; for example, Fielding, like Gay, assumes that we will join him in censuring political corruption and moral hypocrisy.

Fielding himself discusses satire in *Joseph Andrews* (1742). In Book III, ch.1 he comments, 'I describe not Men, but Manners; not an Individual, but a Species,' asserting the authority of his experience, 'I have writ little more than I have seen'. He distinguishes between the satirist and the libeller: the satirist 'hold[s] the Glass to thousands in their Closets, that they may contemplate their Deformity, and endeavour to reduce it, and thus by suffering private Mortification may avoid public Shame'. The satirist 'privately corrects the Fault for the Benefit of the Person, like a Parent'; the libeller 'publicly exposes the Person himself, as an Example to others, like an Executioner'. I leave it to you to decide if Fielding is acting as parent or executioner in *Jonathan Wild*.

Wild and the quest for greatness or Wild as hero

We're introduced to Wild as an 'illustrious person'(Book I, ch 1 p.40) with language appropriate to a great classical hero. Fielding is careful to establish the meaning of 'greatness' within the terms of the novel: 'greatness consists in bringing all manner of mischief on mankind, and goodness in removing it from them'(p.40). He ironically rejects the notion that greatness and goodness may be found in the same person, using classical heroes as examples. Fielding tells us that 'our hero' doesn't suffer much from the imperfection of kindness and thus deserves to be called 'The Great', a title associated with historical figures such as Alexander but also often applied to Walpole in the 18th century. Fielding comments in the *Covent Garden Journal* 14th January, 1752 that 'great' 'Applied to a thing, signifies bigness; when to a man, often littleness, or meanness.' The novel rests on this ironic definition.

Traditionally, heroes of romance went on quests to prove themselves - their greatness involved the search for great truths and love. The narrator refers to Wild moving with 'noble constancy' towards his goal,

'resolving still to attain the summit on which he hath fixed his eye, however dirty the roads may be'(p.77); this sounds rather noble until we remember that his goal often involves petty theft: he dies thieving a corkscrew he can't even use.

Throughout the narrative, Wild's activities are presented in heroic terms eg on p.97 of Book 2 ch.4 we read that men such as Wild 'break openly and bravely through the laws of his country' - it's worth looking at such passages and the implicit critique of the political equivalents to the thieves alluded to.

Wild's quest is for greatness in itself; it's not a metaphysical truth but materialistic gain. There is inevitably a parallel with the world of politics; the arena is different because Wild's 'achievements' are in the world of crime, but he is as much governed by ambition as some politicians are and his success is measured in similar terms: money and power (see Book 2 chs 5 and 7 for example of Wild's schemes against Fierce and Heartfree). The seediness of his world is underlined by the language he uses: 'I had rather stand on the summit of a dunghill than at the bottom of a hill in Paradise'(p.51). There is an obvious echo of Milton's Satan commenting in *Paradise Lost* 'Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n' (Book 1, line 263) but Milton allows his character considerably more dignity in his language!

Fielding even undercuts Wild's skill in theft by showing his thieving to be compulsive and automatic even when there is nothing to gain and it is patently absurd: 'nor could Wild keep his hands out of his friend's pockets, though he knew there was nothing in them'(p.56). These are the actions of a pathetic figure, not a great thief.

Great heroes have adventures and whiz around abroad doing great things. Fielding parodies this in having Wild abduct Mrs Heartfree; he is punished for attempted rape by the captain of the ship, who puts him in a small boat and leaves him at sea. Wild's response to this is hardly heroic: the title of ch 11 refers to 'the great and wonderful behaviour of our hero in the boat' but he simply sits around blustering in fear and swearing, and blames other people for his predicament. He approximates to heroism in deciding to dive into the sea but he's frightened and so gets back into the boat and is rescued by a fisherman (ch 13,p.121). Fielding dresses Wild's cowardice in heroic language, as if Wild determines to be true to his calling and not to try to frustrate fate: 'Nature having originally intended our great man for that final exaltation' ie hanging, 'She...softly whispered in his ear to attempt the recovery of his boat'; he is made to seem even more ridiculous when we learn that the sea was 'a perfect calm'(p.119).

Wild's love interest is Laetitia Snap ('snap' was a slang term for a thief who claimed a share of the proceeds from theft - highly appropriate to Wild himself but also to many of his entourage - his wife's lineage is perfect). Their relationship is an appropriately seedy variation on the traditional love theme - they're hardly in the same league as a young knight and his virtuous maiden!

The description of Laetitia in Book 1 ch 9 parodies traditional descriptions of beautiful maidens, her off white clothing suggesting something less than the total chastity associated with such heroines. The admiring tone only serves to make the picture amusing, albeit somewhat cruel: it's reminiscent of Swift's coarse and unflattering descriptions of society women slapping on make up in their boudoirs for eg his famous poem 'A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed'(wr.1731?; pub 1734). Swift writes of 'Corinna, pride of Drury lane,

For whom no shepherd sighs in vain'

'seated on a three-legg'd chair,
Takes off her artificial hair;
Now, picking out a crystal eye,
She wipes it clean, and lays it by'
'Proceeding on, the lovely goddess
Unlaces next her steel-ribbed bodice,
Which by the operator's skill,
Press down the lumps, the hollows fill'.

It's worth having a look at this poem - it's quite short! It sheds light on the portrait of Laetitia, who clearly owes much to this misogynistic tradition but it also provides a good example of the sort of writing which led people to think that Swift hated people, particularly women, which is obviously relevant to *Gulliver's Travels*. Back to Fielding!

Wild's proposal to Laetitia is fittingly concerned with money. Fielding parodies marriage settlements, where families agreed on specific sums to be paid on marriage: 'At length, everything being agreed between their parents, settlements made, and the lady's fortune (to wit, seventeen pounds and nine shillings in money and goods) paid down, the day for their nuptials were fixed'(Book 3 ch 7, p.142). The language is appropriate to the marriage transactions of polite society; the incongruity would have given considerable amusement to contemporary readers.

The parody of arranged marriages continues in the next chapter when we read that 2 weeks after the wedding, they argue bitterly and Laetitia explains that she married Wild 'Because it was convenient, and my parents forced me'(p.145). He tells her 'your person was all I ever had any regard for; and that I now loathe and detest as much as ever I liked it'(p.146).

The romantic parallel is continued when Laetitia later tells him that they are likely to die together - not, however, in the dignified manner of tragic heroes. Her language renders the potential tragedy comic - 'we shall be nubbed together'(p.171), nubbed being a slang term for hanging. Laetitia is caught picking pockets. Wild is caught by a law 'which made it capital in a prig to steal with the hands of other people'(Book 3 ch 1, p.168); sections of the Transportation Act of 1718 were designed to stop the traffic in stolen goods through agents like Wild, who were clever enough never to have the goods in their possession.

Wild is imprisoned in Newgate, or, in the ironic terms of the novel, 'committed to that castle'(p.169), in keeping with the running comic comparison of Wild to a knight of romance. The 'keeper of this castle' is an old friend of Wild's but refuses to help him, reminding us perhaps of the power politics of the underworld in the *Beggar's Opera*.

Wild seems born to be hanged: we read that 'Fortune at his birth had resolutely ordained' it. Fielding ironically refers to Wild's hanging as 'the consummation of our hero's GREATNESS'(p.212). The scaffold is referred to as 'the tree of glory' and the progress towards it is described in a manner more appropriate to a Roman triumph than to a convict being taken to execution. The crowd is portrayed rather like an audience watching a play: 'he received the acclamations of the multitude'(p.213). The real Wild's hanging was remarkable for the ferocity of the crowd's hatred. *The Newgate Calendar* recounts: 'the populace treated this offender with remarkable severity, incessantly pelting him with stones, dirt etc'(p.167).

Fielding echoes the language used in *Jonathan Wild* in *An Enquiry Into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers* (1751), commenting that the felon's 'procession to Tyburn, and his last moments there, all are triumphant; attended with the compassion of the meek and tender-hearted, and with the applause, admiration, and envy, of all the bold and hardened'. Fielding argued that public hangings should be abolished, since they were often seen as entertainment and could glorify the criminal. People paid to watch hangings and there were permanent wooden grandstands around Tyburn tree. Fielding implicitly criticises this popular attitude in *Jonathan Wild*.

If Wild came to see the futility of human greatness in any of its ephemeral forms, he would come close to being the tragic hero he likes to see himself as. However, Fielding ensures that Wild's own behaviour denies his death any meaningful symbolism. The crowning achievement of his life is reduced to the futility of stealing a corkscrew he cannot use: 'Wild, in the midst of the shower of stones...applied his hands to the parson's pocket, and emptied it of his bottle-screw, which he carried out of the world'(p.214). The juxtaposition of solemn vocabulary with biblical overtones, for example 'tree of glory', 'multitude' and 'carried out of the world', with the banality of a cork-screw, renders the reader incapable of taking the execution seriously and thus of having any sympathy with Wild.

Fielding's humour is uncomfortably dark at times, for example when he jokes that Wild fails in his suicide attempt and that 'the fruit of hemp-seed, and not the spirit of poppy-seed, (ie laudanum) was to overcome'(p.212) him. The amusing ironic presentation of Wild's hanging is tempered by the serious comment which ends the chapter: 'he must be a fool who is ashamed of being hanged, who is not weak enough to be ashamed of having deserved it'(p.214). This reflects Fielding's serious concerns regarding hanging but he refuses to take a didactic tone here.

Eighteenth-century readers would not have been particularly sensitive about hanging, since hangings were not uncommon: they were held approximately every six weeks at Tyburn. Even children over the age of 7 could be hanged. Tyburn, where common criminals were executed, became part of folklore. State prisoners, who were generally of higher social status, were usually beheaded, not hanged, and were executed at Tower Hill. Fielding recognised the absurdity of class-consciousness in such a situation: 'where is the essential difference if the one ends on Tower Hill and the other at Tyburn? Hath the block any preference to the gallows...[?]'(p.52).

The other characters

The Heartfrees

The narrator describes Heartfree as 'possessed of several great weaknesses of mind, being good-natured, friendly, and generous to a great excess' and 'so silly a fellow that he never took the least advantage of the ignorance of his customers'. His wife is described as 'a mean-spirited, poor, domestic, low-bred animal, who confined herself mostly to the care of her family' and 'followed no expensive fashions or diversions'(Book 2, ch 1, pp.84-5). By criticising her behaviour as 'low bred', Fielding is criticising by implication fashionable 18th century ladies who wouldn't dream of staying at home and putting their families first; her behaviour is exactly what was recommended to married women in contemporary conduct books and other guides to moral behaviour.

The Heartfrees embody good nature, a quality which is fundamental to the moral framework of

Fielding's novels eg Tom Jones has many faults but he is good natured, unlike the fundamentally cold and unpleasant Blifil.

The Heartfrees provide a moral corrective, an indication of the way in which people should behave but their goodness is homely rather than heroic. We may warm to them at times but we never admire them and aspire to be them. Fielding makes us conscious of their naiveté - they're partly responsible for their suffering - they allow themselves to be imposed on (rather as the 18th century electorate had allowed itself to be imposed on by Walpole and others of his ilk).

Thematic concerns

Politics - see Beggar's Opera handout

Fielding had a private grudge against Walpole because he had been responsible for The Licensing Act of 1737, which required that the Lord Chamberlain should approve all plays before they were performed. This effectively ended Fielding's career as a dramatist since his works were often satirical and had attacked Walpole.

We need to bear this in mind when reading Fielding's heavily ironic comments in Book 3 ch 5: 'many inconveniences arise to the said great men from these scribblers publishing without restraint their hints or alarms to society; and many great and glorious schemes have been thus frustrated; wherefore it were to be wished that in all well-regulated governments such liberties should be by wholesome laws restrained, and all writers inhibited from venting any other instructions to the people than what should be first approved and licensed by the said great men'(pp.136-7).

There is a wider political context to the novel, which moves beyond specific historical confines to consider the nature of political power and those who crave it but also those who vote for it. David Hume commented in *The First Principles of Government* (1742): 'Nothing appears more surprising to those who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than the ease with which the many are governed by the few and the implicit submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers.'

The idea that politicians are self-seeking and corrupt manipulators is hardly new - Shakespeare presented political leaders with cynicism and none of Fielding's readers would have been surprised at the negative portrayal of political figures.

Swift commented in *Thoughts on Various Subjects* (1706): 'Politics, as the word is commonly understood, are nothing but corruptions.'

The narrator of *Jonathan Wild* tells us, 'those great arts which the vulgar call treachery, dissembling, promising, lying, falsehood, etc...are by great men summed up in the collective name of policy, or politics'(Bk 2, ch 5 p.102). Perhaps things don't change very much - Mencken commented in 1956, 'A good politician is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar'.

Politicians have always been associated with rhetoric, the ability to persuade the electorate. While in Newgate, Wild canvasses for support among the inmates much as politicians do - Book 4 ch 3, pp.172-6: 'Friends, and fellow-citizens...the liberty of Newgate is at stake'(p.172). The exhortation is just what one would expect from a politician - think of Antony's famous 'Friends, Romans, countrymen' in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Wild's speech, described by the narrator as 'florid', is meaningless: Newgate is a prison - hardly the place to discourse on liberty - he's promising the one thing he clearly can't deliver but is

exploiting what they most desire - typical of political rhetoric. Wild appeals to moral and democratic values in order to manipulate people. He is a cutting but amusingly ironic comment on politicians doing the same.

More seriously, Wild's practices mirror Machiavellian [SPELL] principles of politics, which allow lies and manipulation as necessary political tools. See Wild's maxims for success in Book 4 ch 15 eg 'To know no distinction of men from affection; but to sacrifice all with equal readiness to his interest'.

Machiavelli wrote in 1519:

'Whoever desires to found a state and give it laws, must start with assuming that all men are bad and ever ready to display their vicious natures, whenever they may find occasion for it.'

It is commonly objected that the novel isn't topical in its principal character, Wild, or the man he in part represents, Walpole. Walpole was no longer in power when *J Wild* was published in 1743 - he lost power in 1742; Wild himself was executed in 1725.

However, political corruption did not disappear with Walpole. In using the idea of the thief as politician and vice versa, Fielding was exploiting an old joke but one which would have struck a chord with his readers, many of whom would have been disillusioned with their political leaders.

Law

Wild reflects the corrupt manipulation of the legal system in high places; he argues that 'the highest excellence of a prig' or thief is to 'convert those laws which are made for the benefit and protection of society to my single use'(p.80). Walpole and others caused the political 'death' of those who wouldn't co-operate; he could make or break careers and thus lives. Wild's manipulation at once parallels this but is more serious in that he can literally have people killed.

Fielding provides fictional examples of the way in which the real Wild manipulated the law in order to kill those who crossed him. Wild persuades Heartfree to obtain jewels and give them to the Count, Wild's confederate, in return for a small down payment. Heartfree falls into debt because Wild arranges for him to be robbed and because his creditors, including the Count, refuse to pay him what they owe him. Wild, hoping to gain possession of Heartfree's property and his wife, advises Mrs Heartfree 'instantly to remove with the most valuable jewels she had...before any statute of bankruptcy issued to prevent her'(p.112). Wild's skills in deception and circumventing the law make us aware of the illegality of the action but Mrs Heartfree seems to have no choice; he capitalises on her desperation but she is unwittingly providing evidence which will be used against her husband.

We read on p.155 that Wild and Fireblood 'framed an evidence' which they gave to one of Heartfree's creditors to show a magistrate. This false evidence leads to a warrant for Heartfree's arrest. Heartfree is found guilty of felony or capital crime, in this case embezzling, because Wild's skilful manipulation ensures that 'the circumstances of the fact corroborat[e] the evidence of Fireblood'(p.167).

Wild organises his trap for Heartfree in accordance with the way in which the law interprets evidence. He gets Fireblood to testify that Heartfree 'had...employed [him] to carry the orders of embezzling to Wild, in order to be delivered to his wife' and that Mrs Heartfree had 'shewed him the casket of jewels, and desired him to tell her husband that she had fully executed his command'. In order to make it appear that Heartfree had told his wife to take the jewels 'after [he] had notice of the commission'(p.156) of bankruptcy against him, Fireblood and Wild testify falsely 'that Mrs Heartfree lay several days concealed at Wild's house before

her departure for Holland'(p.157).

We must not underestimate Heartfree's danger: he is 'convicted on a statute the infringers of which could hope no pardon'(p.167), that is, one which cannot be commuted; Wild has in effect produced a death warrant for him. Despite his innocence, Heartfree is imprisoned in Newgate, a prison particularly associated with the death penalty. He encounters more prejudice against the poorer classes: 'the turnkey would have confined Heartfree (he having no money) amongst the common felons' and so Friendly pays 'every shilling he had in his pocket, to procure a room in the press-yard'(p.157).

However, comedy asserts itself over potential tragedy because Heartfree is rescued by the very system which wrongly imprisoned him. Fielding often exposes the injustices of the judicial system but here he shows that the system can work. He presents a magistrate 'who did indeed no small honour to the commission he bore'(p.181) and criticises less diligent magistrates by implicit contrast: he is good simply because he examines the evidence carefully and seeks justice. When he realises that the evidence concerning Heartfree's supposed felony was given by a man now in Newgate and another guilty of robbery, he reappraises the situation and, believing Heartfree to be innocent, 'obtain[s] his pardon and enlargement' by 'represent[ing the case] to the sovereign, who immediately granted him that gracious reprieve'(p.182). The narrator explains the circumstances of the reprieve lest it 'should seem to resemble that in *The Beggar's Opera*' ie 'contrary to the strictest rules of writing and probability'(p.181). Whatever he may say, of course, there are many similarities in tone and subject matter between the 2 texts.

As a member of the legal profession, Fielding was naturally aware of the responsibilities of a magistrate, 'entrusted with decisions affecting the lives, liberties, and properties of his countrymen'(p.181). Mrs Heartfree meets a magistrate abroad and later explains to her companions, 'He was chosen (as is the custom there) for his superior bravery and wisdom', implying that English magistrates were not selected according to such criteria. English magistrates generally owed their positions to rank, influence and money. Mrs Heartfree continues, 'on the first deviation from equity and justice, he is liable to be deposed and punished by the people', whose elders 'examine into his conduct'(p.201) every year. Contemporary readers would have realised with amusement that their magistrates would not remain long in power under such a system but Fielding would clearly endorse such strict controls.

The style of the novel

Irony is of course a fundamental tool for the satirist but heavy irony can alienate 20th century readers in particular - tend to feel the constant underlying parallel between Walpole and Wild for eg is somewhat laboured, the heavy irony rather crude.

The style is appropriate to the political mock-heroics of the early 18th century. Wild appropriates the rhetoric and symbolism of heroic traditions to gloss his own activities, likening himself to great leaders such as Alexander and Julius Caesar eg in Book 4 ch 4, p.178, Wild comments, 'I ought rather to weep with Alexander that I have ruined no more, than to regret the little I have done.' Of course such pretensions are absurd - that's part of the point Fielding's making - but Wild's pretensions to greatness are no more ridiculous than those of some politicians who have no greatness in themselves but attain the semblance of it through manipulation.

The novel can be read on 2 levels:

1. It's the narrative of the criminal exploits and ultimate comeuppance of a rogue-hero, or anti-hero in this case, since Wild lacks the noble qualities a hero should have and his experiences are without tragic dignity. As such, it has roots in the immensely popular tradition of criminal biographies and the public's fascination with famous criminals.

2. It's a satirical comment on contemporary society and in particular politics. Fielding is satirising not just Walpole but what he represents: self-seeking politicians who corruptly exploit and manipulate situations to their own advantage rather than seeking the public good.

The use of heavy irony keeps the reader in a privileged position, shared only by Fielding - we are privy to the real motives behind the characters' behaviour and we see the consequences of their actions before they do. Yet the reader is not exempt from Fielding's comments; Fielding is warning his readers against naiveté and apathy. Fielding implies that his readers know that politicians are often corrupt and even dangerous but that they continue to vote for them, or not vote against them, and thus give them power. Men such as Walpole would never have come into power unless a body of people gave it to him by voting for him. Fielding is suggesting that maybe we get the politicians we deserve!

We'll leave it on that happy note!

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