



**HENRY FIELDING, THE “SUBJECTIVIZATION”
OF FEMININE BEAUTY, AND THE LIFE OF THE LOVING
COUPLE**

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What follows is a literary-critical or theoretical commentary rather than historical scholarship. It proposes that Henry Fielding’s novels make feminine beauty a matter of a personal vision that puts aside conformist, canonical visual images and that a consequence of this “subjectivization”¹ is the representation of the life of the loving couple as a rich, private experience that finds itself at odds with the community. It also proposes that this way of representing feminine beauty and the life of the couple has now been practically lost in a modern culture of visual images. And it addresses an observation made by Paul-Gabriel Boucé regarding sex in Fielding at an international Conference in Paris some years ago.²

On introducing his Sophia Western, modeled, he says, on his deceased wife Charlotte, Fielding asserts that his own image of feminine beauty is above all one derived from his own experience and desire. What he sees can finally be seen only by him. Sterne is, perhaps, joking about such a process of subjectivization—and associates it specifically with eighteenth-century

¹ As this paper was presented to the International Conference “Change and Exchange(s) in the Enlightenment” at Le Havre on June 16, 2013, the term “novelization,” borrowed from Michael Bakhtin, was used instead of “subjectivization.” But “novelization” was employed in the paper in such a modified sense from Bakhtin’s—to mean simply creation of a character by means of the dialogue going on between the reader and the speakers in the novel, including the author—that, at the cost of losing the prestige of Bakhtin’s name, Bakhtin’s term has been dropped here. Nonetheless there does seem to be something in common between “subjectivization” and his “novelization.” See BAKHTIN 259-422.

² “L’Aventure dans la Grande-Bretagne du XVIII^e siècle,” Centre d’Études Anglaises du XVIII^e Siècle, Université Paris III, December 9, 1999.

novelistic practice—when in Chapter 38 of Vol. VI in *Tristram Shandy* he offers the reader a blank page on which to draw a portrait of the Widow Wadman after the reader’s “own fancy.” But we have to remember that such a portrait would have been drawn in a different visual culture than any that prevails throughout the modern world.

For, according to Jacques Ellul, in the eighteenth century visual images themselves were still relatively scarce in the lives of most people, but subsequently there arose a culture of “tangible images” mechanically produced and reproduced by photography, film, television, but used in exhibitions and museums and all sorts of educational visual aids—a culture that is now dominant and that works to “produce conformity, to make us join a collective tendency” [35]. Ellul points out that the “overall and unconscious perception of a whole ‘package’ of information which does not follow the slow and arduous path of language [...] explains why we are [...] inclined to watch images rather than to read a long book or listen to a demonstration. Intellectual laziness³ causes the image to win out over the word automatically, and we observe its victory on every hand” [37]. So when the much-acclaimed 1963 film version by Tony Richardson of Fielding’s *Tom Jones* gives the audience Susannah York for the novel’s Sophia, the viewer is helpless against his or her own conditioned reflexes and responses to that tangible, visual image of that woman chosen by the director and who is already identified as beautiful by a collective consensus. This film version of Sophia, whatever she means in the novel, *replaces* Fielding’s character. Roman Polanski did a similar thing to Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* by *replacing* Hardy’s verbal description and dramatization of his protagonist with the one he chose to play the role, Natasha Kinsky.⁴ As the film-theoretician George Bluestone pointed out, in the film version of a novel we find, “with its abandonment of language as its sole and primary element,” a change so great that the novel as genre becomes mere “raw material” for the production of a radically different thing—and something censored and oversimplified in conformity to collective expectations [vii].

But a visual image itself meant to undermine a collective image of feminine beauty also presents a problem. Such an intention certainly operates in Hogarth’s art; his realistic sequences (his “Progresses”) have themselves been called novel-like, and his feminine portraits, like *The Shrimp Girl* and

³ The phrase “intellectual laziness” might be compared to what Freud understood as the mind’s tendency towards the economic use of energy in its processes, as in “condensation” or other methods for the production of dream images.

⁴ The devastating results to Hardy’s novels are explained in Pauline Kael’s review of the Polanski film [KAEL 88-89].

Miss Mary Edwards, are not after canonical models as they would be if they had been done by a fashionable portraitist like J. B. Vanloo: Hogarth had little time for art school and learned to rely on his own observation rather than copying the approved models. No doubt his realism accounts for why few commissioned their portraits from him. Nevertheless, the anti-images produced by Hogarth's realism are themselves visual images, so that Hogarth's feminine portraits may easily become images of a new feminine ideal, at least as oppressive to individual perception as the images they replaced, just as, for the film industry, one style of idealized feminine beauty may follow another.

In his first novel, *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding has not yet himself gone far in subjectifying feminine beauty. He not only uses in his "Preface" the example of Hogarth's work to justify his own theory of comic prose fiction, but he himself attempts to produce by verbal means a very concrete visual image of Fanny. "*Fanny* was now in the nineteenth Year of her Age; she was tall and delicately shaped; but not one of those slender young Women, who seem rather intended to hang up in the Hall of an Anatomist, than for any other Purpose," this description begins and continues for over two hundred words about the size of her breasts and hips, the shape of her arms, the exact color of her skin and hair, the height of her forehead and many specific details about her facial features including a smallpox mark on her chin, and so on [FIELDING 1967: 152-153]. Nevertheless, even if Fielding tries to close up every gap in this description with detail, the abstract nature of words themselves leaves room for the individual reader's own personal sense of feminine beauty and desirability.

But at the start of the description or, rather, evocation, of Sophia in his second novel, *Tom Jones*, Fielding does not try to render a specific, tangible, visual image. "Hushed be every ruder Breath," he begins and then asks rhetorically if the reader has seen the famous images of feminine beauty, "the Statue of the *Venus de Medicis*," "the Gallery of Beauties at *Hampton-Court*," "each bright Churchill of the *Galaxy*, and all the Toasts of the *Kit-Kat*." But he makes an interesting concession to readers too young to have seen those canonical examples. He says that "at least thou hast seen their Daughters, the no less dazzling Beauties of the present Age; whose Names, should we here insert, we apprehend would fill the whole Volume," and in this remark he has suddenly expanded the examples of feminine beauty to such a degree that they undermine the concept of desirable woman as rare trophy to be possessed. The narrator does vaguely suggest that Sophia is "most like the picture of Lady *Ranelagh*, and I have heard more still to the famous Dutchess of *Mazarine*" — interesting here that he has, apparently, not

even seen this second portrait. “[B]ut most of all,” he asserts, “she resembled one whose Image can never depart from my Breast, and whom, if thou dost remember, thou has then, my Friend, an adequate Idea of *Sophia*.” The best image of Sophia is his inner, personal image of his now dead wife, his beloved Charlotte, elaborated by whatever deep, unconscious processes, and can really be known by no one but himself. It is true that Fielding then reverts almost to the kind of tight, particularizing description of Sophia he had given to Fanny in the earlier novel, and this time for almost three hundred words. But even here much of the description seems an evocation of abstractions and literary allusions, e. g., the poetry of Suckling, Horace, and Donne [FIELDING 1975, 154-157]. Finally, in Fielding’s last novel, *Amelia*, the novelizing method will be fully developed: there will be very little concrete physical description of the eponymous heroine, who is also a representation of Charlotte.

There is one Charlotte, yes, but almost anyone can have a Charlotte “in my Breast.” In other words, this Charlotte-Sophia-Amelia opposes, even better than do the portraits by Hogarth, what René Girard called the object of “imitative” or “triangular” desire—the one who is loved because others love her.⁵ Fanny is presented to us as such an object, but neither Sophia nor, especially, Amelia, is. And just as their Tom Jones and Captain Booth have private visions of the beloved and what makes her beloved, so what matters most in the experience with the beloved will be private as well, guarding its autonomy from the community’s morality and mediating images.

A sense of the value of the private life of the loving couple follows from this “uncrowning” of public tangible images. In *Joseph Andrews*, the interpolated story Wilson tells of his life provides an example. What had driven Wilson as a young man was principally vanity that meant following convention for the approval of others. This approval required him to be dressed in the fashion, have the “Qualifications” of dancing, fencing, riding, music, “knowledge of the Town,” and even an erotic intrigue or, rather, the *reputation* of one. The result of his conventional, rakish behavior is disgust for women—which is also conventional. But after he is rescued from his debtor’s prison by Harriet, he falls passionately in love with her [201-23] and comes to see “that the Pleasures of the World are chiefly Folly, and the Business of it mostly Knavery; and both, nothing better than Vanity [...]. My Happiness,” he tells his listeners, “consisted entirely in my Wife, whom I

⁵ René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris : Grasset, 1961) *passim*. (The 1966 English translation by Yvonne Freccero is entitled *Deceit, Desire and the Novel : Self and Other in Literary Structure*.)

loved with an inexpressible Fondness, which was perfectly returned; and my Prospects were no other than to provide for our growing Family; for she was now big of her second Child; I therefore took an Opportunity to ask her Opinion of entering into a retired Life, which, after hearing my Reasons, and perceiving my Affection for it, she readily embraced" [224]. They buy a small farm, and, at the time of the novel, have lived together there for "almost twenty Years, with little other Conversation than our own, most of the Neighbourhood taking us for very strange People" because he will neither hunt with the squire nor drink with the parson [224]. All the loving couples in Fielding's novels receive a cold shoulder from the world outside, which often seeks to tear them apart and destroy them.

Now this antagonism towards the loving couple bears out a view held by the psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg, famous for his theory of "object relations." Kernberg observes that there is always hostility towards the loving couple on the part of the community because

All groups that are unstructured (that is, those not organized around some task) foster a regressive, restrictive sense of morality. This type of morality is characteristic of social networks—the small social groups and communities within which individuals communicate with one another but are not intimate and do not necessarily have personal relations with one another. The basic shared values established in such conditions [...] are remarkably similar to the characteristics of mass psychology [...].

Under such conditions, the members tend to project components of the infantile superego onto the group. They try to establish an unconsciously shared consensus on some basic values—a morality very different from the morality each member operates under as an individual. I propose that this, which [...] I call conventional morality, is strikingly similar to the morality of children in the latency phase—following the height of the Oedipus complex, roughly from age four to six and extending to puberty and adolescence. [...] The latency period witnesses the building up of a moral system that is highly dependent on the need to adapt to the social system [...] [KERNBERG, *Love Relations* : 164-165].

This view of the latency period superego and group conformity is expressed or implied in Wilson's behavior that attempts to be fashionable in the eyes of the "Town." But furthermore the latency period superego Kernberg describes is strikingly similar in all cultures and all times, evidently because it is rooted in the universal repression of universal Oedipal wishes. It is always characterized, according to Kernberg, by "the sense that sexuality is

something forbidden and has to do with the secret behavior of ‘others,’” “a derogatory devaluation of genital sexuality [...] expressed in, for example, references to sexual organs and activities as dirty, ‘dirty’ jokes” [...] together with a secretly excited and wondering curiosity about sexuality,” the division “of individuals and causes into good and bad,” the dissociation of “genital sexuality from tender affection and genital sex from polymorphous perverse infantile sexual components,” and “tends to eliminate the erotic element from ‘legally accepted’ relationships.” Latency morality “in fact shows great similarity to kitsch,” a similarity that points to the connection between regressive group processes and the creations of mass culture [...]” [165-66]. Needless to say, these kitschy products certainly include the visual images Ellul describes and that now saturate the world. And surely there are many people who are alone not from choice but as a result of the attack on them and their erotic feelings by the community and its conformist, latency period values.

After the emergence of sexuality in puberty, which brings with it the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal wishes and impulses that were sexuality’s first florescence before repression in the latency period, there is soon new repression that submerges the individual into the community once again. The sexes then tend to separate, if not physically like the children in the playground of an American elementary school, at least emotionally. After all, in his *Republic* (Book V) Plato called for the public regulation of sexual behavior of the Guardians for the sake of the community. But some rebellious couples hold on to their sexual love in spite of the community as do Fielding’s Wilson and Harriet, becoming, like them, “very strange People” to their neighbors—and even more strange when the members of such a couple age and still do not abandon their sexual life.

In Fielding’s loving couples, we do *not* see dissociation, characteristic of latency period values, of genitality from tender affection. But is this untraditional association of tenderness and genitality only tolerable to readers because what *is* dissociated from that genitality is any polymorphous perverse infantile sexual component? Paul-Gabriel Boucé’s observation mentioned at the beginning of this paper, made at the Paris colloquium in response to my argument for the subversive power of Fielding’s affirmation of sexual passion, in effect raised just this question. He said that the sexuality of Fielding’s heroes and heroines, as opposed to what is in Richardson’s novels, lacks “kinkiness.” And Kernberg, corroborating famous studies by Robert J. Stoller, maintains that *all* sexual excitement depends on perversion—on kinkiness. In fact Kernberg claims that

Sexual gratification derives its intensity from a freedom for experimentation that includes the expression of unconscious fantasies reflecting both oedipal and preoedipal object relations. This means bringing sadistic and masochistic, exhibitionistic and voyeuristic elements into the sexual relation and the enactment of complex fantasies. Such developments require time. The enactment of homosexual fantasies as well as of aggressive derivatives of preoedipal relations is included here [...]. This conception links intense sexual excitement with the fantasy world of perversion and pornography. Sexual freedom of the couple in love expresses, at one point, polymorphous perverse fantasy that temporarily frees both participants from their specific object relation—although their total sexual involvement is still contained by that object relation. This last characteristic makes sexual play an erotic art in contrast to the restricted, mechanical quality of pornography. I also use the term *pornography* to focus on one more dimension of sexual freedom—namely, its opposition to socially sanctioned sexual behavior [...]. The aspects of sexuality that are conventionally accepted as part of a couple's love life are typically shorn of the intensity and excitement derived from pregenital features.⁶

In fact what Paul-Gabriel Boucé was implying was correct: mostly all that are brought forth in Fanny-Joseph and Tom-Sophia are “aspects of sexuality that are conventionally accepted as part of a couple's love life” and that are “shorn of the intensity and excitement derived from pregenital features.” The kinkiness all belongs to villainous others in their aggressivity and sadism: to the sexually predatory Lady Booby and Lady Belleston, to the cold sadists like Blifel or Thwackum, and to the seducers and rapists who persecute the heroes and heroines, and are obvious examples of projection. Indeed, Fielding's division of good *versus* evil is clearly an example of latency period thinking and of the psychological mechanism of “splitting,” so common in literature in the construction of its melodramas.

⁶ KERNBERG, *Aggression in Personality Disorders and Perversions*, 251-252. “I am suggesting,” Kernberg further explains, “that polymorphous perverse infantile sexuality serves an important function in the recruitment of aggression in the service of love that characterizes human sexuality. It is as if the transformation of the early experience of pain into sexual excitement, and of the experience of pleasure in aggressive behavior into pleasure in the expression of erotic hostility, provide a quality of elation to sexual arousal linked to the fantasy that sexual wishes as an expression of love and sexual wishes as an expression of aggression are no longer in contradiction. [...] The polymorphous perverse aspects of normal sexuality [...] cement the relation of the couple and limit the effects of infantile superego collusions and related social conventionalities”[253].

It is not until *Amelia* that we see into the life of his loving couple *after* marriage. Splitting still occurs in *Amelia*; sadomasochistic components of sexuality, especially, are still projected onto bad characters, like the Lord, who can only enjoy a woman as a conquest and who wants to make Amelia the victim of an elaborate rape, or like Colonel James who cannot be happy with the "Oil" and "Sugar" of sexual enjoyment but whose appetite needs quickening by "Acids" and who requires to be tormented by a woman with "the Spirit of a Tigress" [226-227]. But such perversion is not completely projected away from Amelia's husband Captain Booth; rather, it is transformed to the extent that it may be disguised from the author himself. How is such more-or-less well integrated and therefore somewhat hidden kinkiness manifest in Booth and Amelia as well?

The heroine is not introduced by Fielding as narrator the way Fanny and Sophia were but by Booth in conversation with Miss Matthews. He says he knew Amelia "in the first dawn of her beauty" of which "she had as much as ever fell to the share of a woman" and that it inspired a "general Admiration." But Booth had first seen her generally admired beauty without himself feeling "any Spark of Love" until she suffers a broken nose in the overturning of a chaise, an accident that results in the *loss* of the admiration of her beauty by others that not only makes him feel he can dare aspire to "the Possession of her Charms" but, more significantly, actually gives him "the first great Impression in my Heart in her Favour." In fact, he is enthralled by the spectacle of her suffering: he loves her, he says, for her "Patience and Resignation [...] to the Loss of exquisite Beauty" and that she could support "the most exquisite Torments of Body, and with Dignity, with Resignation, and without complaining, almost without a Tear, undergo the most painful and dreadful Operations of Surgery in such a Situation" [66]. And, in his married life that follows, he will make her suffer a great deal, at least morally, and she will masochistically submit to it all, including his sexual infidelity with Miss Matthews. Although Fielding endeavors to palliate Booth's adultery with Miss Matthews, who had been in love with him before he married Amelia, his character Booth knows better and does not excuse himself. For Booth in this sexual experience with Miss Matthews may *seem* like a Tom Jones who is taken advantage of by Molly, but here the situation is actually quite different: Booth's telling the story to Miss Matthews of his love for Amelia, replete with tender scenes that move and excite her, including how he personally helped his wife in painful childbirth, a tale that makes him seem a wonder of male tenderness to Miss Matthews, in fact seduces *her*. However, the tenderness that Booth can feel for his wife requires identification with her, that is, requires his successful integration of

homosexuality into his relationship with her, just as her ability simply and quietly to forgive his infidelity is a successful integration of hers, requiring sympathy and identification with the male.

With respect to problems of sexual infidelity, Booth is more split off from himself than Amelia is from herself. Amelia has feelings aroused for their friend Sergeant Atkinson, and the fact that he is someone from outside her social class shows that because he is young, handsome, and able to soothe the tempestuous passions of his own wife, those feelings of Amelia's are sexual ones—feelings that Booth, Fielding tells us, would not want to know about. She is “susceptible to Hysteria,” we are told [120], and the hidden cause of excess of emotion in her anxiety hysteria may well be thoughts of temptation and punishment for sexual wishes.⁷ But even so she defends her marriage to Booth—imprudent by community standards—more unquestioningly than he does. “Am I of a superior Rank of Being to the Wife of an honest Labourer? Am I not Partaker of one common Nature with her?” she says, and adds that she can accept impoverishment as long as she has “such a Husband to make Life delicious” [527]. The oral implications of the word “delicious” suggest kinky practices important to her bliss.⁸

It is not, then, in Fielding's last novel so easy to distinguish the instinctual make up of his good characters from that of his bad characters. In life, according to psychoanalytic views, there is perversion in everyone; the great difference is to what extent it works in each in the service of his or her love—of the object relation. *Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto*; but the “splitting” in Fielding and in so many authors makes this fact that we all possess the same instincts hard to see. Indeed, the opposition of the couple to the world outside that Fielding draws is so severe that it would prevent almost *any* communication with the social group that, after all, shares the same instincts and, as individuals, longings to be fulfilled loving couples.

⁷ For the classic discussion of anxiety hysteria see FENICHEL [194-215].

⁸ Cf. the story of Sophia's muff in *Tom Jones*. Sophia's maid reports to her that Tom “came into the Room, one Day last week when I was at work, and there lay your Ladyship's Muff on a Chair, and to be sure he put his Hands into it, that very Muff your Ladyship gave me but yesterday; “La,” says I, Mr. Jones, you will stretch my Lady's Muff and spoil it, but he still kept his Hands in it, and then he kissed it—to be sure, I hardly ever saw such a Kiss in my Life as he gave it.” —“I suppose he did not know it was mine,” replied Sophia. “Your Ladyship shall hear, Ma'am. He kissed it again and again, and said it was the prettiest Muff in the world. ‘La! Sir,’ says I, ‘you have seen it a hundred Times.’ ‘Yes, Mrs. Honour,’ cried he; but who can see anything beautiful in the presence of your Lady but herself....” [206-207]. Sophia then blushes violently. For further discussion see BUTLER, *Fielding's Unruly Novels* : 79-82.

And, as Kernberg admits, “the couple in a love relationship, while in opposition to the group, still needs it for survival.” Indeed, a “truly isolated couple” faces psychological dangers [181]. In *Amelia*, the greatest actual danger to the couple from the community is the community’s most official representative, the clergyman Dr. Harrison, whose moral authority neither Fielding nor any of the characters in the novel really questions. Yet at one point Harrison feels perfectly right to enter the couple’s living quarters and “toss” their possessions and then have Booth imprisoned for debt. For he thinks of Amelia as his “daughter” and acts as if he wants to take her from Booth in what would then be the perfect triumph of jealous community morality over genital potency. The critic Hugh Amory calls him “monstrous” [517]. In René Girard’s terms, perhaps we can say Dr. Harrison is the “mediator” in a triangle of desire—that is, he is the model that Booth is supposed to imitate in relation to Amelia just as Amadis of Gaul is the model Don Quixote is supposed to imitate in relation to Dulcinea. Booth can be said, in spite of whatever he may profess, by his actual behavior to be rejecting Dr. Harrison’s mediation in his, Booth’s, relationship with his own wife. Of course, in the ending for the novel that Fielding arranges Dr. Harrison *does* win and Booth reforms according to values like his. But as E.M. Forster amusingly points out about the novel as genre:

In the losing battle that the plot fights with the characters, it often takes a cowardly revenge. Nearly all novels are feeble at the end. This is because the plot requires to be wound up. Why is there not a convention which allows a novelist to stop as soon as he feels muddled or bored? Alas, he has to round things off, and usually the characters go dead while he is at work, and our final impression of them is thorough deadness.... [L]ogic takes over the command from flesh and blood [95].

The consensus of academic critics seems to take sides with the plot in Fielding’s novel. But if the reader rebels against this consensus that expresses latency period values, then Harrison clearly is the voice of the harsh, punitive group superego, though neither author nor character can adequately engage it. Such engagement might be possible for a personality less split, less chaotic than Fielding’s, one that might then come into relationship with the envious and ever-hostile community—perhaps to teach it something or lead it somewhere or help it in some other way—though Fielding’s novel itself can be said to be an attempt to establish such a relationship.

Finally, the problems Booth has in the integration of his personality invites speculation about Fielding's own life.⁹ But such biographical speculation—for instance, that Fielding may have had an incestuous relationship with his sister—in wish, of course, he did, since brothers generally do for their sisters, and vice versa, at some stage—merely reinforces the morality of the conventional, group superego and the point of view of Dr. Harrison. This biographical criticism wastes the chance that appears in the eighteenth century for the reader to fill those novelistic “Blanks” Fielding himself was the first to theorize (in Book II, Chapter I of *Tom Jones*) with the deepest of the reader's imaginative powers and most profound awareness, psychoanalytic or otherwise.¹⁰ Indeed, reading the British novel from Fielding to D.H. Lawrence in such a way can enrich the reader's view of the possibilities of the loving couple, especially of the couple's secret, inner life but also of the relations to their surrounding group. E.M. Forster in *Maurice* shows that the loving couple does not necessarily have to be a heterosexual one. But, because of the triumph of the culture of images, conformist in their very nature—kitsch reinforcing latency period values—the novel that might have come to the aid of the couple of whatever sexual orientation may no longer be possible even to read in any depth or complexity.¹¹

⁹ Fielding's reputation of immorality in his life invites so much speculation by his biographers that it seems almost justified by a kind of tradition to speculate here too. If the Fielding as seen by his critics after the publication of *Joseph Andrews* is a real person, then he himself possessed a deeply split, dissociated personality: in the words of one of his biographers, he was a “libertine who protested he meant no real harm and loved his wife,” “the loving husband whose sexual passion paraded publicly in his work,” “the man of moral sense who drank himself into invalidism,” and “one of those [like Johnson's Imlac] who discoursed like an angel but lived like a man” [THOMAS 225].

¹⁰ For a development of the theory of novelistic blanks or gaps see ISER, *The Implied Reader and The Act of Reading*.

¹¹ Kernberg, who defended the necessity of erotic art, in fact does not use novels as his examples, but three commercial films: Rohmer's *My Night at Maud's* (1969), Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1974), and Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1990) (*Love Relations* : 172-175).

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