THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS

American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS)

The Comic Novel and the Poor: Fielding's Preface to Joseph Andrews
Author(s): Judith Frank
Source: *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter, 1993-1994), pp. 217-234
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press. Sponsor: American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS).
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2739381
Accessed: 20-08-2017 11:45 UTC

REFERENCES
Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:
http://www.jstor.org/stable/2739381?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents
You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms

American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS), The Johns Hopkins University Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Eighteenth-Century Studies*

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

The Comic Novel and the Poor: Fielding's Preface to *Joseph Andrews*

JUDITH FRANK

> Surely he hath a very ill-framed Mind, who can look on Ugliness, Infirmity, or Poverty, as ridiculous in themselves: nor do I believe any Man living who meets a dirty Fellow riding through the Streets in a Cart, is struck with an Idea of the Ridiculous from it; but if he should see the same Figure descend from his Coach and Six, or bolt from his Chair with his Hat under his Arm, he would then begin to laugh, and with justice.[1]

FIELDING'S PREFACE TO *Joseph Andrews* might have the peculiar status of being at once the most assigned and the least analyzed discussion of the aesthetics of the novel in English studies. Because, doubtless, of the genial and assured polemic with which Fielding ushers in his new literary form, the Preface has a satisfying ring of canonical authority. It may be that very authority, and its accompa-

My thanks to Fredric Bogel, Laura Brown, Andrew Parker, Ronald Paulson, Neil Saccamano, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, and Sasha Torres for their help at different stages of the writing of this essay.

[1] Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 9. All further references to the Preface are cited parenthetically in the text.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

nying aura of interpretive transparency, that has caused very little to be actually written about it. The little criticism that exists has generally understood the Preface's significance to lie in Fielding's differentiation of his new comic form, the "comic Epic-Poem in Prose," from such previous narrative forms as the romance and his own parodic *Shamela,* as well as in his placement of it within the classical literary canon.[2] But as my opening quotation from it suggests, Fielding is at least as concerned about the reception of this new form, and the Preface may also be read as a kind of ethics of representation of the urban poor. When Fielding raises the specter of inappropriate or immoral laughter, he does so in relation to the spectacle of poverty, warning that the "Ridiculous" works properly, "with justice," only when it serves as a moral commentary on the spectacle of the poor imitating the rich. Indeed, as I will argue, the ridiculous—the "comic" part of "the comic Epic-Poem in Prose"—is a category so ambivalent in the Preface that it requires a considerable labor of definition and justification.

Accordingly, this essay seeks to dislocate the account of Fielding's Preface that sees it as most concerned with offering a high-cultural alternative to romance. Rather, I argue that it is more crucially concerned about another generic shift with important historical implications: Fielding's shift from popular—that is, theatrical—entertainment to literary representation. Such a dislocation allows us to shift the focus from the predominantly middle-class readers of the romance to the problematically non- and semiliterate spectators of early eighteenth-century burlesque theater. While we might like to think of the canonical Fielding as a renegade satirist capable of singlehandedly motivating legislation of the theater, there were in fact larger social and historical issues involved in the Licensing Act that turned him to the novel: the London theater of the 1730s provoked legislation because it was a turbulent social space. The shift Fielding announces in the Preface, from an aural/visual to a literary mode of artistic production, may be read, I

[2] See Martin C. Battestin, Introduction to *Joseph Andrews and Shamela* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961); Ronald Paulson, *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967); *Walter Reed, An Exemplary History of the Novel: The Quixotic versus the Picaresque* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), 123; and Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1957).

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

argue, as a manifestation in the realm of the aesthetic of the larger social processes that attempted to exclude the lower classes from forms of collective festivity. Morover, his displacement of the "Burlesque" from the voices of his lower-class characters to the voice of the gentleman author may be read as an attempt symbolically to ward off the possibility that a "dirty Fellow" might ride in a "Coach and Six": that the poor might imitate their betters.

But Fielding's act of high canon formation is not unambivalent about the ways in which it regulates and repudiates the popular. By examining moments of anxiety in this text—moments in which Fielding raises the possibility that we could find spectacles of misery and poverty comic—I will argue that this account of generic transition is accompanied by an anxious reflection on the potential immorality of written representation, and a concomitant meditation on the types of pleasure to be gained from comic writing. My argument alternates between analyzing the logic of the the Preface's figures within the text itself, and attempting to elaborate these figures' social and historical meanings. It also brackets, for reasons of space, the question of what *Joseph Andrews* actually performs.[3]

Fielding labors to define the burlesque at the moment when he wants most seriously to dissociate himself from it in order to describe his new kind of writing, "which," he says grandly, "I do not remember to have seen hitherto attempted in our Language" (9). He employs classical generic categories in order to bestow upon his new fiction the prestige of a classical genre. This act of categorization operates through the establishment of a series of binary oppositions—tragedy vs. comedy, high vs. low, sublime vs. ridiculous; once those oppositions are set up, and Fielding restores the missing term *Margites* as the binary opposite to the term *Iliad,* he can invent

[3] In a companion piece to this essay (*Yale Journal of Criticism,* Fall 1993) I argue that *Shamela* represents lower-class literacy as aggravatedly eroticized and utopian, and that it is the novel's project to defuse this intense desire for upward mobility. Accordingly, *Joseph Andrews,* I demonstrate in a reading of the novel, represents desire and literacy as mutually exclusive, and by doing so wishfully attempts to ward off the possibility of the lower class's access to fictions of upward mobility. This attempt to cleanse literacy of desire, and desire of literacy, offers a new way to read the combination of the mock-heroic and the low carnivalesque in *Joseph Andrews,* a combination which creates that novel's particular kind of realism; and it also affords us insight into the novel's curious hesitancy about representing Fanny, who, I claim, stands at the center of *Joseph Andrews's* anxieties about its own representational practice.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

the category of the comic epic, which will henceforth have a respectable lineage. In other words, the primary function of the elaboration of Aristotelian distinctions in the Preface is the conferral of high-cultural status upon the comic epic-poem in prose. This new form contrasts with the works of uncertain lineage he has written before; Fielding agrees with Lord Shaftesbury, who asserts of "the Burlesque" that "'there is no such Thing to be found in the Writings of the Ancients'" (5).

The Aristotelian categories have another job as well, however: the comic epic-poem in prose, Fielding argues, differs from the epic in the same way that comedy differs from tragedy in Aristotle—it introduces "Persons of inferiour Rank, and consequently, of inferiour Manners" (4). The Aristotelian lineage of Fielding's new form, then, also legitimizes its attention to the poor. While this is certainly not the first time in western literature that comedy has been said to represent the lower classes, it is a particularly vexed instance; as I will show, the Author's Preface is crucially about how problematic this conjunction is.

Fielding does not merely attempt to establish the comic epic's familial relation to the classical epic; he also sets up a noncanonical category in opposition to it, which he calls the "Burlesque." When he evokes the burlesque it is to call it "mere Burlesque," deprecating the type of writing he had done in his plays and in *Shamela.* Here is Fielding's attempt to differentiate "Parodies or burlesque Imitations" from "the Comic," which he also calls "the Ridiculous" (I will use the two terms interchangeably):

> Indeed, no two Species of Writing can differ more widely than the Comic and the Burlesque: for as the latter is ever the Exhibition of what is monstrous and unnatural, and where our Delight, if we examine it, arises from the surprizing Absurdity, as in appropriating the Manners of the highest to the lowest, or *e converso;* so in the former, we should ever confine ourselves strictly to Nature, from the just Imitation of which, will flow all the Pleasure we can this way convey to a sensible Reader. (4)

In a manifesto whose fundamental activity is the careful establishment of differences, the comic and the burlesque represent for Fielding the very epitome of difference. Functioning as what Peter

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

Stallybrass and Allon White call the "low-Other,"[4] the category of the burlesque is invoked as a "monstrous" and "unnatural" foil against which the comic is constituted as natural and proper. The burlesque low-Other, Fielding claims, has a specific class content; it may be defined as an "exhibition" of cross-class imitation—most particularly, the low imitating the high—that arouses delight. Imitation across classes, Fielding suggests in this definition, is inherently "monstrous and unnatural." The comic, on the other hand, offers us "Persons of inferiour Rank, and consequently of inferiour Manners" (4): in a form "confin[ed] . . . strictly to Nature," rank and manners have a natural correspondence.

Significantly, Fielding illustrates the distinction between the two modes through an analogy to painting ("Comic History-Painter" vs. "Caricatura"). Arguing that while the comic history-painter copies nature, caricatura exhibits "Monsters, not Men," Fielding writes,

> Now what *Caricatura* is in Painting, Burlesque is in Writing; and in the same manner the Comic Writer and Painter correlate to each other. And here I shall observe, that as in the former, the Painter seems to have the Advantage; so it is in the latter infinitely on the side of the Writer: for the *Monstrous* is much easier to paint than describe, and the *Ridiculous* to describe than to paint. (6)

If the burlesque is performed to its best advantage visually, the ridiculous takes place in the realm of the "described," or written. The two terms, then, suggest not only opposing *levels* of culture (high and low), but also a difference of levels that articulates itself through a contrast in artistic media. One of the burdens of this passage is the argument that we should regard "the Ingenious *Hogarth*" as a "comic history-painter" rather than a practitioner of "caricatura"—as, analogously to Fielding, a comic rather than a burlesque artist. Ronald Paulson, however, has regarded the distinction between Fielding and Hogarth as paradigmatic of the different epistemological worlds of elite and popular culture in the eighteenth century. In an analysis of Hogarth's *Industry and Idleness,* Paulson writes, "These visual subculture images set up a substitute code, [in E. P. Thompson's phrase] 'an unwritten popular code' . . . . They

[4] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), 5-6.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

also show that there is one way of reading or viewing for the educated audience of Fielding's *Enquiry [Concerning the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers]* and another for the essentially visual/aural culture of the uneducated 'inferior part of mankind.'"[5] He adds that *Industry and Idleness*

> leads us to conclude that Hogarth associates the visual language of images with the subculture; the language of words—at least of written, inscribed words like those of the Ten Commandments—with the dominant or master's culture.[6]

So while Fielding's Preface distinguishes between various *literary* forms, the comic novel and the romance, I would argue that its evocation of Hogarth and elaborate attention to the visual suggest that it is also crucially concerned with evoking the difference between aural/visual and literary modes of representation, and with announcing Fielding's move from the former to the latter.

When Fielding alludes to the burlesque, he alludes to a written form: "Writings of the Burlesque kind." But the burlesque in fact came down to Fielding in two forms, the written and the nonwritten. It was an important genre in the chapbooks that circulated among the semiliterate and literate of the working classes.[7] At the same time, in the Restoration and early eighteenth century burlesque was also a theatrical form, in which the neoclassical and the heroic were uttered by the low: for example, Thomas Duffett's burlesque of Elkanah Settle's *The Empress of Morocco* (1673) transformed Settle's heroes into "corn-cutters, draymen and a 'scinder-Wench," while in his burlesque of *The Tempest* (1674), an orange-woman, rather than an actress, played Ariel.[8] Fielding's own plays remain a

[5] Ronald Paulson, *Popular and Polite Art in the Age of Hogarth and Fielding,* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 15-16.

[6] Paulson, *Popular and Polite Art,* 13.

[7] See Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and Its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981). Comparing the definitions of the burlesque in the 1694 and 1776 editions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Francoise,* Joseph A. Dane suggests that it became increasingly regarded as a literary form during the course of the eighteenth century. See *Parody: Critical Concepts versus Literary Practices, Aristophanes to Sterne* (Norman and London: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 123-24.

[8] John Loftis et al., *The Revels History of Drama in English,* 8 Vols., Vol. 5: 1660-1750 (London: Methuen, 1976), 250–51.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

primary example of the burlesque in its theatrical instantiation. I am not claiming that the burlesque was inherently a popular form: it was clearly directed to an educated audience, one competent in the conventions of the heroic drama. Its nonliterary status, however, made it accessible to a wider audience, and it, along with farces and other theatrical forms, took place in a turbulently mixed social space. Studies of eighteenth-century playhouse audiences pay little attention to the attendance of the people, concentrating chiefly upon the transition from elite to bourgeois audiences reflected in the emergence of bourgeois sentimental drama. We do know, however, that if the audience was "dominated by the affluent," in the upper gallery sat apprentices and footmen, who paid little or nothing for admission.[9] Joseph Andrews, who upon his arrival in London goes to the opera and becomes "a little too forward in Riots at the Play-Houses and Assemblies" (27), stands in rather discreetly for a class whose riotous behavior, both inside and outside the confines of the theater, came to be considered a major social problem during the period.

In the major strategy of theatrical burlesque, heroic dialogue was uttered by low characters: Fielding's new literary form, however, employs a quite different strategy:

> In the Diction I think, Burlesque itself may be sometimes admitted; of which many Instances will occur in this Work, as in the Description of the Battles, and some other Places, not necessary to be pointed out to the Classical Reader; for whose Entertainment those Parodies or Burlesque Imitations are chiefly calculated.
>
> But tho' we have sometimes admitted this in our Diction, we have carefully excluded it from our Sentiments and Characters: for there it is never properly introduced, unless in Writings of the Burlesque kind, which this is not intended to be. (4)

This passage argues that the burlesque will only be "sometimes admitted," designed for the pleasure of a "classical reader." And most important, Fielding announces its containment in the voice that manages description: in the name of propriety, it is "carefully excluded" from the voices of the characters "of inferiour Rank," and

[9] John Loftis, *Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1959), 14-15; Loftis et al., 19-21, 24.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

hitherto limited to that of the gentleman author. One might call this burlesque in only one direction: while the gentleman author imitates the manners of the lowest, the lowest are prevented from imitating those of the highest.

The regulation of the burlesque in the comic epic occurs in the interest of a more abstract and deferred pleasure than the burlesque, "a more rational and useful Pleasure," Fielding writes (6). While the burlesque generates "exquisite Mirth and Laughter" (5), in the ridiculous "we should ever confine ourselves strictly to Nature from the just Imitation of which, will flow all the Pleasure we can this way convey to a sensible Reader" (4). One feels the censorship levelled on the practitioner of the comic, whose project takes place under the rubric of strict confinement. So restrained is this form of pleasure that only a "sensible" reader feels it; the comic does not "so strongly affect and agitate the Muscles" as the burlesque (6). Indeed, the extreme caution of the formulation "all the Pleasure we can this way convey to a sensible Reader," opens up a world of other ways of conveying pleasure and other kinds of readers who are feeling pleasure. The dignifying of the comic—a mode of representing those of inferior rank and manners—into a classical literary genre intended for a cultural elite entails an abstraction from the cruder and more bodily pleasures of the burlesque.

Such an abstraction from bodily pleasures was an important part of the creation and consolidation of the bourgeois public sphere in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, which, according to Stallybrass and White, entailed a "general transformation of the sites of discourse," a transformation that "marked out a number of changes in the interrelationship of place, body and discourse during the period." Focusing on the Restoration theater, for example, they claim that the hybridization of classical and popular culture lived by many gentlemen of the period was under attack, and describe the theatre as a site of the disciplining and refinement of the public body. And in the early part of the eighteenth century, "self-exclusion from the sites of popular festivity . . . was a major symbolic project for the emergent professional classes."[10] Fielding, whose social and cultural allegiances were extremely complex,

[10] Stallybrass and White, 83, 112.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

vividly embodies this hybridization of classical and popular culture. For years, until his theatrical activity was curtailed by the Licensing Act, he successfully straddled the realms of high and low culture. The Preface registers this success in modest negatives, when Fielding explains that he has "less Abhorrence" for the burlesque than Shaftesbury "not because I have had some little Success on the Stage this way" (5). The refining of the public body also entailed a kind of phenomenological shift, from "a dispersed, heterodox, noisy participation in the *event* of theatre" to the "silent specular intensity" of reading.[11] Fielding's move from the burlesque theater to neoclassical literature, then, is a move from low to high that is simultaneously a transition in modes of experiencing culture: from the collectivity watching the stage to the more culturally prestigious activity of the individual reading.

The construction of the bourgeois public sphere in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries entailed not only the gentleman's self-exclusion from sites of popular recreation; this was also a time when the ruling classes were intervening in and curtailing the recreations of the poor themselves. Robert Malcolmson has documented the fact that to the ruling classes "recreation was commonly seen as an impediment, a threat of substantial proportions, to steady and productive labour."[12] Along with the fairs whose gradual demise Stallybrass and White have documented, the theater seems to have been a primary target for the regulation of poor and working people. According to Vincent J. Leisenfeld, Sir John Barnard's 1735 introduction of a bill to Parliament to limit the number of playhouses reflected the growing hostility of the bourgeoisie to existing theaters (especially the one in Goodman's Fields), which they believed caused moral decay in the London neighborhoods that housed them. Not only did new theaters, it was claimed, bring "higher rents, liquor, and prostitution into their neighborhoods"; but

[11] Stallybrass and White, 93, 87.

[12] Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), 16. While Malcolmson dates the beginning of this oppression at around 1750, there is plenty of evidence, especially in the history of the theater, to suggest that it began earlier. Mikhail Bakhtin also discusses the encroachment of the state upon "festive life" in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, in *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984), 33.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

"the mischief of the drama threatened trade as much as body or soul."[13] When Barnard spoke in the House of Commons for his new bill, he complained of "the Mischief done to the City of London by the Play-Houses, in corrupting the Youth, encouraging Vice and Debauchery, and being prejudicial to Trade and Industry." According to Liesenfeld, "it was this threat to industry more than any other single factor that provoked attacks on the theaters in 1735."[14] He also argues that the series of playhouse riots by footmen that occurred in February 1737 should be read in the context of a series of civil disorders in 1736-37 that seemed to seriously threaten the stability of the government; in the spring of 1737, the Parliament whose last piece of business was the passing of the Licensing Act addressed the problem of "the general spirit of insurrection it believed pervaded the nation."[15] During this period plays often interacted in a volatile way with an already restless class of people, making the social space of the theater dangerous enough to require governmental regulation.

In the Preface, then, both Fielding's shift from the aural/visual to the literary, and his displacement of the burlesque from the voices of his lower class characters to the voice of the gentleman author for the enjoyment of the "classical Reader," may be read as manifestations in the realm of the aesthetic of the larger social process that attempted to exclude the lower classes from theatrical entertainment. In *Shamela,* Fielding had already illustrated the social chaos that ensues when the burlesque is not limited to the "Diction," but also appears in the "Sentiments and Characters." And read alongside the Preface, Fielding's other, darker treatise of cross-class imitation—the *Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers*—makes explicit the regulatory character of his aesthetic program. In this treatise, cross-class imitation is regarded as a social catastrophe:

> In free Countries, at least, it is a Branch of Liberty claimed by the People to be as wicked and as profligate as their Superiors. Thus while the Nobleman will emulate the Grandeur of a Prince; and the Gentleman will

[13] Vincent J. Liesenfeld, *The Licensing Act of 1737,* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 24.
[14] Liesenfeld, 27-28, 24-26.
[15] Liesenfeld, 73, chapter 3.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

aspire to the proper State of the Nobleman; the Tradesman steps from behind his Counter into the vacant Place of the Gentleman. Nor doth the Confusion end here: It reaches the very Dregs of the People, who aspiring still to a Degree beyond that which belongs to them, and not being able by the Fruits of honest Labour to support the State which they affect, they disdain the Wages to which their Industry would intitle them; and abandoning themselves to Idleness, the more simple and poor-spirited betake themselves to a State of Starving and Beggary, while those of more Art and Courage become Thieves, Sharpers, and Robbers.[16]

In this passage "emulation" carries a strong political charge, implying "aspiration" upward. If the emulating poor are rather harmless objects of ridicule in the Preface, here Fielding savages their bolder brothers who, for example, gain admission into public places "upon no other Pretence or Merit than that of a laced Coat" in order to hustle credulous heirs (*Enquiry,* 93).[17] Fielding's interesting claim that if the poor cannot achieve the status of, say, the tradesman, they would just as soon starve underscores what is for him the power of the urge to imitate over even basic biological needs.

It is the significatory instability of all classes of people in this period that generates what might be regarded as a pervasive epistemological malaise in Fielding's work. As he writes in "An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men,"

Thus while the crafty and designing Part of Mankind, consulting only their own separate Advantage, endeavor to maintain one constant Imposition on others, the whole World becomes a vast Masquerade, where the greatest Part appear disguised under false Vizors and Habits; a very few only shewing their own Faces, who become, by so doing, the Astonishment and Ridicule of all the rest.[18]

[16] Henry Fielding, *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers,* in *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers and Related Writings,* ed. Malvin R. Zirker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 77. All further references are cited parenthetically in the text (*Enquiry*).

[17] Paulson has noted the link between this social affectation in the *Enquiry* and affectation as the source of the ridiculous in the Author's Preface *(Popular and Polite Art,* 3-4).

[18] Henry Fielding, "An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men," in *Miscellanies by Henry Fielding, Esq.,* Vol. 1, ed. Henry Knight Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 155.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

Fielding's use of the figure of the masquerade to describe a universal opacity of motive and character evokes the sartorial burlesque that vizors and habits were meant to perform. Describing the cross-class dressing that went on in both directions at the masquerade, Terry Castle writes, "the provocative travesties of rank and occupation intimated a potentially disarming fluidity in the realm of social circumstance, as critics of the masquerade . . . were obsessively to point out."[19] This social fluidity came from the new energies of commercialism, which rendered older status categories unstable.[20] Indeed, England's transformation into a commercial society and the power of money to level distinctions between the various ranks were the social ills around which the Opposition organized its platform, complaining of a general moral degeneracy in the nation that originated in Walpole's court.

In the Preface to the *Enquiry,* giving a brief history of "the Commonality" from feudal times to his own, Fielding claims that "the Introduction of Trade"

> hath . . . given a new Face to the whole Nation, hath in a great measure subverted the former State of Affairs, and hath almost totally changed the Manners, Customs, and Habits of the People, more especially of the lower Sort. (*Enquiry,* 69-70)

The image of the nation's "new face" recalls the "false Vizors and Habits" worn by people in the "Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men," and the assertion there that only "a very few . . . [shew] their own Faces." The social emulation engendered by the spread of trade generates a transformation of the lower classes into their own diametrical opposite: "the Narrowness of their Fortune is changed into Wealth; the Simplicity of their Manners into Craft; their Frugality into Luxury; their Humility into Pride, and their Subjection into Equality" (*Enquiry,* 70). And among them, robbers are the most impudent of imitators:

[19] Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986), 63.

[20] See Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987), 162-67. McKeon writes of Fielding's ambivalent relation to the possibilities afforded by English commercialism, "Attracted . . . to the energy of the career open to talents, Fielding was appalled by the vanity and pretension of those who enacted that career with any success or conviction" (408).

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

> There is at this Time a great Gang of Rogues, whose Number falls little short of a Hundred, who are incorporated in one Body, have Officers and a Treasury; and have reduced Theft and Robbery into a regular System. There are of this Society of Men who appear in all Disguises, and mix in most Companies. (*Enquiry,* 76)

The affectation of these rogues makes them organize into societies that burlesque government and allows them access to all parts of society.

Fielding is attacking an explosion of cross-class imitation in English society brought on by the spread of trade—an imitation that directly threatens the property-owning classes: he wonders that "a Nation so jealous of her Liberties . . . should tamely and quietly support the Invasion of her Properties by a few of the lowest and vilest among us" (*Enquiry,* 76). And the *Enquiry's* solution to the problem of the peripatetic, robbing, and emulous poor is their discipline into a classifiable and productive work force.[21] Along with such measures as severer laws against vagrancy, the limitation of wages and the reform of workhouses, this transformation entails, most salient to the Preface, the exclusion of the poor from public places, or "Temples of Idleness" (*Enquiry,* 82).

Fielding is speaking, then, for the property-owning classes who regarded cross-class imitation on the part of the poor as a disastrous social problem, and who regarded the diversions of the people as threats to morality and industry. He in fact holds two contradictory positions: if the cross-class imitation of the poor in social reality generates anxiety, we have seen that the burlesque, the *representation* of such imitation, generates too much *pleasure*—the intense bodily pleasure that, like the diversions of the people that need to be "limited and restrained," needs to be smoothed into the "more rational and useful Pleasure" of the comic. Fielding's new art form not only arises simultaneously with the exclusion of the poor from traditional and collective sites of entertainment; by containing cross-class imitation

[21] The classification and discipline of persons in the eighteenth century is, of course, documented in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). See the section entitled "Proposals for Erecting a County Work-house, etc.," in Fielding's *A Proposal for Making an Effectual Provision for the Poor,* in Fielding, *An Enquiry,* 237-55. This section is a veritable cornucopia of Foucaultian disciplinary techniques.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

it also effects a similar discipline in the realm of the aesthetic.

This discipline is mostly symbolic; the Preface might be regarded as a cultural fantasy of disciplining the poor—as a wish that one could appropriate the fun and energy of the burlesque while at the same time controlling the class aspirations that it entails. But when we take into account the shift from the aural/visual to the literary announced by the Preface, the discipline it enacts appears slightly more material. Not only would this shift have caused a quieting of the mode of reception of Fielding's work; it would also probably have changed the constitution of his actual audience. For we might assume that a proportion of the apprentices and servants who attended his theatrical works were unable to read,[22] and that those who could would have had some difficulty getting access to the novel as a form of diversion. Richard Altick argues that until the first cheap reprint series of standard authors in the 1770s, books could only be purchased by the relatively wealthy, and while J. Paul Hunter suggests that "the young and ambitious—the ones most likely to have found the means to learn to read," passed books around, getting access to books required effort.[23] When I call this shift disciplinary, I don't mean to suggest that it had much impact on the lives of those servants and apprentices in Fielding's audience. I

[22] Figures on literacy in the period are plentiful, but curiously unhelpful, because literacy in the premodern period was always already, seemingly transhistorically, on the rise. These figures bear out what we easily intuit: that literacy was class and gender based, the upper classes and men becoming literate first; that those in the city were more apt to be able to read and write than those in the country; and that servants, with their emulation of their masters' ways, and their roles as cultural intermediaries between the upper and lower classes, were a particular source of irritation to those who feared that reading and writing would create desires for upward mobility. It seems safe to say that some servants, and some women, and some apprentices could read. See Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980); J. Paul Hunter, "Some Notes on Readers and the Beginnings of the English Novel," in *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France, and Germany,* ed. Alan Charles Kors and Paul J. Korshin (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 259-82; Victor Neuburg, *Popular Education in Eighteenth Century England* (London: Woburn Press, 1971), chapters 1, 4; Spufford; and Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1957).

[23] Altick, 51-52; Hunter, 266. *Joseph Andrews* would have been expensive for a servant, the first edition selling for 6s (Battestin, xxix).

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

mean simply that Fielding's new art form is meant to weed out certain kinds of audience as well as certain kinds of reception.

At the same time, though, the Preface feels anxious about its disciplinary effects. While it explicitly uses as a precedent the Aristotelian link between comedy and "Persons of inferiour Rank," it labors uneasily to define the circumstances under which it could be morally acceptable for a middle-class and classical audience to find the poor an object of laughter. I want to return here to the Preface's claim that the burlesque and the comic represent the very epitome of difference. One does not have to look very hard to discover that the category of the burlesque is in fact constitutive of the comic. Using "the Ridiculous" as a synonym for "the Comic," Fielding writes, "The only source of the true Ridiculous (as it appears to me) is Affectation." While this reified character trait is clearly regarded as a human universal, Fielding's primary examples of affectation concern the specific social phenomenon of poor people imitating the rich:

Surely he hath a very ill-framed Mind, who can look on Ugliness, Infirmity, or Poverty, as ridiculous in themselves: nor do I believe any Man living who meets a dirty Fellow riding through the Streets in a Cart, is struck with an Idea of the Ridiculous from it; but if he should see the same Figure descend from his Coach and Six, or bolt from his Chair with his Hat under his Arm, he would then begin to laugh, and with justice. In the same manner, were we to enter a poor House, and behold a wretched Family shivering with Cold and languishing with Hunger, it would not incline us to Laughter, (at least we must have very diabolical Natures, if it would:) but should we discover there a Grate, instead of Coals, adorned with Flowers, empty Plate or China Dishes on the Side-board, or any other Affectation of Riches and Finery either on their Persons or in their Furniture; we might then indeed be excused, for ridiculing so fantastical an Appearance. (9)

The poor render themselves ridiculous in this passage by appropriating, burlesque-like, the manners of the highest. Elsewhere, in the "Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men," Fielding describes affectation, the source of the ridiculous, as an actual burlesque actor:

[A]s Affectation always over-acts her Part, it fares with her as with a Farcical Actor on the Stage, whose monstrous over-done Grimaces are sure to catch the Applause of an insensible Audience; while the truest and finest

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

Strokes of Nature, represented by a judicious and just Actor, pass unobserved and disregarded.[24]

Characterized by excess and monstrosity, and contrasted to that kind of representation, which like the comic, confines itself to a "just" imitation of nature, affectation appears here to be synonymous with the burlesque.

So while the Preface explicitly states its agenda as an imperative to transcend the burlesque by producing its opposite, Fielding's theory in fact blurs the distinction between the two, and the binary opposition collapses. In this way it follows what Stallybrass and White describe as a recurrent pattern in the representation of low-Others: "what is *socially* peripheral is . . . frequently *symbolically* central. . . . The low-Other is despised and denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture."[25] If the recreation of the lower classes is repudiated in the Preface, Fielding's category of the comic nevertheless requires the burlesque symbolically. While the ridiculous is celebrated as a more rational and abstract kind of pleasure than the burlesque, Fielding's aesthetic tract does not easily relinquish the latter category. Indeed, the burlesque is referred to with nostalgia, as Fielding casts a fond backward eye on the mode that "contributes more to exquisite Mirth and Laughter than any other," that "purge[s] away Spleen, Melancholy and ill Affections," and that fills audiences with "Good-Humour and Benevolence" (5). When we consider how freighted good-humor and benevolence are as moral qualities in Fielding's writing, qualities that lead to charity and good works, we can appreciate the utopian possibilities of the burlesque.

Meanwhile, although it is explicitly characterized as rational and useful, the category of the ridiculous in fact carries within it contradiction and ambivalence. Fielding claims that the moral ambiguity of this category stems from some writers' misunderstanding of the generic term Ridiculous:

Nor will some Explanation of this Word be thought impertinent by the Reader, if he considers how wonderfully it hath been mistaken, even by

[24] Fielding, "An Essay," 162.
[25] Stallybrass and White, 5-6.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

Writers who have profess'd it: for to what but such a Mistake, can we attribute the many Attempts to ridicule the blackest Villanies; and what is yet worse, the most dreadful Calamities? (9)

Arguing, oddly, that sadism could result from a generic or semantic error, Fielding chastises the author who, laboring under such misapprehension, writes "*the Comedy of Nero, with the merry Incident of ripping up his Mother's Belly*" or who attempts "to expose the Miseries of Poverty and Distress to Ridicule" (7). Similarly, in the discussion of affectation I have just quoted, he alludes to people who might have "very diabolical Natures" and be inclined to laughter at "Ugliness, Infirmity, or Poverty" or at "a wretched Family shivering with Cold and languishing with Hunger" (9). These fiendish figures, whose lurid presence interrupts the measured prose of the Preface, are the index of the text's anxiety about the potentially inherent immorality of comic literary representations of the poor.[26]

I have cited Fielding's claim that "The only source of the true Ridiculous . . . is affectation" and argued that like the burlesque, affectation refers to cross-class imitation. Indeed, it is through the mediating term of *affectation* that the burlesque enters the realm of the ridiculous. We may regard *affectation* as the name for that which gives the ridiculous moral sanction: when affectation is added to a pathetic spectacle it makes laughter justifiable. "But should we discover there . . . any . . . Affectation of Riches and Finery either on their Persons or in their Furniture, we might then indeed be excused, for ridiculing so fantastical an Appearance" (9). Like the joke in Freud, affectation "*will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible.*"[27] Rather than regarding it as an intrinsic characteristic of the ridiculous, as Fielding polemically argues, we may regard affectation, which is none other than the burlesque moment, or the moment of cross-class imitation, as that part of the ridiculous designed to mitigate its own potential excesses. The restriction evaded by the admixture of affectation is taking pleasure in reading about the poor, as if literary comic representation were inherently a tendentious act. For the Preface to *Joseph Andrews* sug-

[26] Jill Campbell argues that this passage "draws a limit to the legitimacy of satire's practice of exposure," in "'The Exact Picture of his Mother': Recognizing Joseph Andrews," *ELH* 55:3 (1988). 660.

[27] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), 103.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

gests that it *is*—that as a social practice, the work of novel-making entails both the appropriation of the poor and the containment of their mimetic voices.

Indeed, what the Preface shows us is the uneasy interaction of two mutually contradictory historical and ideological forces: the neoclassical and the sentimental. With the low as its object, a neoclassical comic aesthetic takes the conjunction of low characters and comedy as natural. With its doctrine of innate and spontaneous humanitarian benevolence and its attention to the poor, however, the ideology of sentimentalism, which was emerging at this time with the writings of the latitudinarian divines and would reach its aesthetic and ideological peak in the 1760s, troubles this easy identification.[28] During the first half of the century there was in fact a lot of concern about inappropriate laughter. Discussions of comedy and laughter by such writers as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Addison invariably argued from classical precedent, and just as invariably attempted to ensure the morality of laughter by connecting it to some kind of social love.[29] In the case of the Preface, what we might call the sentimentalization of laughter clashes with the literary form intended to serve as the vehicle of Fielding's high-cultural aspirations. It is this formal/ideological contradiction that generates what I have read as the anxiety, even melancholy, of the Preface. For Fielding's act of canon formation suggests that the problem of comedy is bound up in the problem of the poor. And as such the Preface has two competing, almost equally urgent impulses: to resist the novel's mass-cultural appeal, and yet to avoid repudiating altogether what it figures as the monstrous and chaotic, yet mirthful and benevolent realm of popular culture.

Amherst College

[28] For readings of eighteenth-century sentimentalism as an ideology, see Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982); Judith Frank, "'A Man Who Laughs is Never Dangerous': Character and Class in Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey,*" *ELH* 55:1 (Spring 1989): 97-124; Robert Markeley, "Sentimentality as Performance: Shaftesbury, Sterne, and the Theatrics of Virtue," in *The New Eighteenth Century,* ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Methuen, 1987): 217-18; and Mary Poovey, "Ideology and *The Mysteries of Udolpho,*" in *Theory and Practice of Feminist Literary Criticism,* ed. Gabriela Mora and Karen S. VanHooft (Ypsilanti, Mich.: Bilingual Press, 1982): 98.

[29] On the repudiation of Hobbes's theory of laughter and the attempt to make comedy morally respectable see Paulson, *Satire and the Novel,* 16-18.

This content downloaded from 80.251.40.39 on Sun, 20 Aug 2017 11:45:29 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms