

Comedy and the “Tragic Complexion” of *Tom Jones*

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Tony Richardson’s 1963 film *Tom Jones* contains an image not explicitly authorized by Fielding’s novel: Tom, with a noose around his neck, being hanged. Fortuitously, he is rescued by Squire Western before gravity takes its toll. Although consistent with other dark film comedies of the 1960s, this image also has considerable basis in the text. Fielding begins the seventeenth book of *Tom Jones* by putting a hypothetical noose on his hero. With Tom imprisoned, charged with murder, and Sophia Western recaptured by her father, Fielding contemplates an ending for the novel:

When a Comic Writer hath made his principal Characters as happy as he can; or when a Tragic Writer hath brought them to the highest Pitch of human Misery, they both conclude their Business to be done, and that their Work is come to a Period.

Had we been of the Tragic Complexion, the Reader must now allow we were very nearly arrived at this Period, since it would be difficult for the Devil, or any of his Representatives on Earth, to have contrived much greater Torments for poor *Jones*, than those in which we left him in the last Chapter; and as for *Sophia*, a good-natured Woman would hardly wish more Uneasiness to a Rival, than what she must at present be supposed to feel. What then remains to complete the Tragedy but a Murder or two, and a few moral Sentences.

But to bring our Favourites out of their present Anguish and Distress, and to land them at last on the Shore of Happiness, seems a much harder Task; a Task indeed so hard that we do not undertake to execute it. In Regard to *Sophia* it is more than probable, that we shall somewhere or other provide a good Husband for her in the End, either *Blifil*, or my Lord, or Somebody else; but as to poor *Jones*, such are the Calamities in which he is at present involved, owing to his Imprudence . . . so destitute is he now of Friends, and so persecuted by Enemies, that we almost despair of bringing him to any good; and if our Reader delights in seeing Executions, I think he ought not to lose any Time in taking a first row at *Tyburn*.¹

Richardson’s film literalizes the idea implicit in *Tom Jones*, bringing Tom physically closer to death than Fielding needed to do in his novel. The “Tragic Complexion” Fielding refers to is, nevertheless, much more fully worked out in the novel, primarily through allusions to tragedies. More self-consciously than the comic dramatists he admired—Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Molière, and Gay—Fielding dwells on this recurrent feature of comedy, the presence of tragic potentiality which Northrop Frye has labeled somewhat awkwardly “the point of ritual death.”

Frye’s point of ritual death designates the “potentially tragic crisis near the end” of a comedy. As he defines it: “The action of comedy moves toward a deliverance from something which, if absurd, is by no means invariably harmless. We notice too how frequently a comic dramatist tries to bring his action as close to a catastrophic

¹ *Tom Jones*, ed. Martin C. Battestin and Fredson Bowers (Middletown, Conn., 1975), p. 875. All further references are cited in the text.

overthrow of the hero as he can get it, and then reverses the action as quickly as possible. . . . Any reader can think of many comedies in which the fear of death, sometimes a hideous death, hangs over the central character to the end, and is dispelled so quickly that one has almost the sense of awakening from a nightmare.” This feature of comedy, Frye argues, stems from myth, in which “the hero is a god, and hence he does not die, but dies and rises again. The ritual pattern behind the catharsis of comedy is the resurrection that follows the death, the epiphany or manifestation of the risen hero.”²

One need not take the archetypal approach to recognize that Frye has identified an important motif of comedy. What I wish to revise, however, is the narrowness of Frye’s term, which forces the motif into the mythic pattern he describes. In many comedies there is a “point” where a tragic catastrophe seems imminent, such as the impending execution of Macheath in *The Beggar’s Opera*. But in many other comedies there is a series of such moments, a pattern of tragic possibility. The “death” in “point of ritual death” even Frye allows to be only some similitude of death. Where, for instance is the point of ritual death in *Tom Jones*? Is it in the passage cited above? Or in the eighteenth book when Partridge discloses Tom’s incest with his “mother”? Or, for Sophia, in Book XV when Lord Fellamar tries to rape her? Given the allusions to tragedy at such crucial moments in *Tom Jones* and other comedies, we could more profitably identify a tragic perspective within comedy, signalled by allusion as well as action. This potential catastrophe within comedy differs from the contrast of holiday and everyday that is fundamental to comedy by suggesting an alternative literary perspective for characters in certain contexts.

In comedies with fairly precise points of ritual death there is often also a tragic perspective of this kind. In *Tartuffe*, which Frye uses to exemplify the motif, long before Tartuffe comes to imprison Orgon, both of the latter’s children, Mariane and Damis, are brought to crises that make Tartuffe’s menace obvious to all but his gull. In Act III, scene 6, Orgon banishes and disinherits Damis, thus “killing” him legally as his son and heir. As early as Act III, Scene 3, Orgon’s daughter threatens to kill herself rather than marry Tartuffe. Later, in Act IV, Scene 3, she begs her father: “let me end the tale/ Of my sad days behind a convent veil.”³ While Mariane’s pathetic language in these scenes resembles that of Corneillian tragedy, Dorine’s mockery of her “self-pitying key” underlines the folly of this young lover’s tendency to see herself as a tragic heroine.

Similarly, in *The Beggar’s Opera* the player interrupts Macheath’s exit to the gallows, declaring “this is a downright deep tragedy.” His words are apt, for the third act refers frequently to tragedy, explicitly through allusion and implicitly in Lucy’s near definition of eighteenth-century tragedy: “There is nothing moves one so much as a great man in distress.”⁴ In Act III, Scene 15 the tolling of the bells and Macheath’s final words to the jailer, “I am ready,” echo the betrayal of Pierre in Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserved*. The entrance of Macheath’s “wives” and children in that scene and an earlier comment, “Which way shall I turn me”⁵ (Air LIII), allude to Antony’s dilemma in Act III, Scene 1, of Dryden’s *All for Love*. Gay’s tone is complex. He parodies the extravagance of Restoration tragedy and its incompleteness. But the tragic allusions, however ridiculous in their local context, remind the reader that, in a predatory world like that represented in the play, betrayal and death are just as likely a mimetic action as reprieve.

² *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New York, 1957), pp. 178-79, 215.

³ *Tartuffe*, trans. Richard Wilbur (New York, 1963), p. 115. Harold C. Knutson in *Molière: An Archetypal Approach* (Toronto, 1976), reveals the difficulty of finding the point of ritual death when he writes: “Another characteristic of *Tartuffe* is that the impression of imminent defeat usually contained in the moment of ritual death is diffused through the play; at more than one point the energy of the young appears to be spent, the nightmare on the verge of becoming reality” (p. 77). Thus Knutson describes what I call the tragic perspective. I am grateful to J. B. Huber’s *Molière & the Comedy of Intellect* (Berkeley, Calif., & Los Angeles, 1962), for the suggestion that Mariane “gets into difficulties because of her own false *persona*, which may result from having attended too many tragedies and tragicomedies by such dramatists as Corneille and Rotrou” (p. 99).

⁴ “*The Beggar’s Opera*” and *Companion Pieces*, ed. C. F. Burgess (New York, 1966), P. 71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 71.

Although Fielding did not bring Tom to so explicit a point of ritual death as Macheath, he did not object to the device. Before writing *Tom Jones*, in the earlier *Jonathan Wild*, he commented on Gay's ending in regard to Heartfree's similar reprieve from prison and death:

But here, though I am convinced my good-natured reader may almost want the surgeon's assistance also, and that there is no passage in this whole story which can afford him equal delight, yet, lest our reprieve should seem to resemble that in the *Beggar's Opera*, I shall endeavor to show him that this incident, which is undoubtedly true, is at least as natural as delightful; for we assure him we would rather have suffered half mankind to be hanged than have saved one contrary to the strictest rules of writing and probability.⁶

As a novelist, Fielding wanted to create a natural and probable world; however, in this ironic passage, he implies that his ending is just as arbitrary as Gay's, though he erects a chain of circumstances to show how likely it is. The arrest of Fireblood leads the magistrate "luckily and timely" to the discovery of villainy and the rescue of Heartfree.

As he declares in *Tom Jones*, the improbability Fielding objects to is that into which "modern Authors of Comedy have fallen almost universally," transforming heroes from "notorious Rogues" to "worthy Gentlemen." Fielding regrets: "There is, indeed, no other Reason to be assigned for it, than because the Play is drawing to a Conclusion; as if it was no less natural in a Rogue to repent in the last Act of a Play, than in the last of his Life; which we perceive to be generally the Case at *Tyburn*, a place which might, indeed, close the Scene of some Comedies with much Propriety, as the Heroes in these are most commonly eminent for those very Talents which not only bring Men to the Gallows, but enable them to make an heroic Figure when they are there" (p. 406). Heartfree and Tom get close to Tyburn, but neither is a rogue-turned-gentleman who deserves hanging. Both are good-natured characters lacking the prudence to combat hypocrisy. Since nothing they do can reprieve them, safety must come from outside. Their tragic potentiality is authentic, if finally unrealized.

Comedies without an apparent point of ritual death frequently have a tragic perspective developed through allusion. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, lacks a storm or a Caliban to threaten life, although there is a threatening father, but it does contain a pattern differing from the folly of love or imagination. "The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby," treated as low comedy in the play, has as its basis an Ovidian story of young lovers, parental tyranny, secret meetings, and misunderstanding resulting in double suicide, a plot not unlike that of *Romeo and Juliet*, the death scene of which Shakespeare may be burlesquing in his comedy. C. L. Barber suggests that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* are "companion pieces": "The one moves away from sadness as the other moves away from mirth."⁷ Theseus's remarks on this play-within-the-play are indicative of such a dual perspective:

"A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus
And his love Thisby; very tragical mirth."
Merry and tragical? tedious and brief?
That is hot ice and wondrous strange snow.
How shall we find the concord of this discord?⁸

The phrases "tragical mirth" and "Merry and tragical" aptly describe the perspective with which the comic mode contains or reflects its opposite. The "brief scene" is a reminder, however farcical, that in some similar dramatic circumstances, "The course of true love never did run smooth" (I.i. 134). This comment by Lysander, early in the play, precedes a listing of love's obstacles—nationality, class, age, relatives, war, illness, death. Lysander describes in brief the kind of tragedy Shakespeare presented in *Romeo and Juliet*:

⁶ *The Complete Works of Henry Fielding*, ed. W. E. Henley (1903; rpt. New York, 1967), II, 163.

⁷ *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton, N.J., 1959), p. 159.

⁸ *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Madeline Doran (New York, 1971), V.i. 55-60. All further references are cited in the text.

Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,
And ere a man hath power to say "Behold!"
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to confusion.
(I.i. 144-49)

Hermia accepts this tragic perspective, which the play contradicts as incomplete. Thus she replies to Lysander: "If then true lovers have been ever crossed, / It stands as an edict in destiny" (Ii. 150-51). She has the kind of tragic recognition that Shakespeare is mocking along with the other follies of lovers.

Tragic allusions in Aristophanes, similarly, typically ridicule the perspective of tragedy as false and incomplete and thus validate the truth of comedy. In *Lysistrata* tragedies are associated with the male world, the typical dramatic reality from which the play's fantasy is a liberation. Kalonike, for instance, describes "a soldier from Thrace / swishing his lance like something out of Euripides."⁹ The male Koryphaios asks of the conflict, "Shall we not do as much I against these women, whom God and Euripides hate?" (*Four Comedies*, p. 20). Even the women are organizing their resistance according to the male model of tragedy, for *Lysistrata* wants an oath among them in the best style: "You remember how in Aischylos' *Seven I* they killed a sheep and swore on a shield?" (*Four Comedies*, p. 16). Likewise, in *The Birds* the fantastic creation of Cloudcuckooland takes place among the reminders of the god's punishment of rebellious mortals in tragedy. Early in the play the transformed Tereus appears as the Hoopoe, When Euelpides observes that "the Twelve Gods seem to have visited something" on him and laughs at him, the Hoopoe replies: "I can't help it. It's Sophokles' fault, / the way he misrepresented me in his plays" (*Four Comedies*, p. 168). Near the play's end is a paranoid Prometheus, far from Aeschylus's tragic hero, announcing the ruin of Zeus. Now a comic figure, he tells Pisthetairos:

Just don't mention my name. If Zeus finds me here
he'll scalp me. You don't know the half of it.
I'll tell you; only,
please hold this umbrella over my head
so the gods can't look down and see me from up there.
(*Four Comedies*, p. 232)

His hatred of the gods leads Prometheus to give Pisthetairos the secret to Zeus's overthrow. Perhaps most pointed is the arrival of Iris as a messenger from Zeus about midway through the play. She reminds the mortals of their peril, with an allusion to the *Licymnius* of Euripides:

Alas, deluded worm, think not to stir
the guts of wrath eterne: else heavenly Justice,
with Zeus's pitchfork arm'd, drops from on high
to man's undoing and leaves not a rack
behind. Fried and consumed shalt thou be,
as i' th' Euripidean Tragedy!
(*Four Comedies*, pp. 220-21)

⁹ *Four Comedies*, trans. Dudley Fitts (New York, 1957), p. 33. All further references are cited in the text.

Again the tragic perspective is associated with the dramatic world of Athenian religion, which is being turned upside down in this comedy. In comedy, however, the gods do not punish rebels. Although neither *Lysistrata* nor *Pisthetairos* goes through a point of ritual death, these plays include a tragic perspective.¹⁰

Thoroughly familiar with the comedies of Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Molière, and Gay, Fielding uses the tragic perspective even more self-consciously and extensively than they in his comic masterpiece. Among the several functions of tragic allusions in *Tom Jones* are, foremost, reminders to the reader of the tragic alternative to the comic fantasy and of the more complete truth of comedy. Early in the novel minor characters are ridiculed through tragic references. Lines from *Othello* are used to depict Mrs. Partridge (II, 3), Thwackum and Square (III, 6), Square and Mrs. Wilkins (V, 7), and the landlady at Upton (IX, 3). A passage from Addison's *Cato* serves to ennoble Allworthy (V, 7), when he is dying, but may also include some ridicule, since he is only apparently dying. From the time of Tom's banishment from Paradise Hall in Book VI, tragic allusions are primarily associated with the approach of Tom and Sophia to the possible catastrophe described in the opening paragraphs of Book XVII, quoted at the beginning of this essay.

Three allusions between Tom's exile and his arrival in London illustrate the early stages of his difficulty. Just after his banishment, Tom, with great self-approval, resolves to "pursue the Paths of this Giant Honour, as the gigantic Poet *Lee* calls it," and give up Sophia (p. 312). Fielding is mocking both Tom and the bombastic tragedian Nathaniel Lee, but in so doing he brings up, however ludicrously, the conventional tragic conflict of love and honor. Tom's fate, as ridiculous as it seems it might be, need not be comic. A few adventures later Tom himself quotes from *Venice Preserved*, praising Sophia in the words of Jaffeir's apostrophe to woman:

Angels are painted fair to look like her.
There's in her all that we believe of Heaven,
Amazing Brightness, Purity and Truth,
Eternal Joy, and everlasting Love. (p. 409)

Even this set piece of idealization carries with it a faint reminder of the destinies of Jaffeir and his beloved, Belvidera. During a later chance encounter with the lawyer Dowling, who knows the secret of Tom's birth, a brief allusion to *Othello* suggests another perspective (XII, 10).

The tragic allusions become more frequent when Tom and Sophia reach London. Sophia's escape from her father's house to Lady Bellaston's gives her little security, for in Book XV the lady convinces Lord Fellamar to rape Sophia and then marry her. When Fellamar first contemplates the act, Fielding describes his mind being "tost in all the distracting Anxiety so nobly described by *Shakespear* [in *Julius Caesar*]:

Between the Acting of a dreadful Thing,
And the first Motion, all the interim is
Like a Phantasma, or a hideous Dream:
The Genius and the mortal Instruments
Are then in Council; and the State of Man,
Like to a little Kingdom, suffers then
The Nature of an Insurrection?' (p. 792)

Since FeHamar is not a Brutus contemplating the assassination of a Caesar and wavering out of noble motives, but a fop pursuing a squire's daughter and lacking courage, his heroic conflict "between Honour and Appetite" (p. 793), is easily ridiculed. The potential for tragic disorder is only hinted to the reader. After Lady Bellaston bolsters his confidence with reminders of Helen of Troy and the Sabine Women, the next chapter ends with

¹⁰ In *Lysistrata* and *The Birds* there is not the ritual death Frye finds in Aristophanic comedy: "In Aristophanes the hero, who often goes through a point of ritual death, is treated as a risen god, hailed as a new Zeus, or given the quasi-divine honors of the Olympian victor" (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 215).

preparation for “the fatal Hour, when every Thing was prepared for the Destruction of poor *Sophia* . . . being the most tragical Matter in our whole History” (p. 796). This sequence may allude to *Clarissa*, in which Lovelace assures himself that Clarissa will marry him after he rapes her)¹¹ Though FeHamar is not a Lovelace either and cannot rape Sophia, her situation is not entirely comic. Fielding suggests that a young woman who flees her father’s house for the protection of a disreputable woman may just as likely be tragically compromised as comically reprieved.

Lord Fellamar’s approach for the attempted rape is prefaced with another allusion to tragedy: “The Clock had now struck Seven, and poor *Sophia*, alone and melancholy, sat reading a Tragedy. It was the *Fatal Marriage*, and she was now come to that Part where the poor, distress *Isabella* disposes of her Wedding-Ring. Here the Book dropt from her hand, and a Shower of Tears ran down into her Bosom” (p. 796), Thomas Southeme’s *The Fatal Marriage: or, The Innocent Adultery* contains certain parallels with Sophia’s situation that enable her to identify with its heroine Isabella as a woman cut off from a lover and harassed by a suitor, in other words “born to suffer,” as Isabella says at the point where Sophia stops to cry. Her excessive tears for this sentimental work, Fellamar’s pompous assault, and her resistance all quickly distance the reader from the tragic threat, showing it to be only part of the novel’s truth. However, Sophia is soon again confined by her father so that Fielding can depict her in Book XVII likely to be married to “either *Blifil*, or my Lord, or Somebody else.”

Tom’s tragic possibilities are just as explicitly portrayed. He is soon drawn into “the tragical Story” (p. 766) of his friend Nightingale, who quotes Nicholas Rowe’s *The Fair Penitent*, depicting his seduction of Nancy Miller in the words of Lothario’s robbery of Calista’s chastity. At about the same time Tom receives a letter from Sophia, which provides “the same Kind of Consolation . . . which *Job* formerly received from his Friends” (p. 749). Job’s story, humanly tragic, but divinely comic, is an appropriate commentary on Tom’s increasingly dismal situation in London, even though he will not suffer so much as Job. In the next book, in a stock comic scene, Lady Bellaston enters Tom’s room, where Mrs. Honour is already sequestered. Fielding comments about this dilemma: “Nothing can be imagined more comic, nor yet more tragical than this Scene would have been, if it had lasted much longer” (p. 811). Tom’s deepening involvement with Lady Bellaston, while predominantly comic, does have tragic potentiality. Her revelation to Sophia of Tom’s offer of marriage is just a hint of this. She is powerful and duplicitous.

In the novel’s sixteenth book Fielding immerses Tom in tragic possibility of a Shakespearean kind, first by sending him to a performance of *Hamlet* and then confronting him with an Othello-like figure. Tom’s visit to the theater is splendidly comic, especially in Partridge’s ingenuous commentary. Unlike Sophia, Tom does not realize the similitude of his situation to that of the tragic protagonist before him. Like Hamlet, Tom is passionate, self-accusatory, caught up in events moving beyond his control. Like the prince, Tom is about to face a duel, a “mother’s” incest, the “return” of his father, and his own possible death.¹² Ominously, Blifil arrives in London to seal Tom’s tragic fate while his half-brother is “diverting himself with *Partridge* at the Play” (p. 860). Then Tom visits Mrs. Fitzpatrick, where Fortune “who was not his Friend . . . accordingly produced the tragical Incident” of a duel with her husband, a character dominated by “that green-ey’d Monster mentioned by *Shakespear* in his Tragedy of *Othello*” (p. 871). Tom’s wounding of Fitzpatrick nearly leads to his own tragic end.

Fielding, however, has not yet completed Tom’s downward turn on Fortune’s wheel when Tom is imprisoned for apparently killing Fitzpatrick and kept there, likely to be executed, by Blifil’s and Dowling’s machinations. At this point Squire Western is gleeful “at the Hopes of seeing the speedy tragical End of poor *Jones*” (p. 886).

¹¹ Maurice Johnson in *Fielding's Art of Fiction: Eleven Essays on "Shamela," "Joseph Andrews," "Tom Jones," and "Amelia"* (Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 109-14, offers valuable suggestions about the relationship of this episode to *Clarissa* and *The Fatal Marriage*.

¹² Maurice Johnson's discussion of Tom's resemblance to Hamlet provided the stimulus for my remarks (*Fielding's Art of Fiction*, pp. 100-106). For other suggestions, see Manuel Schonhorn, “Heroic Allusion in *Tom Jones: Hamlet* and the Temptations of Jesus,” *Studies in the Novel* 6 (1974): 218-27.

But Fielding provides one more “*very tragical Incident*” (p. 915), when Partridge tells Tom “you have been a-Bed with your own Mother.” In *Joseph Andrews* Fielding allowed the chaste lovers, Joseph and Fanny, to believe overnight that they were brother and sister and to experience “perhaps little less Anxiety in this Interval than *Oedipus* himself, whilst his Fate was revealing.”¹³ In this novel Tom must believe for a short time that he has actually committed incest. The comic Hamlet also becomes a comic Oedipus, who, like the Greek hero, remains too long blind to his responsibility for his fate. Much of the joy of the recognition and reversal that follow derives from this potential tragedy averted. As Lane Cooper points out, “If we admit the reality of a comic catharsis, we must grant that the effect proceeds from. . . dramatic suspense, and from the arousal and defeat of our expectations in various ways.”¹⁴

Interpretations of this tragic perspective in Fielding’s comic novel have too often succumbed to fashionable despair. For example, Andrew Wright says of Fielding: “I have already pointed out that Fielding is very far from viewing ordinary life with the comic assurance that he brings to his novels; art offered him an alternative to the bleak truths he observed in Bow Street and elsewhere. But the alternative was not that of comedy to tragedy. It was comedy or despair.”¹⁵ Wright has adapted Christopher Fry’s statement: “Comedy is an escape, not from truth, but from despair: a narrow escape into faith.”¹⁶ Similar is Morris Golden’s viewpoint. According to him, Fielding “provides us with gloriously triumphant fantasies . . . but frequently forces us to abandon them. . . to some awareness of surrounding actuality.” As a writer of comedy, Fielding “necessarily shows virtue rewarded in this life and vice and folly curbed” but “makes sure at every step that we see the normal possibilities. Tom very nearly committed incest and murder; Sophia is very nearly married by force to a villain.” Golden concludes that Fielding “shares the central fear of eighteenth-century literature, a vision of a disintegrating world under the sway of chaos and old night.”¹⁷ Thus comedy is linked to despair again. But as the novel’s allusions to tragedy show, Fielding presents not the normal probabilities but the tragic possibilities. His comedy is the alternative to tragedy, not to despair, which is only part of the truth that comedy embodies. We should not read Fielding’s “we almost despair of bringing him to any good” too literally.

Less despairing views of Fielding’s tragic perspective have been expressed by Sheridan Baker and R. S. Crane. Baker describes the point in *Tom Jones* with which we began this essay, “when the stage expects a final depression in the hero’s fortune,” as one where Fielding is “talking most facetiously and ironically about the playwrights problem of concluding a comedy or tragedy.” Of such comedy Baker remarks: “Superimposed on the more realistic, variegated life in a novel, this abstract stage-structure makes an ironic comment on life, somewhat more quizzical than a simple affirmation of Fortune.”¹⁸ Without finding irony in the form, Crane states, “It is against this background of the potentially serious—more than ever prominent in the London scenes—that the story of Tom’s repeated indiscretions is made to unfold, with the result that though . . . the pleasure remains consistently comic, its quality is never quite that of the merely amiable comedy, . . . We are not disposed to feel, 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.”¹⁹ Crane calls *Tom Jones* a mixed rather than a simple comedy. We might more appropriately use the term “morally serious comedy.”²⁰

¹³ *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Middletown, Conn., 1967), p. 336.

¹⁴ *An Aristotelean Theory of Comedy* (New York, 1922), p. 68. See also Henry Knight Miller’s *Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones and the Romance Tradition*, English Literary Studies Monograph Series, No. 6 (Victoria: University of Victoria Press, 1976).

¹⁵ *Henry Fielding: Mask and Feast* (Berkeley, Calif. & Los Angeles, 1965), p. 158.

¹⁶ “Comedy,” *Vogue* (1951), rpt. *Comedy.. Meaning and Form*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York; 2nd edn., 1981), p. 17.

¹⁷ *Fielding’s Moral Psychology* (Amherst, Mass., 1966), pp. 124, 146.

¹⁸ “Fielding and the Irony of Form,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 2 (1968): 124, 146. See also Baker’s “Fielding’s Comic-Epic-in-Prose Romances Again,” *Philological Quarterly* 58 (1979): 63-81.

¹⁹ “The Plot of *Tom Jones*,” *The Journal of General Education* (1950), rpt. in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of “Tom Jones,”* ed. Martin C. Battestin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 88.

²⁰ This term was introduced by Sheldon Sacks in “Golden Birds and Dying Generations,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 6 (1969), where he argues that Fielding and Jane Austen “wrought from narrative rather than dramatic materials new techniques . . . that fully realized the aesthetic effect of comedy in works as morally serious, perhaps, as tragedy” (p. 280). Of the later books of *Tom Jones* Sacks writes: “That constant sense that things need not have turned out so well—that we are in anything but a fairy tale world—is a

The comedy of Fielding, like that of Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Molière, and Gay, is not an escape from despair, nor from truth. If it does not assert universal good, this comedy does portray man's fate through a wider lens than does tragedy. In "Tragedy and the Whole Truth" Aldous Huxley separates tragedy from what he calls "Wholly-Truthful art" and includes Fielding, with Homer, as examples of the latter. *Tom Jones* is, like the *Odyssey*, "never tragical; never—even when painful and disastrous, even when pathetic and beautiful things are happening. For they do happen; Fielding, like Homer, admits all the facts, shirks nothing."²¹ Among the things Fielding never shirks is the tragedy latent in his action. Huxley describes the relationship of such tragedy to an art like Fielding's as follows:

Wholly-Truthful art overflows the limits of tragedy and shows us, if only by hints and implications, what happened before the tragic story began, what will happen after it is over, what is happening simultaneously elsewhere. . . . Tragedy is an arbitrarily isolated eddy on the surface of a vast river that flows on majestically, irresistibly, around, beneath, and to either side of it. Wholly-Truthful art contrives to imply the existence of the entire river as well as of the eddy. It is quite different from tragedy, even though it may contain, among other constituents, all the elements from which tragedy is made.²²

As Nathan A. Scott, Jr., has pointed out, Huxley does not explicitly identify "Wholly-Truthful art" with comedy, though the idea is not inconsistent. Scott thus proposes that comedy is an art "dedicated to the telling of the Whole Truth: this is what it is that comedy 'imitates'—not the ludicrous, but the Whole Truth."²³

The tragic perspective of comedy is essential to its whole truth. The pattern of tragic allusion found in Fielding's comedy suggests both possibility and limitation, what might possibly have happened if the protagonist had been viewed from another literary perspective and the limits of that perspective. Like the defiance of Lysistrata and Pisthetairos or the laments of Hermia, Mariane, and Macheath, Tom's masquerade as Hamlet or Oedipus lets the reader glimpse tragedy but see the whole truth. With the exception of Shakespeare, tragedy, in its singleness, does not easily accommodate the comic perspective. Comedy at its best, as in Fielding's novel, need not avoid the whole truth or despair over it. As Joseph Campbell reminds us, in the ancient world "the realities depicted in the fairy tale, the myth, and the divine comedies of redemption"—the bases of comedy—were "regarded as of a higher rank than tragedy, of a deeper truth, of a more difficult realization, of a sounder structure, and of a revelation more complete." The comedy of Fielding, like that of his revered predecessors, offers what Campbell calls "a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man."²⁴

consequence of the very seriousness of Tom's plight, of the seriousness of the moral judgments conveyed, and of a sequence of brilliant artistic choices in the name of representation which helps to define that special comic world which is peculiarly Fielding's" (p. 284).

²¹ *Collected Essays* (New York, 1958), p. 98.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²³ *The Broken Center: Studies in the Theological Horizon of Modern Literature* (New Haven, Conn., 1968), pp. 93-94.

²⁴ *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Cleveland, Ohio & New York, 1949), p. 28.