"This Great Theatre of Nature": Henry Fielding and the Ancient Comic Stage

Stephen Ryan

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Part of the Classical Literature and Philology Commons, and the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/1335

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
“This Great Theatre of Nature:” Henry Fielding and the Ancient Comic Stage

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from The College of William and Mary

by

Stephen Thomas Ryan

Accepted for Honors

Brett Wilson, Thesis Advisor

Kim Wheatley, Exam Chair

Adam Potkay

Mitchell Brown

Williamsburg, VA
April 30, 2019
From Stage to Page: Fielding’s “New Province of Writing”

One of the most influential novelists of eighteenth-century England, Henry Fielding (1707-1754) is best remembered for his novels *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and his Friend Abraham Adams* (1742) and *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* (1749). Before his emergence as a prominent novelist, however, Fielding’s career centered on the London theater. Between the production of his first comedy in 1727 and the Stage Licensing Act of 1737, Fielding produced twenty-nine plays, many of them notable successes, earning him the designation by Robert D. Hume as “the most dominant professional playwright in London since Dryden” (ix). Much of Fielding’s successes included harsh satire of the current government, especially the Prime Minister Robert Walpole. As Thomas Keymer notes, Fielding’s plays took on an “Aristophanic amplitude” (17), a similarity that Fielding’s contemporary James Harris remarked upon as well, noting the Aristophanic “scenes of fancy and allegoric humor, pictures of human Life Extravagance and Nature, ye highest humour imaginable occasionally interspersed with a large mixture of bitter sarcasm and personal Satire, respecting ye leading Persons and measures of the times” (306). This governmental criticism ultimately resulted in the Stage Licensing Act of 1737, which some say was directly targeted at Fielding, and it essentially ended his theatrical career (Keymer 17).1 While Fielding’s contemporaries and modern scholars alike draw connections between Fielding’s plays and ancient Greek and Roman comedy, they largely ignore this relationship when investigating Fielding’s

---

novels. Despite this relative lack of existing criticism focusing on the relationship between Fielding’s novels and ancient comedy, Fielding’s deep knowledge of these ancient texts as well as the thematic and stylistic similarities present in his novels, such as the reliance on physical and sexual humor, misunderstanding, and chaotic disorder, demonstrate the influence of ancient Greek and Roman comedy in the development of Fielding’s self-proclaimed “new Province of Writing.”

Before discussing influence, however, it is important to establish Fielding’s access to, engagement with, and understanding of these ancient comedic texts in their original forms. Fielding attended Eton as a boy from 1719-1725, a time when Latin was the language of teaching, prayer, and even conversation with peers (Mace 19). Furthermore, the first two years were spent memorizing William Lily’s *Short Introduction of Grammar*, which frequently quoted authors such as Virgil, Terence, Cicero, Ovid, Plautus, and others before shifting to learning Greek in their third year, mostly focusing on Homer (Mace 20). Thus, through his education, Fielding developed a familiarity with the writings of the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence in the original Latin language. Following his time at Eton, Fielding enrolled in the classical curriculum at Leyden University in 1728, shortly after his first plays were being produced, furthering his knowledge of the classics (Mace 40). Complementing this classical education, an incomplete catalog of Fielding’s library shows a continued interest in ancient Greek and Roman literature, with editions and commentaries of Aristophanes, Aristotle, Homer, Sophocles, and others dominating the list (Mace 41-42). Fielding himself published a few translations of classical authors including Demosthenes, Juvenal, and most significant to this study, Aristophanes’ *Plutus*, which was completed in
collaboration with William Young and also included critical and explanatory notes. In the preface to this translation of *Plutus*, Fielding describes the appeal of Greek comedy, noting that “Readers of a purer Taste and sounder Judgement, will be able, we apprehend, to digest good Sense, manly Wit, just Satire, and true Humour,” in Aristophanes’ comedy (xii). Ronald Paulson notes that *Plutus* “embodies the typical Aristophanic hypothesis: Wealth and virtue do not correspond,” a theme found throughout Fielding’s novels (189). Fielding clearly engaged with the texts of ancient comedy, both in his education, his reading, and his work as a translator, indicating a potential for influence on his novels.

Fielding’s varied theatrical career—with entertainments often taking the forms of slapstick farces or revues based on current events—also suggests a conscious engagement with the concepts of genre and comedic convention, paving the way for a similar focus in his novelistic work. In the *Author’s Farce*, for example, Harry Luckless struggles between his literary ideals and his need for money that drives him into alternative styles of comedy, like the puppet show, *The Pleasures of the Town*, that dominates Act 3. Luckless, seemingly a stand-in for Fielding himself, epitomizes Fielding’s own experimentations with the genre of comedy. As Keymer notes, “The paradox is that in turning from prestigious to popular modes of drama, Fielding also made his creative breakthrough, releasing his genius for theatrical havoc from the strictures of conventional form” (24). He continues, “If the plays do indeed anticipate the novels, it is not least in their awareness that the public for literature is unpredictably diverse, and in their strategy of maximizing audience appeal by diversifying content and style” (31). For Keymer, Fielding’s adaptation of ancient comedic tropes to the modern forms of comedy allowed for a flourishing of creativity in his crafting of comic scenes. Fielding’s novels embraced
various concepts and styles of comedy in their crafting, and Fielding’s deep knowledge of Aristophanes, Terence, and Plautus in both form and style indicates a significant influence on texts such as *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*.

Giving up on the stage in chagrin after the passage of the Stage Licensing Act, Fielding turned to the newly emerging genre of the novel. Fielding’s career as a novelist began in response to Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), and Fielding published *Shamela* (1741), a spoof of *Pamela*, and his first novel *Joseph Andrews* (1742) shortly afterwards. For Thomas Lockwood, *Shamela* occupies an interesting middle ground between theater and the novel, existing simultaneously as a novelistic parody and as a continuation of Fielding’s career as a playwright in the vividness and theatricality of the descriptions (28-32). As we shall see, this reconciliation of theater and novel plays an important part in Fielding’s early novels as well, notably in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*. Fielding wrote *Joseph Andrews* in dialogue with Richardson’s *Pamela*, with the titular character Joseph Andrews imagined as the moral brother of Richardson’s ostentatiously virtuous protagonist. Despite this direct link to *Pamela* in premise, *Joseph Andrews* takes on a distinct character from Richardson’s domestically focused novel. Joseph, fired for refusing the sexual advances of his employer Lady Booby (along with those of her maidservant Ms. Slipslop), embarks upon a journey with his friend Abraham Adams to reunite with his childhood love Fanny. Joseph and Fanny’s happy ending is momentarily delayed when it seems that they might be brother and sister, but a series of happy coincidences reveals that each was an adopted foundling from different parents, and as such they can live happily ever after. Joseph’s adventures exist in the “real world”
away from home, and he engages all ranks and classes of people from gentlemen to lawyers, parsons, robbers, innkeepers, and many more.

Fielding built upon this style of encountering the world away from home and its inevitable comic episodes in his most successful novel, *Tom Jones* (1749). *Tom Jones* covers much more ground than *Joseph Andrews*. Divided into three sections, the narrative focuses on Tom’s childhood in the country, his time on the road after he leaves home, and his life in the city of London. In the first section, Fielding describes Tom’s childhood, during which he is adopted by Squire Allworthy as a foundling. Growing up, Tom demonstrates his essential goodness to his community’s have-nots despite being educated by the harsh parson Mr. Thwackum and the moral philosopher Mr. Square, engages in a youthful dalliance with the gamekeeper’s daughter Molly Seagrim before falling in love with his neighbor Sophia Western, and is ultimately banished by Allworthy due to the machinations of his nemesis Blifil. Tom, cast out from his home and his love, sets out to make his own way in the world, joined again by a sidekick, Partridge, and at one point even attempting to join the army to fight the current Jacobite Rebellion, before traveling to London for the final third of the book in which, after a series of comical and sexual misadventures, Tom and Sophia finally agree to marry, for, despite his many peccadillos, Tom has proved himself an affectionate, generous, and loyal man.

One of Fielding’s distinctive contributions to the early development of the novel as a form is the incorporation of comedy. Whatever the merits of Samuel Richardson’s canon, his deadly serious novels do not even attempt to provoke laughter. Fielding’s comic novels are informed by his experiences in the rollicking comic theater of the early 18th century and by his knowledge of ancient comedic conventions. Fielding specifically
emphasizes the comic nature of his novels, calling *Joseph Andrews* a “comic Epic-Poem in Prose,” a term that highlights Fielding’s comic innovation in a genre typically devoid of Fielding’s styles of humor. As Lockwood notes, “Fielding’s playhouse beginnings left him with a certain instinct for imagining his narrative material as something stageable” (27). For many scholars, Fielding’s plays hold an important part in understanding the shift from the theater to the novel, and the stageability of Fielding’s narratives contributes to a more complete realization of Fielding’s ideas of genre in his novels. Indeed, in the first chapter of Book VII of *Tom Jones*, Fielding writes:

> The World hath been often compared to the Theatre; and many grave Writers, as well as the Poets, have considered human Life as a great Drama, resembling, in almost every Particular, those scenical Representations, which *Thepsis* is first reported to have invented… But as Nature often exhibits some of her best Performances to a very full House; so will the Behaviour of her Spectators no less admit the above mentioned Comparison than that of her Actors. In this vast Theatre of Time are seated the Friend and the Critic; here are the Claps and Shouts, Hisses and Groans; in short, every Thing which was ever seen or heard at the Theatre-Royal.

 (*Tom Jones* VII.i; 289-291).

In this chapter, Fielding explicitly compares life, and by extension his novelistic imitation of life, to the theatre while adding his readers into the metaphor as the audience. Paulson expands upon this idea of Fielding’s novel as theater as an “essential element for an understanding of Tom” (221). For Paulson, the hypocrisy of a theater audience that ridicules the characters on stage but themselves live a life of immorality epitomizes
Fielding’s understanding of the novel as a kind of theater. As Fielding closes his chapter, he notes, “They are the same Folly, the same Childishness, the same Ill-breeding, and the same Ill-nature, which raise all the Clamours and Uproars both in Life and on the Stage” (Tom Jones, VII.i; 292). Essentially, Fielding imagines his novels as theater on the page with the reader serving as a private audience, and this conception of Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones underscores Fielding’s reliance on theater in crafting their plots and styles.

Fielding’s style of comedy within his theatrical career contributes to this idea of the dramatic influence on his novels. Fielding’s plays, with all of their comical bawdiness and irreverence, often located their satirical humor not in the comic sexual impropriety, but in the duplicitous actions of their characters. As Tiffany Potter notes, Fielding would “forgive the licentious and impetuous, but never the hypocritical” in his productions (35). For example, Fielding, poking fun at the vanity of the upper classes through the character of Lord Formal in Love in Several Masques, writes, “Lord Formal is so perfect a Master of Good-breeding, that if he launched a little out of the common Road, the World wou’d esteem it a Precedent, and not an Error” (53). Fielding’s satire of the formality of English society abounds in lines such as these in his plays, which, in addition to the more forgivable sexual antics, contribute to the disorder and libertinism of his productions. For Potter, Fielding’s most incisive comedy comes when it “mocks conventional reverence” (37). Fielding carries this propensity for satirical criticism of hierarchies in his novels, disparaging the hypocrisy of the pompous upper classes both with scenes of clever wit and the tropes of physical and sexual humor. As Ian Donaldson puts it, Fielding’s novels are “at a delicate point of transition” between the raucous sexual humor and the more traditional moralizing aspects of comedy (202). Fielding’s humor, in a forced transition
from stage to page due to the Stage Licensing Act, maintains bawdiness and sharp
satirical wit while also reattaching itself to the traditions of comic writing in its endings,
morality, and reforming characters, as seen in the tidy conclusions of *Tom Jones* and
*Joseph Andrews* that both end in a happy marriage and a considerable increase in fortune.
Barred from the theater, Fielding’s novels represent a balance between his successful
theatrical career and the new opportunities presented by the medium of the published, as
opposed to performed, word.

With this theatrical influence in mind, it is important to recognize the multitude of
genres that helped shape Fielding’s conception of the comic novel. Many scholars
attempt to classify, or at the very least identify, Fielding’s novels by finding their roots in
a particular genre – candidates have included everything from epic to ancient Greek prose
fiction to medieval romance. The diversity of genres from which Fielding draws
inspiration, however, is very much the point: for Fielding, combination and compromise
are both aesthetic and moral principles, and this necessitates an appreciation and
recognition by scholars focused on the rise of the English comic novel. In his study of the
rise of the novel, Ian Watt centers his discussion around the relationship between
Fielding’s novels and the epic tradition, largely passing over any relationship with comic
literature. Similarly, Margaret Anne Doody’s study of the novel locates the original
influence of prose fiction in what she calls the ancient novels of ancient Greece and
Rome, and she ties nearly every evolution of prose fiction, including the era of Fielding

---

and Richardson, back to these classical origins. While these studies provide useful insight into the correlations between Fielding’s novels and specific ancient genres, they fail to account for the inherent compromise found in a work dubbed a “comic Epic-Poem in Prose,” a title that at first glance may seem to be a joke in itself. When fully appreciating the influence of compromise in Fielding’s characters, plots, and resolutions, this label necessitates a shift in outlook when studying Fielding. Of course, this study focuses on the relationship of Fielding’s novels specifically to ancient comedy (an irony fully recognized in regard to this argument). Nevertheless, acknowledging the fact that Fielding explicitly relates his novels to several genres, including epic, medieval romance, and comedy, facilitates a more holistic approach to the study of Fielding’s novels.

Fielding wrote often about where his plots and form derive their inspiration. In the preface to *Joseph Andrews*, for example, Fielding establishes an ancient source for his novel, the lost comic epic of Homer, the *Margites*. For Fielding, the loss of the *Margites* directly contributed to the lack of subsequent examples of comic epic from antiquity, leading authors to rely on drama as the main source of classical comedic literature. As Fielding writes in his Preface:

The EPIC, as well as the DRAMA, is divided into Tragedy and Comedy. Homer, who was the Father of this Species of Poetry, gave us a Pattern of both these, tho’ that of the latter kind is entirely lost; which Aristotle tells us, bore the same Relation to Comedy which his *Iliad* bears to Tragedy. And perhaps, that we have no more Instances of it among the Writers of Antiquity, is owing to the Loss of

---

this great Pattern, which, had it survived, would have found its Imitators equally with the other Poems of this great Original.

*(Joseph Andrews, 3)*

In this passage, Fielding effectively establishes Homer’s *Margites* as the lost inspiration for his “comic Epic-Poem in Prose,” raising the question of his true inspiration. The mention of “DRAMA” in the beginning of this paragraph implies that due to the absence of the *Margites* as a model, Fielding turned to ancient drama, specifically comedy, for his Classical inspiration in his novels. As Anaclara Castro-Santana writes, “As Fielding sought to elevate the cultural status of prose fiction—while also being caught in the paradoxical reverence for the classics and an enthusiasm for novelty characteristic of his time—his ostensible sources should be respectable and familiar, but also new and exciting” (647). Castro-Santana emphasizes the importance of a classical tradition to what Fielding saw as a new genre of writing in British literature as a source of legitimization, and she suggests that the lack of a comic epic tradition led Fielding to the comedies of Ancient Greece and Rome. Due to the lack of a classically sanctioned comic source, Fielding’s novels locate much of their comic inspiration in the ancient comedy of Aristophanes, Plautus, and Terence.

**Legitimizing Slapstick: Fielding’s Comedy and the Ancient Tradition**

Before tracing Fielding’s comic novels back to the conventions of ancient comedy, it is important to identify where Fielding locates humor in his novels. Abraham Adams, the blundering moral compass of *Joseph Andrews*, exemplifies almost every
variety of Fielding’s comedy. Throughout the novel, Fielding frequently invites the reader to laugh at Adams’ various comical adventures. Fielding pinpoints this humor in several locations, especially in sexual humor, physical humor, didactic satirical humor, and the comedy of misunderstanding. Adams finds himself in these situations frequently, accidentally getting into bed with Fanny while naked, participating in several brawls and fights, highlighting a gentleman’s hypocrisy and cowardice by leaping into action, and mistakenly taking Mrs. Slipslop for a male rapist and attacking her. Adams’ comedy stems from a dismantling of hierarchy into chaos and disorder and through the subversion of the reader’s expectations. For Simon Dickie, Adams serves as the focus of ridicule in the novel, with readers finding his utter naivety both baffling and comical, tempering his role as sincere moralizer in the novel through “violent humiliations” (172-4). For Claude Rawson however, Fielding merely uses these comic episodes to “desolemnify without deflating” Adams’ character (247). Perhaps J. Paul Hunter puts it best when he writes:

Innocent of evil, [Adams] is also unavailable to the complexities of postlapsarian experience; he is as impossible to emulate as he is ideal…Fielding achieves a paradox of vision and mortality, eternity and history, a recognition that human oughtness is conditioned by the Edenic curse as well as inspired by memories of original ideality. (112)

For Hunter, Adams’ comedy stems from his inability to recognize the realities of the world, but nevertheless his morality persists in guiding the novel’s ethics of Christian charity and moral action in aid of the vulnerable and those in need. This desolemnification serves Fielding’s comedy in its dismantling of order with rudeness,
peace with violence, and formality with impropriety as exemplified by Adams’ comic adventures throughout *Joseph Andrews*.

In addition to the focalization of comedy in disorder and impropriety in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, Fielding centers a significant amount of his humor on the body and unexpected physical interactions with others. The prevalence of sexual humor in Fielding’s novels shares a congruence with Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “grotesque body.” Bakhtin places specific emphasis on the so-called “apertures or the convexities” of the body. The grotesque body centers around the parts that invite connection with the outside world and that blur the defined notion of the self, “that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world…the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose” (Bakhtin 26). It is through these protrusions and orifices that the body grows, especially through interaction with others in physical instances such as eating, drinking, sexual encounters, and bodily excretion. Furthermore, Bakhtin emphasizes the carnivalesque, the state of suspension of typical rules, hierarchies, and social standards.

As Bakhtin writes:

> This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible during everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times. (10)
For Bakhtin, the grotesque body becomes free to express itself during the carnival when the boundaries of hierarchy and polite social expectations fall away. Fielding’s novels share this focus on both the grotesque body and the carnivalesque. Throughout his novels, Fielding includes frequent scenes of eating, drinking, sex, and bodily contact, drawing on this tradition of the grotesque body and its manifestation in the sphere of the carnivalesque to inform his comedy, and the ancient comic tradition with which Fielding was so familiar contributes to this relationship.

In the ancient comedy of Aristophanes, the most significant surviving playwright of Greek Old Comedy, physical and sexual humor played an important role in both plot and characterization, desolemnifying the action and contributing to the carnivalesque nature of the productions. The most visible manifestation of this fact comes in the form of the costumes of Aristophanic comedy. As Margarete Bieber notes, small statuettes depicting comic actors of Old Comedy provide insight into the physical appearance of the actors during performance (39-41). These performers, who were exclusively male, would dress in skin-colored tights stuffed with cushions to create an ancient “fat suit” of sorts, accentuating the buttocks and the stomach. Furthermore, when playing a male character, the actors would wear an exaggerated, artificial phallus. In addition to these bodily alterations, Old Comedy made use of exaggerated masks with expressions of anger, happiness, fear, laughter, etc. These statuettes also demonstrate some of the gesticulations of the actors. Several depict performers, artificial phallus exposed, placing both hands on their hips in a provocative manner (Bieber 39). The very nature of Old Comedy costuming and performance contributed to the overall sexual and physical humor of the drama. A trace of the trappings of Old Comedy persists in the characterization and plot of
Fielding. This style of “low humor” plays a profound part in Fielding’s novels, not only in the sexual adventures of Tom Jones, but also in the brawls of Abraham Adams, the unexpected exposure of Mr. Square in Molly Seagrim’s bedroom, and many others.

In the *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes includes scenes of explicit sexual humor that simultaneously serve as plot devices and instances of “low” humor. Especially in the *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes’ plot embraces a carnivalesque suspension of traditional hierarchies as the women of Athens seize control of the acropolis and assume the positions of power in society by withholding sex from their husbands. Furthermore, Aristophanes’ direct bodily humor finds congruence with Bakhtin’s ideas of the grotesque body in its focus on phallic sexual humor and the withholding of sex as a bargaining chip. In one scene, the Athenian soldier Kinesias begs his wife, Myrrhine, to break the sex strike, and she toys with him, fetching different items to facilitate their sexual encounter before darting away. Aristophanes writes:


This woman’s driving me bonkers!

MYRRHINE. *(returning with blanket)* Here we are. Now let me just arrange it nice. Get up a second, dear, will you?

KINESIAS. Get up? I’ve been up for days.

*(Kinesias groans, reluctantly getting to his feet while Myrrhine spreads the blanket on the cot. He lies down again.)* …

MYRRHINE. I’m coming darling. See, I’m taking off my shoes.

You will support the peace movement, won’t you?

KINESIAS. Don’t worry—I need a peace, all right!
Hey, where you going? Come back!

(Myrrhine dashes back into the Acropolis. The gates shut behind her.)

Good gods, I’ve just been pussy-whipped!

After all that fuss, she runs out on me!  

(Lysistrata, 1082-1111)

In this scene, Aristophanes centers the action on clear, sexual humor wherein Kinesias remains on-stage in a state of arousal and discomfort while Myrrhine through the use of her sexuality secures his commitment to ending the war with Sparta. Aristophanes frequently uses sexual comedy in a subversive manner; by placing the women in control of the political dealings of Athens, Aristophanes crafts scenes that locate their sexual humor in the disorderly, chaotic, and even absurd aspects of his plots.

Fielding latches on to this idea of sexual humor that centers on the grotesque body throughout his novels. One representative scene comes from Joseph Andrews, where the naked Adams bursts into Slipslop’s bedroom before accidentally getting into bed with Fanny. Hearing Slipslop’s cries for help, Adams, “jumped out of Bed, and without staying to put a rag of Clothes on, hastened into the Apartment whence the Cries proceeded” (Joseph Andrews IV.14; 311). For the entirety of the scene, including the fight with Slipslop and the accidental retiring to Fanny’s bed, Adams remains naked, both highlighting his absurdity and his dedication to his morals over his appearance. As Adams continues to strike Slipslop, he “discovered, by the two Mountains which Slipslop

---

4 This translation was recommended to me by Dr. Mitch Brown, and though the language reads as modern, the action itself rather than the tone is the focus here.

5 Quotations from Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones will take the form (Book.chapter; page number).
carried before her, that he was concerned with a Female. He then concluded her to be a Witch, and said, he fancied those Breasts gave suck to a Legion of Devils” (*Joseph Andrews* IV.14; 312). Here, after he had mistakenly identified Slipslop as a man due to the hair on her chin, Adams realizes her womanhood by her breasts, concluding that because of her ferocity and man-like features, she must be a witch. Lady Booby, bursting into this chaos, “began to revile the Parson as the wickedest of all Men, and particularly railed at his Impudence in chusing her House for the Scene of his Debaucheries, and her own Woman for the Object of his Bestiality” (*Joseph Andrews* IV.14; 312). Similar to Aristophanes’ scene above, Fielding draws his comedy from a suspension of traditional boundaries and order in a carnivalesque fashion; the safety and separate nature of the bedroom is violated by several characters, the conceptions of gender are mistakenly blurred, and the authority shifts from a parson to a lady, who equates her servant to an animal. Furthermore, Slipslop’s breasts and Adams’ naked body represent the grotesque body in action, drawing their humor from their capacity for sexual activity and their ultimate confusion concerning their bodies. In this scene, Fielding highlights his propensity for locating his comedy in moments of subversion and disorder, casting characters typically held up as dignified as uncontrollable and improper.

In addition to these sexual and bodily misadventures, Fielding’s physical and often violent comedic episodes represent another aspect of his writing that is grounded in ancient comedy. In the Roman comedy of Plautus, physical humor plays an important role in the plot. As Stanley Ireland notes, Plautus’ plays employ “slapstick, verbal abuse, and exuberance of language” to keep the Roman audience engaged in the comedy (392-96). For Ireland, one of the most identifiable aspects of Plautus’ humor comes in his use
of slapstick-style humor in his adaptations of Greek originals. In the *Menaechmi*, for example, a full-scale brawl breaks out on stage as the townspeople deem Menaechmus I to be mentally unstable due to the presence of his twin brother, Menaechmus II, in the town and the confusion that ensues. Seeking to restrain him and bring him to the doctor, they start to carry Menaechmus away before Messenio comes to his aid. Plautus writes:

*A wild mêlée ensues*

*MENAECMUS* [while fighting, to MESSENIO]. Hey, I’ve got his eye.
*MESSENIO*. Then make the socket in his head appear! Evil people! People snatchers! Bunch of pirates!

*SLAVES [together]*. Woe is us! Hercules! No—please!

*MENAECMUS*. What sort of handiwork is this? Face a festival of fists.
*MESSENIO*. Go on, be gone, and go to hell! *[Kicking the slowest slave]* You take that as your reward for being last to get away.

*They are all gone. MESSENIO takes a deep breath of satisfaction*

(Plautus, *Menaechmi* 1013-1017)

This passage is dominated by the violent and physical humor that characterizes Plautus’ plays. With a full-on brawl taking place on stage, Plautus injects humor into the scene with Menaechmus and Messenio’s comments about the slave’s eye, and while it remains unclear whether or not Menaechmus truly gouged out the slave’s eye from its socket, the overall staging of the scene presents a real breach of decorum and propriety in its violence. This type of commotion draws some of its humor from the fact that a fairly wealthy Syracusan citizen finds himself in a brawl with slaves. Plautus, like Aristophanes, finds his humor in the suspension of traditional order, with the man who
would typically give orders to slaves being carried off, deemed insane by the slaves and onlookers alike. As exemplified by this episode, Plautine comedy relies on physical and slapstick styles of humor that often function in a carnivalesque manner through their subversion of traditional hierarchies.

Similar to Plautus in his employment of physical and comic violence in his plays, Fielding utilizes this kind of slapstick comedy to inject humor into his plots through disorder and subversion. The quintessential slapstick actor in Fielding’s novels comes in the character of *Joseph Andrews*’ Abraham Adams. His constant, seemingly blundering adventures and altercations paired with his moralizing sermons as a parson make Adams simultaneously a target of the reader’s ridicule and sympathy. In Book II Chapter 5 of *Joseph Andrews*, Adams, seeking to protect Joseph from harm, finds himself engaged in a brawl with the host and hostess of an inn. After Adams knocks the host to the ground, the hostess bursts in and joins the fray. Fielding writes:

> The Hostess, who was a better Wife than so surly a Husband deserved, seeing her Husband all bloody and stretched along, hastened presently to…revenge the Blow which, to all appearance, was the last he would ever receive; when, lo! a Pan full of Hog’s-Blood, which unluckily stood on the Dresser, presented itself first to her Hands. She seized it in her Fury, and without any Reflection discharged it into the Parson’s Face, and with so good an Aim…that a more horrible Spectacle was hardly to be seen, or even imagined.

*(Joseph Andrews, II.5; 115)*

This passage truly exemplifies Fielding’s propensity for slapstick humor; not only can the reader imagine characters sprawled on the floor unconscious, but the ferocity of the
hostess in her protection of her husband and her subsequent pitching of the hog’s blood onto Adams provides the reader with a scene of ridiculous circumstances, epitomized by a Parson drenched in blood. The scene maintains its comic nature with Mrs. Slipslop, seeing the state of Adams, joining in as well. Fielding describes the carnage of the scene as the brawl draws to a close:

Poor Joseph could hardly rise from his Chair; the Parson was employed in wiping the Blood from his Eyes, which had entirely blinded him, and the Landlord was but just beginning to stir, whilst Mrs. Slipslop, holding down the Landlady’s Face with her Left Hand, made so dextrous a use of her Right, that the poor Woman began to roar in a Key, which alarmed all the Company in the Inn.

*(Joseph Andrews, II.5; 115)*

By the end of the fight, nearly everyone, except for Slipslop, is incapacitated in some comedic fashion. Joseph, the most respectable victim, lies inert in his chair, Adams is wiping pig’s blood from his eyes, the Landlord lies unconscious on the ground, and the Landlady is screaming under the onslaught of Slipslop. This scene, far from furthering the larger plot of the novel, functions almost exclusively to provide the reader with laughter and entertainment. Fielding transforms a country inn into a scene of a wild brawl between host and guest, finding humor in subversion and disorder.

In addition to the explicitly sexual and physical humor found in both ancient comedy and Fielding’s novels, a scene from the *Frogs* highlights the prominence of satirical and didactic humor in Aristophanic comedy, often concerning topics of masculinity, bravery, sex, civic duty, and cowardice. In the play, Dionysus, dressed as Heracles, and his slave, Xanthias, switch costumes several times while on stage, at first
prompted by Dionysus’ fear of Aeacus, Cerberus’ keeper who is angered at Heracles’ theft of the dog, and subsequently by his desire to attend a party. Aristophanes writes:

DIONYSUS. Ok then, tell you what. You win the hero contest, so you get to play me and wear the lionskin and carry the club. And I’ll be the slave and carry the bags. Deal?

XANTHIAS. You word is law. Hand ‘em over. (They exchange)

Hey, look at Mr. Xanthias-Heracles! Just see if I’m a coward like you! …

HOUSEMAID. Heracles, honey it’s you! Come on in! When Miss Persephone heard you were here, why, she put bread in the oven, made pea soup, roasted a whole ox on a spit, and made buns and cakes. So come and get it! …Now don’t make a fuss. I’m not going to let you go. Oh, and by the way, there’s a girl who plays flute waiting, and a couple of belly dancers, too.

XANTHIAS. Did you say belly dancers?

HOUSEMAID. Yes, pretty young things, fresh from the bath and dressed like models. Come on! …

DIONYSUS. Hold on a second. You didn’t think I really meant it, did you? Just because, as a joke, I dressed you up as Heracles? Well, you can drop it now. Pick up these bags and get a move on.

(Frogs 445-458)  

---

6 Alfred Corn, in his translation of the Frogs, includes deliberately casual language in an attempt to capture the spirit of the play as he interprets it. This translation was recommended to me by Dr. Mitchell Brown.
In this scene, Aristophanes provides a somewhat farcical scene of rapid wardrobe exchanges, fear, lust, and mythological burlesque to satirize both Dionysus, and perhaps even the Athenian male citizen, for their sexual desires and simultaneous physical cowardice. Indeed, earlier in the scene, Dionysus boasts of his bravery and strength, only to faint from fear at the threats of Aeacus. Throughout the play, Dionysus and Xanthias exchange costumes several times, with each instance prompted by a selfish Dionysus either cowering in fear or indulging his physical or sexual appetites. This type of farcical and didactic humor, wherein a character one expects to be respected (such as the god Dionysus at a festival in his honor) is the target of satire, plays an important part in Aristophanes’ plays, and in turn the novels of Fielding.

Fielding also incorporates this style of didactic satire in his novels, usually in his comedic episodes concerning the upper classes and the clergy. In a scene in *Joseph Andrews*, similar to the Dionysus episode described above, Adams and an unnamed gentleman discuss ideals of bravery on the journey to the gentleman’s house when they overhear a damsel in distress, at which the gentleman advocated abandoning her to her fate out of his own regard for his self-interest. Fielding writes:

> On they travelled, the Gentleman renewing his Discourse on Courage, and the Infamy of not being ready at all times to sacrifice our Lives to our Country… whence, on a sudden, they heard the most violent of Shrieks imaginable in a female Voice. Adams offered to snatch the Gun out of his Companion’s Hand. ‘What are you doing?’ said he… ‘You are not mad enough, I hope…Do you consider this Gun is only charged with Shot, and that the Robbers are most probably furnished with Pistols loaded with Bullets? This is no Business of ours;
let us make as much haste as possible out of the way, or we may fall into their
Hands ourselves.’

(Joseph Andrews, II.ix; 131)

Similar to Dionysus in the Frogs, the gentleman talks on the abstract goodness of bravery
and heroic action, yet in the face of concrete danger, he trembles in fear and retreats.
Fielding uses ironic situations like these to prompt a rueful laughter in his readers through
the criticizing of both his characters, especially those of the upper classes, and the values
of society as a whole. Similar to Aristophanes, Fielding subverts the expectations of the
audience: the gentleman praising the virtues of bravery and honor ends up fleeing the
scene, leaving Adams and his crabstick to save the endangered woman. Fielding uses
carnivalesque episodes like these didactically, castigating the gentlemen of British
society for their empty talk of virtue, just as Aristophanes satirizes a divine being for his
empty talk of bravery and utter dedication to self-interest.

In addition to their visual and stylistic similarities, this relationship between
ancient comic humor and the congruous “low” humor of Fielding shares a deeper
connection than mere plot in their didacticism. As seen in the episode with Dionysus in
the Frogs, Aristophanes often used his comedy to criticize shortcomings in Athenian
society, especially hypocrisy and cowardice. In discussing his translation of the Frogs,
Alfred Corn notes how the circumstances of the Athenian Empire at the time of the play’s
first performance may have shaped Aristophanes’ criticisms. He writes:

It was first staged in 405 B.C. at the Lenaea…Athens had recently undergone
several reverses in its continuing conflict with Sparta, no one doubting that as
much as one more defeat would be final…For Aristophanes, drama had the
potential for kindling a militant spirit in its audience. As a writer of comedy, he could mock cowardice and goldbricking… Aristophanes is first and foremost concerned with the contestants’ comparative ability to inspire martial ardor and fortitude. (179)

In this passage, Corn emphasizes the importance of circumstance in the crafting of Aristophanes’ *Frogs*. For Aristophanes, with Athens in the midst of a crisis threatening their very existence, comic castigation of Athenian cowardice and hypocrisy could spur the people to action in the face of an imposing foe. Aristophanes’ comedy turns his satire of his perception of Athenian laziness into a chance for didacticism, driving the Athenians to fight despite the odds. This style of moralizing comedy abounds in Fielding’s novels as well, emphasizing the link between ancient comedy and Fielding’s concepts of humor in his novels.

Fielding often uses sexual humor for analogous purposes in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, implicating certain members of society, usually the clergy or upper classes, for their hypocrisy and sanctimony. Fielding uses the scene of Mr. Square and Molly Seagrim caught by an unsuspecting Tom Jones to expose the libidinous drives of even the noisiest moralizers. He writes:

As *Molly* pronounced those last Words, which are recorded above, the wicked Rug got loose from its Fastening, and discovered every thing hid behind it; where among other female Utensils appeared— (with Shame I write it, and with Sorrow will it be read)—the Philosopher *Square*, in a Posture (for the Place would not near. Admit his standing upright) as ridiculous as can possibly be conceived…
He had a Night-cap belonging to Molly on his Head, and his two large Eyes, the Moment the Rug fell, stared directly at Jones; so that when the Idea of Philosophy was added to the Figure now discovered, it would have been very difficult for any Spectator to have refrained from immoderate laughter.

*(Tom Jones V.v; 204)*

In this scene, in which the previously pragmatically characterized Mr. Square appears in a lady’s nightcap and likely in a state of indecent exposure, Fielding interjects bawdy humor to poke fun at the philosopher Square, while also offering Tom an excuse for abandoning his relationship with Molly in her infidelity. This type of physical and erotic humor, abundant in Aristophanes’ comedies, links Fielding back to his theatrical career in his use of farcical scenes of characters in ridiculous situations or costumes to throw disorder into the hierarchy of eighteenth-century Britain. Fielding takes the moral philosopher Square, who debates with Thwackum on the nature of ethical behavior, and reduces him to a crouching, cross-dressing lover to Molly. Essentially, Fielding exposes Square’s hypocrisy through the interjection of sexual humor, emphasizing the absurdity of the pompous educational elites of society.

In addition to the didactic satire found in both ancient comedy and Fielding’s novels, *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* share many similarities with the ancient focus on the comedy of misunderstanding. Throughout his plays, Plautus facilitates scenes of dramatic irony to inject humor into the action. As George Duckworth notes, “Confusions and misunderstandings are thus one of the main sources of laughter in Roman comedy. The superior knowledge of the spectators enables them to appreciate the humor in the situation when one character is taken for another” (316). As Duckworth notes, situations
such as these dominated the Roman stage and provided clever sources of laughter for the audiences of Roman New Comedy. In addition to the physical comedy of the brawls noted above, the *Menaechmi* capitalizes on two long separated twin brothers, both named Menaechmus, who cause a great deal of confusion on stage when different characters mistake one for the other, not knowing that both are present in the town. In one scene, Menaechmus I’s wife scolds Menaechmus II, thinking he is her husband while Menaechmus II confusedly responds. Plautus writes:

WIFE. I simply can’t endure all this disgracefulness—
   I’d even rather live my life…a divorcée
   Than bear the brunt of this disgracefulness of yours.

MENAECCHMUS II. What’s it to me if you can’t stand your married life—
   Or ask for a divorce? Is it a custom here
   To babble to all foreigners who come to town?

WIFE. ‘To babble’? I won’t stand for that. I won’t! I won’t!
   I’ll die a divorcée before I’d live with you.

MENAECCHMUS II. As far as I’m concerned you can divorce yourself,
   And stay a divorcée till Jupiter resigns his throne.

(*Menaechmi* 719-728)

If in this scene Menaechmus II was indeed married to the Wife, his responses would surely merit her indignation at his blasé attitude towards their marriage. For the audience, however, the scene provides a source of humorous dramatic irony, for the Wife is upbraiding a man who has never met her for actions he did not perform. Scenes such as
this abound in Plautus’ plays, and the comedy of misunderstanding, as Duckworth notes, holds an important place in Roman comedy as a whole.

Drawing on this Plautine trope, Fielding frequently uses scenes similar to that of the *Menaechmi* above that rely upon dramatic irony for humor, contributing to the theatrical nature of his novels. In *Tom Jones*, for example, Tom undertakes the mission of convincing Nightingale’s father to allow his son to marry Nancy Miller, and both men imagine the conversation to be about a different woman. Fielding writes:

‘Sir, answered Jones, I honour you every Moment more and more. To be so easily satisfied, so very moderate on that Account, is a Proof of the Soundness of your Understanding, as well as the Nobleness of your Mind.’ – ‘Not so very moderate, young Gentleman, not so very moderate,’ answered the Father… ‘Why pray, what Fortune do you imagine this Lady to have?’ – ‘What Fortune? cries Jones, why too contemptible a one to be named for your Son… ‘Do you mean to banter me, young Gentleman?’ said the Father a little angry.

(*Tom Jones*, XIV.viii; 680)

To the reader, these two men are clearly discussing a different woman, yet Tom and Mr. Nightingale are unaware of the miscommunication. They simply explain away the discrepancies by assuming that each maintains a different standard of acceptable wealth in a marriage. Indeed, the conversation reaches its comedic climax when the characters finally unearth this misunderstanding by actually referring to the women by their names. Mr. Nightingale asks incredulously, “‘My Son married to Miss Harris!’ answered he again—‘To Miss Harris! said Jones; no, Sir, to Miss Nancy Miller, the Daughter of Mrs. Miller, at whose house he lodged; a young Lady, who, though her Mother is reduced to
let Lodgings’ (Tom Jones XIV.viii; 681). At this culmination of confusion, the characters exclaim the names of the woman they imagine the conversation was about, and the resolution of this lapse of communication highlights the comedic nature of the scene. Just as Plautus and Terence include scenes of miscommunication in their plays to further the comedic action, Fielding includes a similar type of conversational confusion in his novels to emphasize the dramatic irony of his novels and the theatricality of his scenes.

In addition to Fielding’s exploitation of poor communication, he also draws upon the ancient tradition of the confused identity to contribute to the scenes of potential heartbreak, and eventual happy resolution, of his novels. Often in ancient comedy, a male character will drunkenly rape a woman at a festival only to find out later in the plot that the woman was in fact his neighbor, future wife, or love interest. In Terence’s Hecyra (The Mother-in-Law), for example, the male protagonist, Pamphilus, learns that his wife, Philumena, was pregnant at the time of their marriage, as she is about to give birth seven months after the wedding. Pamphilus, who ironically spent the first few months of his marriage with his beloved courtesan, Bacchis, finds this “offense” unforgivable and resolves to end the marriage. Pamphilus soon learns that Philumena was raped and became pregnant, but this fails to change his mind. He says,

As for taking her back, I don’t think that’s at all honourable, and I won’t do it, even though I’m deeply in love with her and feel the pull of our relationship. I weep to think what my life’s going to be like from now on, and how lonely I’m going to be: no one enjoys good luck forever!

(Terence, The Mother-in-Law, 403-7)
In what was meant to be an emotional scene for the ancient audience, Pamphilus’ love for Philumena makes the scene all the more tragic. Eventually, however, Pamphilus realizes that he was the one who raped Philumena when her mother recognizes the ring that he stole from Philumena after the rape. For the ancient audience, the surprise revelation of the rapist’s identity as Pamphilus brings the play to a happy conclusion, and the sexual confusion is clarified. Revelations of this sort frequent Greek and Roman comedy, and, for the ancient audience, this kind of resolution helped to denote the play as a comedy in that the ending often results in either a marriage or reunion rather than tragedy and death.

Fielding taps into this aspect of comedy that prompts tears of joy rather than just laughter in the more sentimental episodes of his novels. In the narrative arc concerning Tom’s apparent incestuous relations with his suspected mother, Partridge informs the imprisoned Tom, who already believes himself to be a murderer, that he in fact committed incest when he shared the night with Ms. Waters at Upton. Upon learning this news, Tom is overcome with emotion. Fielding writes:

Upon these Words, Jones became in a Moment a greater Picture of Horror than Partridge himself. He was indeed, for some Time, struck dumb with Amazement, and both stood staring wildly at each other… ‘Sure,’ cries Jones, ‘Fortune will never have done with me, ‘till she hath driven me to Distraction. But why do I blame Fortune? I am myself the Cause of all my Misery. All the dreadful Mischiefs which have befallen me, are the Consequences only of my own Folly and Vice. What thou hast told me, Partridge, hath almost deprived me of my
senses…’ He then fell into the most violent and frantic Agonies of Grief and Despair.

*(Tom Jones, XVIII.ii; 814)*

Similar to Pamphilus’ exclamation of grief, Tom initially blames his situation on luck or Fortune, lamenting the state in which he finds himself. Unlike Pamphilus, however, Tom takes responsibility for his own actions, and he falls into the depths of despair. This horror, both Tom’s and the reader’s, at the suspected incest immediately calls to mind Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, and sets the stage for a tragic ending: Tom, in a “State of Desperation” and “raving” while alone in his cell seems like a man in danger of self-harm or suicide. At this moment in the novel, Fielding communicates such despair in his description of Tom that the reader, a mere sixty pages from the conclusion of the story, would almost certainly fear for the hero’s demise. Fielding includes a similar threat of incest in *Joseph Andrews*, where Joseph and Fanny are briefly believed to be siblings before Mr. Wilson recognizes Joseph’s birthmark and claims him as his son (IV.xii). As Paul Baines notes, “Fielding brings his denouement close to a familiarly tragic ending, but opts instead to toss tragedy into fire and produce a latterday Margites” (52). It is precisely this sobering emotional weight and threat of tragedy that ties Fielding back to the ancients. By setting up the scene as if it were to end in the style of *Oedipus Rex* – complete with suicide and eye-gouging – Fielding’s happy ending rejects this tragic scene for one of joy at the reunion and marriage of Tom and Sophia, just as Pamphilus’ eventual reunion with his wife was meant to be a joyful moment for ancient audiences.

Both ancient comedy and Fielding’s novels capitalize on this sense of impending disaster reversed at the last minute for a joyful conclusion. Northrop Frye discusses this
idea of tragedy contained within comedy as a staple of ancient comedy. He writes, “[Ancient] comedy contains a potential tragedy within itself…the dramatist usually tries to bring his action as close to a tragic overthrow of the hero as he can get it, and reverses this movement as suddenly as possible” (106). These reversals of fortune that Frye locates in ancient comedy often derive from the comedy of misunderstanding; in Menander’s *Samia*, for example, Nikeratos rushes into his house to kill his neighbor’s courtesan for an offense she did not commit before the whole ordeal is clarified and a marriage can take place. Fielding capitalizes on this type of impending disaster quickly reversed at the last minute in a way that emphasizes the joy of his characters. As Adam Potkay notes, *Joseph Andrews* capitalizes on two distinct types of joy in its two protagonists, with Joseph representing the joys and sorrows of *eros* and Adams representing those of sociable joy (112). These moments of joy often come in response to these moments of reversal or transformation; Adams’ joy at the life of his son that he thought had drowned, Joseph’s joy at his reunion with Fanny, and in *Tom Jones*, Tom’s joy at his reunion with Sophia and his return to Paradise Hall, as well as his relief at learning he had not in fact committed incest, all center on these ancient comedic conventions of tragedy averted through misunderstandings, clarifications, and reunions, emphasizing Fielding’s link to this classical tradition.

**Moderated Morality: Ancient and Modern Reconciliation**

Fielding’s novels bear resemblance to ancient Greek and Roman comedians not only in their underlying reliance on physical and sexual humor as well as the comedy of
misunderstanding, but also in the employment of reconciliation throughout their plots. For Fielding, absolute adherence to an extreme ideology almost invariably leads to conflict and moral corruption. Fielding’s idealized moral actors in his novels often find themselves between these extremes, most notably in Squire Allworthy’s role as mediator between Mr. Thwackum and Mr. Square and in the idyllic country life of Joseph Andrews’ Mr. Wilson, who rejects both the pleasures of the town and the misanthropy of Tom Jones’ Man of the Hill. Fielding uses this focus on compromise to reestablish order after the deconstruction of hierarchy through rudeness, sexual impropriety, and violence, which, as we have seen, characterizes much of his comic style. Furthermore, Fielding extends this notion of an ideal middle between two ideologies in his handling of larger social, religious, and political issues, as seen in his treatment of Catholicism and the Jacobite Rebellions in both Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones. Ancient comedians frequently used reconciliation in their texts as well, as seen in the closing moments of Terence’s Adelphoe, among many others. Though these scenes often come very near the end of ancient comedies, they nevertheless play an important role in understanding the focus on shared acknowledgement and respect of disparate viewpoints, with the ideal found somewhere on the spectrum between the extremes. Overall, compromise plays an important role in these narratives and their characterizations of morality, strengthening the link between Fielding and ancient Greek and Roman comedians.

Exemplifying this reconciliation, a great deal of Terence’s ancient comedy ends with one or more characters coming to terms with a specific reality, such as the merits of differing parenting styles, the woman a father’s son truly loves, or why a child was kept
in the family instead of exposed. In *Adelphoe (The Brothers)*, for example, the brothers Demea and Micio realize that their parenting styles, extremely strict and extremely lax, respectively, both have their shortcomings. After Micio asks the typically stern Demea why he is being so generous, Demea responds:

DEMEA. I wanted to show that, while they think you obliging and amazing, that doesn’t spring from a sincere way of life, nor from what’s reasonable and right, but from acquiescence, indulgence, and extravagance...And now, Aeschinus [his son], if the reason you boys hate my being alive is that I don’t simply gratify absolutely every desire of yours, whether right or wrong, then I’ll forget it: pour the stuff away...But you might prefer this: because you’re young...your judgement isn’t what it might be. If you want me to control you in these respects, and correct you, and help you where appropriate, here I am to do that for you.

(*Adelphoe* 986-992)

In this passage, one of the most explicitly didactic endings in Terentian comedy, Demea both identifies the folly of his brother’s parenting style and acknowledges his own failings before suggesting that he meet the sons somewhere in the middle. Rather than attempting to simply prove his brother wrong, as he had done throughout the play, he finds some middle ground and realizes that both he and his brother have a piece of the right solution. This reconciliation brings the play to a happy conclusion, and the brothers and their sons depart the stage in good spirits, signifying the positive potential for such a measured way of life. Compared to the discord and disorder often brought on by slapstick

---

7 In Ancient Greece and Rome, an unwanted child could be “exposed,” or left outside to die if the father did not want it.
comedy in both ancient comedy and Fielding’s novels, these episodes of reconciliation reestablish order through compromise and often lead to the happy endings expected in comedy.

Similar to this style of compromise in *Adelphoe*, Fielding’s novels often included pitched ideological debates with a third-party injecting comedy into the proceedings. Charles Knight suggests that this style of argument bears resemblance to the Aristophanic *agon*, a somewhat formalized style of argument between characters. For example, Abraham Adams’ various theological and moralistic debates throughout *Joseph Andrews* loosely resemble Aristophanes’ use of the *agon* in his plays. As Knight notes, “The Aristophanic *agon* is not connected with the conflict usually inherent in a linear plot, though it usually serves to advance the development of the play’s main idea. It is a debate between the comic hero, or Agonist, and his opposing Antagonist” (494). This style of argument recurs throughout the plot of *Joseph Andrews*, often with Abraham Adams serving as the Agonist. In Book 2 for example, Adams and Parson Trulliber enter into a comic debate concerning the nature of charity and what makes one a Christian, and Mrs. Trulliber humorously chimes in throughout. The following passage comes during the argument:

“I forgive your suspicions,” says Adams, “but suppose I am not a Clergyman, I am nevertheless thy Brother; and thou, as a Christian, much more as a Clergyman, art obliged to relieve my Distress.” “Dost preach to me?” replied Trulliber, ‘dost pretend to instruct me in my Duty?” “Ifacks, a good Story,” cries Mrs. Trulliber, “to preach to my Master.” “Silence, Woman,” cries Trulliber, “I would have thee
know, Friend, (addressing himself to Adams) I shall not learn my Duty from such as the; I know what Charity is, better than to give to Vagabonds.”

(Joseph Andrews II.xiv; 159)

Along with the comedic interjections from Mrs. Trulliber that serve as the parallel to the Aristophanic chorus, this heated exchange between Adams and Trulliber functions similarly to the Aristophanic *agon* in that it puts forth a comedic argument about a topic somewhat tangential to the central journey plot of the novel, but important to the story’s main ideals of virtue. As Knight puts it, “The repeated *agon* not only allows Fielding to develop his treatment of charity as a topic, it also allows him to display a sequence of progressively less charitable examples” (496). For Knight, the *agon* allows Fielding to incorporate moralistic arguments into the plot in a classically sanctioned way. Furthermore, the *agon* links Fielding to a theatrical tradition left mostly untapped by his contemporaries. Fielding saw the conventions of eighteenth-century theater, embraced by his contemporaries such as Steele and Cibber, as somewhat restrictive, and as such he utilized the Aristophanic tradition of Old Comedy for purposes such as governmental critique and social satire (497-8). Through the use of the *agon*, Fielding connected his comic Epic-Poem in Prose to a classically sanctioned literary tradition that allowed for both order and disorder, morality and immorality.

Fielding relies heavily upon this style of resolution that favors cooperation, or at least coexistence, over conflict in his novels. Indeed, the trio of characters that best exemplify this reconciliation are Mr. Thwackum, Mr. Square, and Squire Allworthy. In Book III, when discussing Squire Allworthy’s retention of both Thwackum and Square to educate the young Tom and Blifil, Fielding writes:
These apparent Errors in the Doctrine of Thwackum, served greatly to palliate the contrary Errors in that of Square, which our good Man no less saw and condemned. He thought indeed that the different Exuberancies of these Gentlemen, would correct their different Imperfections; and that from both, especially with his Assistance, the two Lads would derive sufficient Precepts of true Religion and Virtue.

*(Tom Jones, III.v; 123)*

In this passage, Fielding establishes Allworthy’s moral attitude toward disparate ethical outlooks; rather than exalting one tutor as correct and denouncing the other as morally wanting, Allworthy reconciles their views into an ideal combination, guided by his own hand. Indeed, for many such as Sean Shesgreen, Squire Allworthy represents “the novel’s only true guide,” and “Fielding’s allegorical incarnation of true good nature” (163). Though many characters in *Tom Jones* often remark on Allworthy’s moral fortitude, Fielding himself qualifies this opinion as he describes Allworthy’s plan for the moral instruction of the boys as he writes, “For we do not pretend to introduce any infallible Characters into this History; where we hope nothing will be found which hath never yet been seen in human Nature” *(Tom Jones* III.v; 123). Despite Fielding’s qualifying statement, one that allows for Allworthy’s mistakes throughout the plot, Allworthy essentially functions as the moral ideal throughout the novel, partially due to his status as the conciliatory force between the two extremes of Thwackum and Square, as “His Mind was, indeed, tempered with that Philosophy which becomes a Man and a Christian” *(Tom Jones* VI.iii; 250). Here, Fielding attributes Allworthy’s virtue to his status as a mediating
force between two extreme ideologies that finds the best in both and distills them into a more perfect morality.

Fielding demonstrates Allworthy’s conceptions of mediating justice most explicitly in the early sections of the novel while Tom still lives at home. When Allworthy summons Jenny Jones to Paradise Hall to discuss her adulterous relationship that resulted in the birth of Tom, Allworthy embarks upon a discourse on justice, repentance, and reconciliation. Allworthy’s first comments focus on Jenny’s lapse in moral judgement while also condemning the male role in adultery. He says:

Now in what Light, but that of an Enemy, can a reasonable Woman regard the Man, who solicits her to entail on herself, all the Misery I have described to you, and who would purchase to himself a short, trivial, contemptible Pleasure, so greatly at her Expense! For, by the Laws of Custom, the whole Shame, with all its dreadful Consequences, falls intirely upon her... Ought the Woman not to regard him as an Enemy, but as the worst of all Enemies; a false, designing, treacherous, pretended Friend?

*(Tom Jones, I.vii; 52-3)*

Here, Allworthy notes that though justice demands Jenny’s punishment, the male party in the affair share much of the moral blame as an outright enemy of good. Though to the modern reader, this passage remains problematic in its complicity in the fullness of shame falling upon the woman, Allworthy nevertheless finds some middle ground in his judgement. Rather than condemning Jenny to a life of infamy in the local town, he sends her away to start a new life, at once punishing her breach of morality and mitigating the humiliation that inevitably would have accompanied it. Furthermore, Allworthy assures
Jenny that he will care for Tom “in a better Manner than you can ever hope,” suggesting a true concern for all humanity, even those conceived in an unideal situation. Essentially, Allworthy’s behavior towards Jenny demonstrates his mediating role between the characters of Thwackum and Square as a purveyor of justice along with understanding of human shortcomings, for by sending Jenny away, Allworthy simultaneously punishes her wrongdoing and provides for her possible future happiness by allowing her an anonymous life in a new town.

Fielding furthers this ideal of reconciliation and moderation in his treatment of the Man of the Hill in Tom Jones and Mr. Wilson in Joseph Andrews. Both of these characters lived lives of immorality during their youthful years spent in London before reforming in drastically different ways. Mr. Wilson describes his life in the city, saying, “Convent-Garden was now the farthest Stretch of my Ambition, where I shone forth in Balconies at the Play-houses, visited Whores, made Love to Orange-Wenches, and damned Plays” (Joseph Andrews III.iii; 195). Similar to this life of debauchery, the Man of the Hill maintained a life of gambling, debt, and thievery during his time at Oxford and London, noting that he was “high-mettled, had a violent Flow of animal Spirits, was a little ambitious, and extremely amorous” (Tom Jones VIII.xi; 398). In both of these instances, Fielding casts the city as a place of immorality and temptation into which even the best of men can be enticed. Martin Battestin describes both of these episodes as enshrining the “basic thematic antithesis of city versus country,” but he emphasizes the different solutions of each man (46). In Joseph Andrews, Mr. Wilson retires from the city to live a peaceful life in the countryside, yet he still engages with some of his neighbors and graciously shelters Joseph, Fanny, and Adams in his home. The Man of the Hill, on
the other hand, retires to the mountains as a misanthrope, noting that “Human Nature is every where the same, every where the Object of Detestation and Scorn” (*Tom Jones* XVIII.xv; 423). For Fielding, the Man of the Hill represents the opposite extreme of a licentious city-life, and his indifferent attitude towards the attempted assault of Ms. Waters by Northerton exemplifies his failed Christianity despite his claim to the Protestant faith. Mr. Wilson, on the other hand, presents a reconciled ideal of city-life and that of self-imposed exile: a life of retreat from the temptations of the city but still lived with Christian charity at its heart.

Battestin relates this compromise to the sermons of Bishop Hoadly, an important religious figure of Fielding’s time, that find a middle-ground between the classical condemnation of the city and the Christian mission of charity and generosity. Battestin notes:

> As attested by the example of Mr. Wilson, whose charitable offices to his neighbors Fielding carefully notices, Hoadly’s Christian compromise with the classical ideal is practical, in fact even preferable. It perfectly explains the antithetical attitudes we are meant to hold towards the different solutions of the benevolent Mr. Wilson and the misanthropic Man of the Hill in *Tom Jones*. (48)

For Battestin, Fielding’s Mr. Wilson enshrines the compromise between the classical anti-city literature, such as Juvenal’s *Third Satire* that advocates complete withdrawal from society, and the Christian moral necessity for community and charity. Again, Fielding locates the moral ideal in a form of moderated reaction; rather than retreating to the mountains like the Man of the Hill, Mr. Wilson encapsulates the rejection of vice and the embracement of virtue through the reconciliation of extremes rather than the steadfast
adherence to one option. In instances such as these, Fielding’s plots echo the instances of reconciliation like that of the conclusion of Adelphoe in a way that emphasizes the measured lifestyle that results from cooperation over conflict as well as Fielding’s reliance on ancient comedy for his moral resolutions.

All of these examples place reconciliation at the level of character. But for Fielding, this ethic of compromise sometimes plays out as a solution to large scale religious and political tensions as well, as seen in Fielding’s surprising ambivalence toward British Catholics and the Jacobite claims to the throne. In Joseph Andrews, for example, Adams unknowingly encounters a Catholic priest who voices the very same moral ideals of Adams’ own sermons. After the Catholic priest provides a lengthy discourse on the nature of monetary and spiritual wealth, Adams says, “‘Give me your Hand, Brother,’ said Adams in a Rapture; ‘for I suppose you are a Clergyman…Whatever you are,’ cries Adams, ‘you have spoken my Sentiments: I believe I have preached every Syllable of your Speech twenty times over’” (Joseph Andrews, III.viii; 239). In this passage, Adams shows a moral synchrony with a member of the Catholic Church, whose priests could not legally celebrate Mass in England without the priest being fined or charged with high treason (“Catholic Relief Acts”). Furthermore, the Priest later reveals that he, “just arrived in England,” further contributing to his otherness (Joseph Andrews, III.viii; 240). Thus, not only does Adams himself exalt the virtues of charity, but he remarks upon his resemblance to a foreign, Catholic priest. Though the priest denies his status as a clergyman, Fielding communicates a level of tolerance towards Catholicism in this scene unexpected from an Anglican Englishman of the mid-eighteenth century at a time when even practicing the Catholic religion could lead to severe legal repercussions.
Fielding continues this moderation towards Catholic belief and political action in the treatment of the Jacobites in *Tom Jones*. In Book VIII, for example, Tom and Partridge embark on the road to join the army at the near height of the Jacobite Rebellion’s threatening march into English territory in 1745. Along the way, the men discuss their various supposedly shared opinions on the topic before the narrator reveals that Partridge is a Jacobite while Tom supports the Hanoverian claim to the throne. Thinking Tom supports the Jacobites, Partridge says, “Yes, but so far…from speaking in Behalf of his Religion, he assured me, the Catholicks did not expect to be any Gainers by the Change; for the Prince Charles was as good a Protestant as any in England; and that nothing but Regard to Right made him and the rest of the popish party to be Jacobites” (*Tom Jones* VIII.ix; 386). Here, Partridge thinks himself to put forth his support for the Jacobites, but Tom, thinking Partridge to support King George’s claim to the throne, takes Partridge’s suggestion that a Catholic Stuart monarch would maintain the religious status quo in Great Britain as sarcastic, or even just false, maintaining the illusion of Partridge’s support for the Hanoverians. Indeed, Tom goes on to say, “The Cause of King George is the Cause of Liberty and true Religion. In other words, it is the Cause of common Sense” (VIII.ix; 387). Tom, asserting his loyalty to the Hanoverians, finally brings the matter into the open air. The narrator comments, “Partridge made no Reply to this. He was indeed cast into the utmost Confusion by this Declaration of Jones. For to inform the Reader of a Secret…Partridge was in Truth a Jacobite, and had concluded that Jones was of the same Party, and was now proceeding to join the Rebels” (VIII.ix; 387). Fielding, who as demonstrated in his political writings had the propensity for strong anti-Catholic rhetoric as well as moderated tolerance towards the Catholic Church,
exposes the legitimacy and similarity of both the Hanoverian and Stuart claims to the throne. Both Partridge and Tom believe the other to share similar views on the matter, and without the identifying labels, the ideologies become an ambiguous blend. This passage suggests Fielding’s subtle ambivalence toward the Stuarts; while Fielding undoubtedly supported the Hanoverians, he tacitly acknowledges the power of the Stuart argument of hereditary right to the throne.

John Allen Stevenson calls this issue the “post-1688 era choice between illegitimacies,” that is, the powerful claim of both the Stuarts and the Hanoverians to the throne, and Fielding capitalizes on this to emphasize a level of inclusion and tolerance for those who hold differing opinions on the matter (30). Thinkers of this era held a keen awareness of this shared illegitimacy, with the Hanoverian claim of religious authority and the Stuart claim of hereditary right. As David Hume notes in his essay “Of the Protestant Succession”:

Thus, upon the whole, the advantages of the settlement in the family of STUART, which frees us from a disputed title, seem to bear some proportion with those of the settlement in the family of HANOVER, which frees us from the claim of prerogative: But at the same time, its disadvantages, by placing on the throne a Roman Catholic, are greater than those of the other establishment, in settling the crown on a foreign prince. What party an impartial patriot, in the reign of K. WILLIAM or Q. ANNE, would have chosen amidst these opposite views, may, perhaps, appear somewhat hard to determine. (219)

Though this essay was published in 1752, three years after the publication of *Tom Jones*, making Fielding’s knowledge of it in writing his novel impossible, it nevertheless
captures both the merits and the somewhat unresolved issues with both claims to the throne. These “irremovable illegitimacies,” as Stevenson calls them, complicate the narrative of succession for both sides. Similarly, in *Tom Jones*, Tom and Partridge, both well-educated men, find each other supporting opposite sides of this debate. For Fielding, who throughout his novels relies on tolerance, if not acceptance, of differing ideals in order to discover a happy medium, the Jacobite issue proves valuable; while Fielding casts Tom’s support for King George as the proper attitude towards the matter, he nevertheless incorporates an allowance for the Jacobite cause in his inclusion of this episode of miscommunication. The narrator goes as far to say, “Indeed, had the Words been less ambiguous, Partridge might very well have construed them as he did; being persuaded, as he was, that the whole Nation were of the same Inclination in their Hearts” (VIII.ix; 387). Until this scene of clarification, Tom merely referred to “an Enemy” or “the Cause,” leaving Partridge to guess which side he supported. The Jacobite aspect of this section of *Tom Jones* exemplifies Fielding’s recognition of the appeal and logic of the Stuart claim to the throne, and it suggests an affinity for reconciliation, moderation and toleration of differing ideologies. This style of reconciliation characterizes Fielding’s novels, and as seen above in the closing scenes of *Adelphoe* and throughout ancient comedy, this style of compromise contributes to the happy conclusions of both ancient comedy and Fielding’s plots.
“Violent Agonies:” Fielding’s Sympathetic Innovation

Though Fielding relied on the tradition of ancient comedy to inform his plots, characters, and style, he also introduced some innovation into his comic Epic-Poem in Prose through his adaptation of the sentimental episodes of ancient comedy to explore eighteenth-century ideas concerning sympathy. Fielding’s emphasis on both the visual and emotional descriptions of events, as well as his focus on the imagination, suggests a correspondence with, or rather anticipation of, Adam Smith’s notions of sympathy in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For Smith, sympathy derived from imagining the pain of another as if it were happening to oneself. He writes:

> As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation…our senses will never inform us of what he suffers…it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations…By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments…and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (2-3)

For Smith, the essential nature of sympathy involves the imagination; by imagining “torments” inflicted upon another to be inflicted upon oneself, a person can begin to comprehend the agony and sorrow of the suffering person. Fielding seems to anticipate this emphasis on imagination to communicate both sobering emotional weight as well as uplifting episodes of joy in his novels, as seen through his focus on both emotional and
physical descriptions. As we will see in Tom’s lamentation following his exile from his home by Squire Allworthy, Fielding focuses both on the behaviors of Tom in his “tearing of his Hair from his Head” as well as the emotional trauma that “almost rent his Heart asunder.” Similarly, Joseph’s joy at his reunion with Fanny emphasizes the complete joy of the lovers at their reunion in a way that draws the reader into their happiness in their imagination and sympathy for the joys and sorrows of Fielding’s characters. Though Fielding’s novels were published before Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Fielding would have been familiar with David Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738) that discusses ideas of sympathy that, though slightly different in conception, in many ways echo Smith’s notions of experiencing the emotions of another. Fielding’s emotional episodes find some congruence with Hume’s and Smith’s ideas concerning sympathy and imagination in crafting his scenes of joy and sorrow.

Fielding’s episodes of sympathy focus on both the body and the emotions in their appeal to the imagination of the reader. In Book VI of *Tom Jones*, for example, after Tom’s banishment from Squire Allworthy’s house, Fielding writes:

Here he presently fell into the most violent Agonies, tearing his Hair from his Head, and using most other Actions which generally accompany Fits of Madness, Rage, and Despair…And now the great Doubt was, how to act with regard to Sophia. The Thoughts of leaving her, almost rent his Heart asunder; but the Consideration of reducing her to Ruin and Beggary still racked him, if possible, more.

---

8 For more on Hume’s ideas of sympathy, see “Of the Love of Fame” in David Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738-1740).
In this passage, Fielding highlights Tom’s despair, similar to his “violent Agonies” seen above after learning he may have committed incest, in a way that allows the reader to empathize with the banished, heartbroken boy. With descriptions of both Tom’s physical and emotional strife, Fielding invites the reader to experience these emotions alongside the novel’s protagonist. Similarly, in *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding’s description of Joseph and Fanny’s reunion evokes a parallel joy in the reader. As Fielding writes:

> But, O Reader, when this Nightingale, who was no other than Joseph Andrews himself, saw his beloved Fanny in the Situation we have described her…behold his Happiness, when, clasping her in his Arms, he found Life and Blood returning into her Cheeks; when he saw her open her beloved Eyes…pulling her to his Heart, he imprinted numberless Kisses on her Lips, without considering who were present.

*(Joseph Andrews II.xii; 148)*

Similar to the passage above, Fielding emphasizes the experiences of the body in describing the joy of this reunion; Fanny’s blood returning to her cheeks and the embrace and kisses the lovers share allow the reader’s imagination to provoke the same feelings of joy at the blissful reunification, drawing on Smith’s ideas of imagination and sympathy.

Fielding’s emphasis on this type of sympathy distinguishes his novels from the ancient comedic tradition upon which he relied. Terence, one of the most sentimental playwrights of ancient Greece or Rome available to Fielding for study, provides much of the emotional weight of his plays through expository dialogue that distances the reader from the sentimental action. In the *Andria*, for example, Terence opens the plot with
several pages of dialogue explaining the tragic death of a woman and the near suicide of her sister in her funeral pyre. Though indeed this scene contains sorrowful emotional weight, Terence recounts the action through the voice of a third party who cares little for the deceased woman. Terence writes:

SIMO. Meanwhile the funeral procession continued; we were following the corpse. We reached the graveyard; she was put on the pyre; everyone wept. Then the sister I’ve mentioned came rather carelessly close the flames and was in some danger. Pamphilus was terrified; he’d been keeping his love well-hidden and concealed, but now he betrayed it: he ran up to her and put his arms around her waist. ‘Darling Glycerium,’ he said, ‘What are you doing? Why are you going to kill yourself?’ And then it became obvious they were established lovers: she sank back into his arms weeping—and so trustingly!

(Andria 127-136)

Terence’s description of this poignant moment of mourning and near suicide comes in the voice of Simo, Pamphilus’ father who disapproves of his affair with Glycerium, and the whole retelling, while indeed emotional, fails to capture the same sense of sympathy as Fielding’s novels. While Mitchell Brown calls this type of description “saturated characterization,” which he describes as a technique of ancient comedians that employs “bold and memorable strokes” of speech in the limited space available to communicate essential details of offstage characters (78), the scene loses some of its power through its distance from the action. While Fielding’s plots and narration allow deep insight into the minds of his characters, Terentian comedy, partially through the constraints of live performance and ancient restrictions concerning the number of characters on stage, fails
to achieve the same level of intimacy with its characters. In the passage above, for example, Simo simply states, “everyone wept.” When read in comparison to Fielding’s description of Tom’s hair-pulling agony that almost “rent his heart asunder,” upon his banishment, Terence’s “everyone wept” spoken by a third party gossiping to a slave comes across as comparatively distant despite the emotional weight of the moment.

When considering Fielding’s narrator and his description of Tom Jones’ sorrow at his banishment or Joseph Andrews’ joy at his reunion with Fanny, Terence’s plot reflects a relative emotional inaccessibility in its style and voice.

Despite this fairly detached authorial style found in much of Terence’s writing, Fielding chooses to describe Tom with a particularly well-known sympathetic phrase from Terence’s *Heauton Timorumenos*, or *The Self-Tormentor*. Fielding writes of Tom, “He was one who could truly say with him in *Terence, Homo sum: Humani nihil a me alienum puto*” (*Tom Jones* XV.vii; 719). Fielding translated this phrase in the *Covent Garden Journal* as “I am a Man myself; and have an Interest in the Concerns of all other Men” (231). The passage continues:

[Tom] was never an indifferent Spectator of the Misery or Happiness of any one; and he felt either the one or the other in greater Proportion as he himself contributed to either. He could not therefore be the Instrument of raising a whole Family from the lowest State of Wretchedness to the highest Pitch of Joy without conveying great Felicity to himself; more perhaps than worldly Men often purchase to themselves by undergoing the most severe Labour, and often by wading through the deepest Iniquity.

(*Tom Jones*, XV.vii; 719)
Here, Fielding again relies on a concept of imagination to communicate the sympathetic nature of Tom’s personality; Tom, when acting as a spectator of great happiness or misery, feels the same emotions of those whom he observes in a manner remarkably congruous to Smith’s ideals of sympathy. Perhaps the clearest example of Fielding’s emphasis on sympathy through imagination comes with Tom’s confrontation of Mr. Nightingale about his plan to abandon the pregnant Nancy Miller for another woman, Tom says:

> See this poor, unhappy, tender, believing Girl, in the Arms of her wretched Mother, breathing her last. Hear her breaking Heart in Agonies, sighing out your Name; and lamenting, rather than accusing, the Cruelty which weighs her down to Destruction. *Paint to your Imagination* the Circumstances of her fond, despairing Parent, driven to Madness, or, perhaps, to Death, by the Loss of her lovely Daughter. View the poor, helpless, Orphan-Infant: And when your Mind hath dwelt a Moment only on such Ideas, consider yourself as the Cause of all the Ruin of this poor, little, worthy, defenceless Family. [Emphasis mine]

*(Tom Jones, XIV.vii; 675)*

Here, Tom directly invokes imagination as the instrument of sympathy, imploring Nightingale to imagine, and subsequently recognize, the pain he would bring upon the Miller family should he abandon Nancy. Tom’s appeal harnesses a deep emotional power in his bid to convince Nightingale to marry Nancy, bringing the sorrow of a ruined family into the mind of both his friend and the reader, ultimately succeeding in his appeal to Nightingale’s sympathy. Overall, Fielding uses this idea of imagination as a prerequisite
of sympathy both in his narrator’s descriptions of events to the reader and in his characters’ speeches in the novel to communicate the emotional weight of the action.

Conversely, in his play the *Heauton Timorumenos*, or *The Self-Tormentor*, Terence uses the same quotation, “I am a Man myself; and have an Interest in the Concerns of all other Men,” to ironically demonstrate the lack of concern the character Chremes seems to show for his neighbor, Menedemus. Initially, Chremes seems to truly care about Menedemus’ problems, saying, “Stop crying! Tell me about it, whatever it is. Don’t keep it to yourself! Don’t feel ashamed; trust me, I tell you. I’ll help you, whether with consolation or advice or money” (*Heauton Timorumenos* 84-85). While this remark seems to demonstrate Chremes’ true concern for and desire to help his neighbor as well as his willingness to enter into his friend’s emotions, his lines after Menedemus exits the stage convey an emotional disinterest. He says to the audience, “He’s brought tears to my eyes; I do feel sorry for him. But, given the time of day, it’s time for me to remind my neighbour Phania here to come to dinner. I’ll go and see if he’s at home” (168-170). Here, Chremes discards his concern, which still seems genuine to the audience, in search of his dinner. Unlike Tom Jones, who undertakes the arduous task of convincing Nightingale to marry Nancy through sympathetic appeals and subsequently convinces his father to agree to the arrangement, Chremes uses phrases such as “Stop crying!” to calm his friend before simply going to find his dinner partner, leaving Menedemus to his own devices. Terence frequently includes this emotional sympathy with a lack of true action in his plays, providing the audience with sentimental moments to humanize the characters, often the protagonist, but failing to actually provide them with any help. Thus, though Tom and Chremes may be described by the same line, Fielding adds an element of action
to Tom’s character, emphasizing moral action over moral emotion, contributing to a larger theme in his novels.

“Doing!”: Real and Reactive Moral Action

In addition to the contemplative and sympathetic motivations for goodness, Fielding emphasizes a more instinctual and reactive concept of moral action throughout his novels in a way that differentiates his plots from ancient comedy, where much of the action occurs offstage. Though indeed Adams often preaches the virtues of charity and goodwill, he actually lives out his proposed morality, unlike many other characters in Fielding’s novels. In Book II, for example, Adams and a gentleman discuss the ideals of bravery, “Courage and his Country” at length before travelling back to the gentleman’s house for the night (*Joseph Andrews*, II.ix; 131). Along the way however, the two men “heard the most violent Shrieks imaginable in a female Voice.” The gentleman, seeing Adams rushing to help the unknown victim, exclaims, “‘What are you doing?’ said he. ‘Doing!’ says Adams.” Adams, crabstick in hand, exemplifies Fielding’s ideal morality, one focused on ethical action over moral debate – “Doing!” as Adams puts it – and rescues Fanny from possible assault or rape on her journey (II.ix; 131). Adams’ nearly ubiquitous moralizing throughout the novel comes not as a defect, however, because he backs up his words with action. Compared to the offstage action of ancient comedy, Fielding’s descriptions of moral action in the present centralize the ethical necessity for hasty, reactive, and instinctual acts of goodness in aid of the vulnerable or endangered.
Contributing to his dedication to acts of morality, Adams’ cassock serves as an important symbol throughout the novel. Torn and tattered, Adams’ clothing remains the target of scorn and ridicule throughout the novel. When questioned by the Justice of the Peace in Book II Chapter 11, the Justice sees the state of Adams’ cassock and exclaims, “How, Sirrah, do you go a robbing in the Dress of a Clergyman? let me tell you, your Habit will not entitle you to the *Benefit of the Clergy*” (*Joseph Andrews*, II.xi; 139). The Justice finds it inconceivable that Adams could be a real parson given the state of his dress, and the men go on to question Adams in his knowledge of Latin and Scripture to try to prove it. Similarly, in Book II Chapter 14, Parson Trulliber says, “I perceive you have some Cassock; I will not venture to *caale* it a whole one,” and he continues later on in the encounter, “I believe thou art no more a Clergyman than the Woman there, (pointing to his Wife) but if thou art, dost deserve to have thy Gown stript over thy Shoulders, for running about the Country in such a manner” (II.xiv; 159). Again, someone calls Adams’ legitimacy as a parson into question based upon his torn cassock, and this time it is a fellow clergyman who does the accusing. Despite his ragged appearance, however, Adams’ actions commend him to the office of clergyman more than any article of clothing could; as Christopher Johnson puts it, “He is inattentive to his clothing because he is thinking of others. Ironically, the characteristics that make him most suited for his vocation compromise his ability to look the part” (84). For Johnson, Adams’ dedication to helping those in need brings about the sorry state of his cassock, simultaneously emphasizing his moral goodness and demonstrating his lack of concern for exterior convention and appearance. Compared to other members of the clergy,
especially Trulliber in his greed, Adams shines as a moral beacon, and serves for Fielding as an instrument by which he satirizes the clergy in England. As Johnson continues:

Despite his attempt to sell sermons, Adams could never be accused of making a trade of divinity. He is, instead, an honest parson committed to both his church and his parishioners, and he seems to pay a high price for his efforts. Differentiating him from his more worldly peers, his ragged clothing becomes both an ironic indication of his fitness for the clergy and a satirical symbol of episcopal corruption. (86)

For Johnson, Adams’ appearance, when considered on its own, emphasizes his exterior inadequacy for the clergy; his morality and good deeds, however, ironically tear away at his cassock but strengthen his claim to the clergy. Again, Fielding highlights his disregard for exterior convention in favor of positive action, and Adams’ cassock serves as a symbol of true religion in a world Fielding sees as full of superficial clergymen.

This shedding of exterior tradition for positive conduct is perhaps best exemplified in the unfortunate burning of Adams’ copy of Aeschylus. Fanny, hearing the singing voice of Joseph, becomes extremely pale, and with a cry of “O Jesus!” falls backwards in her chair (Joseph Andrews, II.xiii; 148). Fearing for Fanny’s wellbeing, Adams, “jumped up, flung his Aeschylus into the Fire, and fell a roaring to the People of the House for Help.” As Paul Baines notes:

Adams’s jump is one of many gestures in the novel reminding of us of the moral importance of brisk physical action over contained reflection. Adams does not begin to calculate for possible complications in his response and discards a prized possession in a moment of someone else’s need. It is a small demonstration of
that active, practical virtue which Fielding promoted over mere private faith as the essence of Christianity. (51)

For Baines, Adams’ dramatic reaction represents the very “essence of Christianity” in its dedication to the needs of others over physical possessions, even those that are both valuable and dear to one’s heart. Furthermore, Fielding uses the loss of the Aeschylus in a specifically comedic episode to emphasize his value on action in the present over dwelling in the past; by sacrificing an ancient tragedy, a genre almost exclusively set in the heroic past, for a moral action grounded in comedy, a genre that typically takes place in the present, Fielding demonstrates the importance of modern virtue over historical and traditional conventions that may hold less value in the present, such as Adams’ cassock or his prized Aeschylus. Adam Potkay infers a connection between this type of moral action and Aeschylus’ role as the author of the Oresteia, especially the third part of the trilogy, the Eumenides (116). In the Eumenides, Athena establishes the Areopagus, a part of the court system of ancient Athens. For Potkay, Adams is driven by moral necessity in the present moment as opposed to any legal structure. He writes, “Adams jettisons the foundational text of judicature in a moment of sympathetic concern for another body…Symbolically, casting Aeschylus into the flames represents Fielding’s…rejection of an ethics motivated by legal sanction” (116). As Potkay notes, Aeschylus serves an important symbolic role as the author of the “foundational text of judicature,” and Adams’ disregard for that text in response to present moral necessity, however humorous, represents a marked shift from the laws and standards of the tragic heroic past to the moral imperatives of the comic present. Consequently, these episodes demonstrate Fielding’s desire to shed restrictive labels or elements of convention, both in action,
morality, and literary genre, for a morality that functions more properly in the present and aligns his novels more closely with ancient comedy.

Fielding continues this ideal of moral action in *Tom Jones* as well, emphasizing the necessity of Christian charity brought on by sympathy for all of humanity. In Book II of *Tom Jones*, Allworthy embarks on a discourse on charity, saying:

He had always thought [Charity] was interpreted to consist in Action…there is one Degree of Generosity, (of Charity I would have called it) which seems to have some Shew of Merit, and that is, where from a Principle of Benevolence, and Christian Love, we bestow on another what we really want ourselves; where in order to lessen the Distresses of another, we condescend to share some Part of them by giving what even our own Necessities cannot well spare.

(*Tom Jones* II.v; 88-89)

Here, Allworthy continues Fielding’s theme of moral action, especially that at the expense of one’s self, found in both *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*. Furthermore, by stating that true charity derives from sharing in the distresses of others, Allworthy seems to invoke a tenet similar to that of sympathy, with the added dimension of physical as well as emotional shared suffering through sacrifice. *Tom Jones* exemplifies this type of charity throughout his narrative; he helps countless unfortunates such as Black George or Molly Seagrim in their dire situations through action without regard to his own well-being. Essentially, Fielding’s novels focus on reactive moral action rarely found in ancient comedy, which often involves mere discussion of sorrow rather than action, to invoke the ideals of Christian virtue in aiding the vulnerable and endangered.
Moderated Genre: The Comic Epic-Poem in Prose

As I hope to have demonstrated in this thesis, Henry Fielding’s conceptions of the genre of the comic novel, especially in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, were intimately intertwined with his deep knowledge and appreciation of ancient Greek and Roman comedic drama. Fielding’s education at Eton familiarized him with the works of Aristophanes, Plautus, and Terence, and it provided the language skills to read and understand their works in the original Greek and Latin. His career as a playwright for the London stage grappled with ideas of genre in its farce, satire, and comedy. Forced from his career as a playwright to that of a novelist by the Stage Licensing Act of 1737, Fielding took his engagement with ideas of comedy and genre to *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, and ancient comedy played an important role in the shaping of these works. Fielding used various comedic tropes of Aristophanes, Plautus, and Terence in his novels. Drawing on the bawdy humor of these ancient playwrights, Fielding includes scenes of promiscuity and sex to create disorder in his plots, reminiscent of Bakhtin’s theories of the carnivalesque dismantling of hierarchies through the openness of the grotesque body. Contributing to this disorder, Fielding draws on the Plautine tendencies for violent and physical humor; Parson Adams’ constant brawls, falls, and pub crawls fill his adventures, subjecting a character of anticipated dignity to various kinds of comedy in his quest to live a moral life. Fielding’s castigation of the upper classes through situational and visual humor draws on the Old Comedy practice of mythological burlesque, in which the gods or famous heroes are presented as ridiculous and inadequate, as shown in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* and his portrayal of Dionysus. Fielding also capitalizes on the comedy of
misunderstanding, drawn from nearly all ancient comedic playwrights, to further this concept of confusion, disorder, and dismantling of hierarchy in his novels. Fielding’s ideas of comedy draw heavily from these ancient conventions, most visibly in the types of humor that foment chaos and disorder on stage, disassembling societal structures in a carnivalesque fashion.

In addition to these more visible aspects of comedy, Fielding draws on the ancient tropes of sensibility, adding a modern twist with a focus on sympathy and moral action. In Frye’s analysis, he emphasizes the location of tragedy within comedy, creating the illusion of a terrible ending such as separation, death, or incest before quickly resolving the plot in a flourish of joyful reunions, marriages, and love. Fielding draws upon this convention frequently in his novels, as when both Tom and Joseph fear they maintain an incestuous love, Tom is banished from Paradise Hall, or Adams fears his son’s drowning. Fielding quickly remedies these near tragedies, however, and brings an intense joy to his characters in their resolution. Building upon these moments of sensibility, Fielding incorporates ideas of sympathy for those in pain, inviting both his characters and the reader to fully imagine the pain and happiness of his plots through intimate emotional and bodily descriptions. Furthermore, Fielding emphasizes the moral necessity of taking action to aid the most vulnerable and those in immediate danger with rapid and decisive action. While often in ancient comedy the characters merely discuss actions that occur offstage in a fairly reserved manner, as seen above with Simo in the Andria or Chremes in the Self-Tormentor, Fielding’s characters distinguish themselves in their propensity for moral action in the face of danger to the vulnerable. This style of action rarely involves contemplative thought beforehand, as Adam Smith’s theory of sympathy would prompt,
but rather Fielding characterizes this action by its immediacy. Adams’ exclamation in response to the gentleman’s inquiry of his actions that he is “Doing!” characterizes Fielding’s ideals of moral action. While sympathy certainly plays an important role in the novel, these moments of moral action are what drive the plot forward, and they often inject humor into the story as well.

Lastly, Fielding’s novels draw from the ancient comedic practice of reconciliation and compromise. A significant number of these ancient plays come to a close with one or more characters coming to terms with the reality of a situation and a reconciliation of characters and ideas occurs. One of the most explicit examples comes in Adelphoe, when the brothers Demea and Micio realize the flaws in both of their extreme parenting styles and find some middle ground, bringing the play to a happy conclusion. Fielding capitalizes on these reconciliations throughout his novels, and these episodes often convey some of his most important moral ideas on tolerance and acceptance. As we’ve seen, Fielding includes compromise in his discussion of Tom’s upbringing in Allworthy’s role as the mediating factor between Thwackum and Square and in his treatment of Catholicism in his novels. This concept of compromise provides an interesting parallel to Fielding’s notions of the novel when applied to the question of genre. By calling the novel a comic Epic-Poem in Prose, Fielding immediately emphasizes his focus on the reconciliation of multiple literary influences into one “new” product. As I hope to have shown, ancient comedy remains one of the underrepresented yet vitally important influences on Fielding’s novels, however it exists alongside epic, romance, ancient prose fiction, history, and many others as important shapers of the emerging comic novel in English literature. Thus, in studying Fielding’s conceptions of genre and the novel, it is
important to keep in mind the medley of literary influences on Fielding’s work, even when focusing on one of these inspirations, such as ancient comedy, in putting the “comic” into the “comic Epic-Poem in Prose.”


