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Abstract
Fielding's last novel has long been read as a complex attempt both to expand the range of his social analysis and to articulate a reading of human experience that places emphasis on the depth of personal emotion. Fielding does this by weaving into his narrative elements of his own experience, so that the novel abounds in allusions to his first marriage and other details of his private life. Fielding's cousin Lady Mary Wortley Montagu asserted to Lady Bute that in Amelia Fielding "has given a true picture of himselfe and his first Wife in the Characters of Mr. and Mrs. Booth ... and I am persuaded several of the Incidents he mentions are real matters of Fact." As Morris Golden says, 'Amelia constitutes a private retrospection and apologia for Fielding's marriage and life with Charlotte Cradock." It is tempting to accept the suggestion that "Fielding conceived Booth in his own image" and that he wrote Amelia at least in part to atone for the miserable life that he and his adoring Charlotte shared. For the novel so abounds in images of confession and in appeals for atonement that, without such clear hints of autobiographical context, one would have to be imagined.

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1 Recent accounts of *Amelia* have moved beyond the formal and biographical. See, for instance, Nicholas Hudson, "Signs, Interpretation, and the Collapse of Meaning in *Tom Jones* and *Amelia*," *English Studies in Canada* 16 (1990), 1–34; Brian McCrea, "Politics and Narrative Technique in Fielding's *Amelia*," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 13 (1983), 131–40; James Thompson, "Patterns of Property and Possession in Fielding's Fiction," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 3 (1990), 21–42; Mona Scheuermann, "Man Not Providence: Fielding's *Amelia* as a Novel of Social Criticism," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 20 (1984), 106–23; and the important sections on *Amelia* in Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 177–252; John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 180–96; and John Zomchick, *Family and the Law in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 130–53.

2 *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. Robert Halsband, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3:66.

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and life with Charlotte Cradock."[3] It is tempting to accept the suggestion that "Fielding conceived Booth in his own image" and that he wrote *Amelia* at least in part to atone for the miserable life that he and his adoring Charlotte shared.[4] For the novel so abounds in images of confession and in appeals for atonement that, without such clear hints of autobiographical context, one would have to be imagined.

Fielding's seeming desire to weave social commentary into a serious analysis of personal relations is evident in his early comedies and in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* as well. Early plays such as *Rape Upon Rape* (1730) and *The Modern Husband* (1732) suggest that Fielding understood comedy to include serious social commentary. As Martin C. Battestin notes in his biography of Fielding, "Fielding's new species of comedy differed from what had gone before in two essential respects: its manner was more earnest, its subject more daring."[5] Fielding thought of these works as "heroic" comedies, as Battestin points out, and he felt that with them he was breaking new ground as a comic dramatist.[6] Both works are intriguing attempts to re-examine the stock situations of Restoration comedy, such as rape, adultery, and libertinism, from the point of view of their social as well as personal consequences. In doing so, they anticipate the concern of Fielding's prose fiction, where no transgression remains unexamined. *The Modern Husband*, in particular, opens a series of questions that anticipate the serious comedy of *Amelia*. This play tells the story of a man who conspires in the adultery of his wife so that he may enjoy the financial benefits of her aristocratic paramour's generosity. Battestin puts this succinctly: "In *The Modern Husband*, though the mutual complicity of Mr. and Mrs. Modern in her lucrative affairs is the shocking focus of Fielding's 'serious' satire, it is her partner in adultery, Lord Richly, who epitomizes this darker theme of the play, a theme Fielding would not fully develop until the last major work of his life, *Amelia*."[7]

This theme is the corruption of a society that allows the morally corrupt aristocrat to foul intimate relations with the power of his purse. The epilogue to the play suggests the cause of this corruption:

3 Morris Golden, "Public Context and Imagining Self in *Amelia*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 56 (1987), 381.

4 Martin C. Battestin, "General Introduction," *Amelia* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), p. xix; see also pp. xvi–xxi for the most thorough discussion of the autobiographical implications of the plot.

5 Martin C. Battestin with Ruthe R. Battestin, *Henry Fielding: A Life* (New York: Routledge, 1989, 1993), p. 92. Battestin's discussion of both these plays and of their "heroic status" is useful; see pp. 91–93, 99–101, 127–33. See also Robert D. Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre, 1728–1737* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 121–29.

6 See Battestin, *Henry Fielding*, pp. 99, 129.

7 Battestin, *Henry Fielding*, p. 130; see also pp. 539–40, where Battestin extends this comparison.

> Why, faith—if these Discoveries succeed,
> Marriage will soon become a Trade, indeed!
> This Trade, I'm sure, will flourish in the Nation,
> 'Twill be esteem'd below no Man of Fashion,
> To be a Member of the—Cuckold's Corporation![8]

The idea that marriage functions as trade in eighteenth-century culture and that honour, friendship, and love can be sacrificed to the desire for financial gain concerned Fielding throughout his career.

For Fielding to centre his last comic novel on the institution of marriage is, itself, by no means surprising. That he would attempt to reopen some of the issues that he had addressed in his serious social ("heroic") comedies after the rollicking successes of *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* hardly needs explaining. After all, each of those novels contains material that shows how attentive he remained to such issues throughout his career. The narrative of Mr Wilson and the "Man on the Hill" episode raise questions as serious as any that are raised in *Amelia*, and they do so in terms as direct and uncompromising as those he employs in his most serious periodical essays. It has been argued that in *Amelia* Fielding abandoned the mock-epic success of *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* without seriously considering what the narrative procedure of *Amelia* was to be.[9] *Amelia* has a happy ending, of course, but its comic structure is so different from that of *Tom Jones* as to begin to challenge the comic description itself. As in the "heroic" comedies, Fielding seems to have exceeded the structural limits of comedy in his attempt to dramatize the pathos of his central characters. The emotions raised, the horrors exposed, seem too great to be resolved in a simple happy ending. Fielding seems to admit the falsity of his earlier comic endings and his own inability to fit the pain of private experience into a comic resolution. At the same time, he uses all his experience to indict both a society that he saw as detrimental to individual happiness and individual behaviour that he saw as detrimental to the good of society. Fielding's dedication speaks of private and public evils,[10] but in the novel he not only actively attempts to reintegrate public and private versions of experience, as his centre of focus on the marriage of Booth and Amelia suggests, but also tentatively

8 Henry Fielding, *The Modern Husband. A Comedy. As it is Acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane. By His Majesty's Servants* (London, 1732), Glv (p. 82), lines 7–11.

9 See, for instance, J. Paul Hunter, *Occasional Form: Henry Fielding and the Chains of Circumstance* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 193.

10 Henry Fielding, *Amelia* (1751), ed. Martin C. Battestin, with textual introduction by Fredson Bowers, The Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), p. 3. References are to this edition.

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moves beyond such unhelpful dichotomies to a state in which such distinctions are without significance. Fielding of course cannot succeed in breaking such rigid cultural codes and may not even have wanted to if he could, but he does at least question them and begin to show the extent of their ruthlessly dehumanizing potential.

Another way of explaining the almost unseemly urgency of the narration, and the resulting disjunction between form and intention in *Amelia*, is to reconsider Fielding's own autobiographical involvement. In *Tom Jones*, Fielding demonstrated an unparalleled ability to manipulate comic form and master ironic narrative. In *Amelia*, he abandons the ironic point of view in order to deal more directly with the terms of his own private vision, challenging the limits of comedy with the complexity of his own personal experience. In other words, Fielding attempts to expand the comic structure of *Amelia* in order to accommodate a personal, almost confessional impulse. Comedy and confession may seem mutually exclusive, but, as Northrop Frye points out in *Anatomy of Criticism*, the form he calls confession "flows into the novel" in the later eighteenth century, creating fictions that are neither purely novelistic nor purely autobiographical.[11] To consider the novel in these terms is to address both the details of the work and the nature of the controversy surrounding it. The confessional nature of this novel helps to explain its ruminative and philosophical mood. Fielding is working out a *raison d'être* and explicating his own philosophical and religious stance. As Frye says, "Nearly always some theoretical and intellectual interest in religion, politics, or art plays a leading role in the confession. It is his success in integrating his mind on such subjects that makes the author of a confession feel that his life is worth writing about."[12]

Amelia is precisely about "integrating" the mind on such subjects as religion and politics and about the difficulties which the experiences of the public world pose to this integration. Culture functions on a "divide and conquer" system—in this case the rigid distinction between public and private is in fact a means of extending cultural control—and Fielding uses the confession as a means of reintegrating those elements of personal experience that culture would repress. Fielding offers the heroine Amelia as the centre of value in the novel, to whom the hero must finally "confess" his crimes before any kind of comic resolution is possible. If *Amelia* is after all Fielding's novel of atonement, it attempts to invest the confessional structure with comic meaning and give public significance to conversion and confession. It does so by placing them

11 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 307.
12 Frye, p. 308.

in the transitional role between individual awakening and social resolution. Booth is redeemed, that is, for Amelia's sake as well as his own. What could more profoundly suggest the nature of the form which Rousseau was to make available for the romantic age?[13] Fielding's instincts in creating his fictional confession are independent of the great confessions of his contemporaries, but in using the confessional structure in this his "favourite Child,"[14] Fielding was suggesting the terms whereby the novel was to find a structure in the self.

The substitution of reaction for action in the novel, so often remarked as a feature of literature of sensibility, creates a situation which transforms public action and event into private reflection and reaction, thereby enhancing the confessional nature of the work and ensuring the efficacy of a personal resolution. But confessional concerns help to explain not only the subject matter but also the narrative structure of *Amelia*. If, as I argue elsewhere, the language of emotion is ultimately a force of alienation, the challenge facing a novelist such as Fielding, one so attuned to the formal possibilities of fiction, is to find a way of dramatizing this impasse without lapsing into the silence that sensibility so often threatens.[15] Such silent "abjection" is everywhere present in this novel, and Fielding must find a way to resist its power. He accomplishes this in several ways in *Amelia*. But the key to his technique involves giving up narrative control and allowing characters to speak for themselves.

The narrative of *Amelia* is sustained by long passages of personal history, which in a novel such as *Tom Jones* would be called Interpolated Tales. Here, however, they are not interpolated but play a direct and essential role in the narrative itself. These histories—those of Miss Mathews, of Mrs Bennet, and of Captain Booth, especially—share so many

13 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Confessions* (1782, 1789) startled later eighteenth-century readers with their personal revelations, understood the value of autobiographical writing. As Christopher Kelly points out, Rousseau claimed that "autobiography is superior to both history and biography because the autobiographical has direct access to the interior model. It is this direct access to feelings which makes possible an accurate knowledge of human nature." *Rousseau's Exemplary Life: The Confessions as Political Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 34; see also Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, ed. P.N. Furbank (London: Everyman, 1992), pp. 160–61. Fielding, writing thirty years before Rousseau, might have agreed with this assessment, for *Amelia* was deprecated for its refusal to disguise the vices of its author. For a record of early responses to *Amelia*, see *Henry Fielding: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Ronald Paulson and Thomas Lockwood (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), pp. 286–33.

14 Henry Fielding, *The Covent-Garden Journal and A Plan of the Universal Register Office*, ed. Bertrand A. Goldgar, vol. 9 of The Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), no. 8 (28 January 1752), pp. 65–66.

15 George E. Haggerty, "Amelia's Nose; or, Sensibility and Its Symptoms," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 36 (1995), 139–56; see also John Mullan, *Sensibility and Sociability: Language and Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 18–56; and G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 104–53.

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formal features that it is worth pausing over the phenomenon of their presence here. Each is told at length in private confidence as a way of explaining present circumstances and exculpating past behaviour. Each is urgent; each is intimate; and each breaks down the barriers between self and other as a way of redefining the notion of privacy. Finally, each depends on the assumptions behind confession in order to achieve its intended effect within the novel.[16] Recent discussions of confessional form suggest its appropriateness as a device for breaking down the isolation that eighteenth-century theories of the self had inspired and establishing a new basis of communication.[17] Dennis A. Foster argues that confession (like analysis) "transforms a feeling of alienation, of sickness, into an account of separation; it encourages one who is lost to trust his past to a listener who will make sense of it."[18] Confession, in other words, theatricalizes memory as an attempt to break down individual isolation and establish some kind—any kind—of communication with the "outside." This process is repeated throughout *Amelia* and could indeed be said to be its primary rationale.

Consider the case of Miss Mathews's history, which makes up chapters 6–9 of book 1 of *Amelia*. Miss Mathews begins her conversation with Booth by celebrating her guilty act and disguising her confession as a vindication:

Murder! Oh! 'tis Music in my Ears.—You have heard then the Cause of my Commitment, my Glory, my Delight, my Reparation!—Yes, my old Friend, this is the Hand, this is the Arm that drove the Penknife to his Heart. Unkind Fortune, that not one Drop of his Blood reached my Hand.—Indeed, Sir, I would never have washed it from it.—But tho' I have not the Happiness to see it on my Hand, I have the glorious Satisfaction of remembring I saw it run in Rivers on the Floor; I saw it forsake his Cheeks. I saw him fall a Martyr to my Revenge. And is the killing a Villain to be called Murder? Perhaps the Law calls it so.—Let it call it what it will, or punish me as it pleases.—Punish me!—no, no—That

16 Peter V. LePage calls these histories "confessions," "The Prison and the Dark Beauty of *Amelia*," *Criticism* 9 (1967), 352; Spacks talks about Booth's "confession of faith" in a slightly different context and emphasizes the role of "memory" and "self-interpretation" in the novel, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 275–85; see also Castle, pp. 234–38. Besides these long confessional histories, other confessional moments in the novel involve Colonel Bath, Dr Harrison, Sergeant Atkinson, Mr Robinson, Amelia's maid, and Amelia herself.

17 For a discussion of the "anxiety" inherent in eighteenth-century concepts of the self, see Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): "anxiety exceed[s] its occasion because the soul can never be entirely filled by the sensations and reflections which arise from an object 'out there'—an object whose essential absence is presupposed by perception" (p. 18).

18 Dennis A. Foster, *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 8.

is not in the Power of Man—not of that Monster Man, Mr. *Booth*. I am undone, am revenged, and have now no more Business for Life; let them take it from me when they will. (p. 43)

After such a preamble, it could be imagined that Miss Mathews would make a fiery exit and leave Booth to marvel at her heroics. She has articulated a tragic stance worthy of the stage. But instead of matching her bravado with a suitably violent act, Miss Mathews "barred the Door on the Inside, as securely as it was before barred on the Outside" (p. 47), suggesting a sudden shift from public stance to private communication, and began her "History." Far from expecting that her dramatic flourish would do any more than momentarily shock Booth, she proceeds to give him a minutely detailed account of how her particular circumstances justify the murder that she is supposed to have committed.

The story of her growing emotional attachment to Hebbers and his increasingly contemptuous treatment of her is more than an elaborate attempt at self-justification. By telling her tale, Miss Mathews creates a past that in its pathos reverberates throughout the novel. She tells of the evening of her sister's wedding:

The Villain *Hebbers* danced with me that Night, and he lost no Opportunity of improving the Occasion. In short, the dreadful Evening came. My Father, though it was a very unusual Thing with him, grew intoxicated with Liquor; most of the Men were in the same Condition; nay, I myself drank more than I was accustomed to, enough to inflame, though not to disorder. I lost my former Bed-fellow, my Sister, and,—you may, I think, guess the rest,—the Villain found Means to steal to my Chamber, and I was undone.

Two Months I passed in this detested Commerce, buying, even then, my guilty, half-tasted Pleasures at too dear a Rate, with continual Horror and Apprehension; but what have I paid since, what do I pay now, Mr. *Booth*? O may my Fate be a Warning to every Woman to keep her Innocence, to resist every Temptation, since she is certain to repent of the foolish Bargain. (p. 53)

This private, confidential tone is far different from her earlier outcry. Here she talks about guilt, betrayal, repentance, and horror. Miss Mathews is exposing herself to Booth as a way of liberating herself from the confines of her own guilt. The story of her fall is the harbinger of other confessions and indeed of circumstances which animate the plot of the novel. Her tale of misery uses narrative itself to dramatize her plight. Her uneasy tone and narrative disruption suggest the violence of her fate. Her pleading asides heighten the sense of her abjection, as she exposes herself to her interlocutor. At the same time, of course, she uses this exposure as a way of attracting him.

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having vented her Passion, she all at once put on a serene Countenance, and with an Air of great Complacency, said, "Well, Mr. *Booth*, I think I have now a Right to satisfy my Curiosity, at the Expence of your Breath. I may say it is not altogether a vain Curiosity; for perhaps I have had Inclination enough to interest myself in whatever concerns you;—but no Matter for that—Those Days (added she with a Sigh) are now over." (pp. 59–60)

Miss Mathews's confession performs a narrative function that moves beyond the fact of confession itself: the crime she relates has almost more meaning in relation to her present colloquy than it does in relation to past events. Foster claims that "the confessional relation ... reproduce[s] patterns of power, desire, guilt, and obligation" and says further that in confession, "the issue is not persuasion ... it is seduction."[19] No mere act of coquettishness, Miss Mathews's confession is an attempt to establish a relation, albeit sexual, with someone who stands outside her private desolation. By sacrificing her subjectivity, that is, she attempts to escape from the horror of her private dilemma. Her momentary success is represented in her literal seduction of Booth, an event which has profound implications for the novel as a whole.[20]

Mrs Bennet tells *her* History as a way of preventing Amelia from falling victim to the pernicious designs of the Noble Lord, which were executed under the guise of a masquerade. She relates the story of her own entrapment and its consequences in terms that cause both Amelia and her to swoon at the intensity of the horror. This is not as obvious a seduction as that of Miss Mathews, but it is surely an attempt on Mrs Bennet's part to gain control over Amelia and to place her under obligation. Mrs Bennet has after all been married secretly to Sergeant Atkinson and needs a friend such as Amelia (to whom Atkinson is devoted) to help her manage the implications of her own past. In helping Amelia, she also establishes a bond which places them on the same footing, a detail which surfaces ominously in a later scene when Mrs Bennet in her drunkenness begins to attack Amelia's reserve. The trust that grows between them as a result of these confidences, moreover, leads to the deception at the masquerade, which in turn results in an abuse of that trust and a near-calamity for Amelia.

The confession itself begins with the fastening of the door and opens with as dramatic a gesture as that of Miss Mathews: "You would not

19 Foster, pp. 7, 4.

20 For a discussion of various nineteenth-century texts that "identify with extraordinary constancy their narrative situation by recourse to a metaphor of seduction" (p. 10), see Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

wonder at my Emotion, if you knew you had an Adulteress and a Murderer now standing before you" (p. 267). In its detail, moreover, it quickly becomes as conspiratorial as that of Miss Mathews. Mrs Bennet's revelations are upsetting, but she nevertheless articulates them in elaborate and precise detail: it seems that by articulating the past so vividly she frees herself from its hold over her. She relates the horrible culmination of violence between herself and her husband, after he has thrown her to the floor, kicked her helpless form, and bashed his own head against a chest of drawers:

> I can truly say, I felt not the least Resentment for the Usage I had received; I thought I deserved it all; tho' indeed I little guessed what he had suffered from me. I now used the most earnest Entreaties to him to compose himself; and endeavoured with my feeble Arms to raise him from the Ground. At length, he broke from me, and springing from the Ground flung himself into a Chair, when looking wildly at me, he cried,—"Go from me, *Molly*. I beseech you leave me, I would not kill you."—He then discovered to me—O Mrs. *Booth*, can you not guess it?—I was indeed polluted by the Villain—I had infected my Husband—O Heaven! why do I live to relate any thing so horrid—I will not, I cannot yet survive it. I cannot forgive myself. Heaven cannot forgive me.—— (p. 299)

Mrs Bennet's sense of guilt is palpable. She seems to relive the horror as her narration becomes animated and irregular. Inexplicably, she imagines that Amelia will have guessed the "polluted" outcome of her commerce with the Noble Lord, and then proceeds to the paroxysms of self-abnegation that her situation seems to warrant. The relation is surely genuine, but at the same time Mrs Bennet is aware of her audience and concerned to involve her in the horror she relates. She then becomes "inarticulate with the Violence of her Grief": she has given vent to her feelings, and she collapses "in a violent Convulsion Fit" (p. 300). The details of this description are as gruesome as our sense of the personal implications for the character who relates them.

Both these confessions have involved a subtle plot for public recognition. That is, Miss Mathews and Mrs Bennet both use these narratives to reach beyond the limits of privacy and find a new and less harrowing public basis for self. According to Foster, confession "is a mode by which people enter into the discourse of their culture. ... It represents an attempt to understand the terms and the limits by which the people are defined, both as they listen to the confessions of others and as they recount their own transgressions."[21] *Amelia* emphasizes again and again the need to overcome private alienation in this way. It could be argued, of

[21] Foster, p. 7.

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course, that there is nothing "public" about these almost ruthlessly private conversations; but just to articulate guilt in the language that culture provides is to break down the limits of privacy and begin to integrate the violently separated realms of "inside" and "outside." If the result is to relieve the pressures of privacy and convert the misery of the past into a compelling public tale, it is also to accept the implications, not always reassuring, of the public self that inevitably emerges.

A good example of this double-edged consequence of confession occurs when Amelia confides in Dr Harrison what it is that makes her uneasy about spending time with the Jameses, with or without the company of her husband. Dr Harrison listens with sympathy to Amelia's tale of her fear of Colonel James, and "seemed greatly shocked at the Relation, and remained in a silent Astonishment" (p. 374). Fielding prefaces the interview with the following response from Booth to Dr Harrison's request for some time alone with Amelia: "'Upon my Word, Doctor,' answered *Booth*, 'no Popish Confessor, I firmly believe, ever pronounced his Will and Pleasure with more Gravity and Dignity; none therefore was ever more immediately obeyed than you shall be'" (p. 373). For all Dr Harrison's quiet reassurances and helpful suggestions, however, it is not long before he violates his confidence and tells Booth, albeit indirectly, of Amelia's suspicions. Not only does he tell Booth, but he writes a letter to the Colonel that is read publicly at the masquerade and which leads later to the very confrontation between her husband and Colonel James that Amelia was trying to avoid. The confidential intimacies of the confessional, that is, have almost immediate public ramifications. A character cannot seem to relieve private fears without risking public exposure.

Confession as a narrative mode is therefore central to the conception of *Amelia*. Characters bare their souls to one another as a means of overcoming the abjection of their private isolation, their guilt, their desire. The resulting sympathy, personal as it is, has public implications as well. For once characters "enter into the discourse of their culture" by means of "confession," once they have articulated their guilt, they have both freed themselves from potentially destructive self-obsession and sacrificed individuality to a communal cause.[22] Mrs Bennet confides her secret in order, on one level, to help Amelia. Her sympathy, that is, takes her out of herself, and redeems the horror of her past. In publicizing it, she creates a place for herself in the world.

The character in *Amelia* whose confession is most central to its shape is Captain Booth himself. Booth tells his own history to Miss Mathews as

22 See Foster, p. 7.

a way of explaining his own depressed status in the world and his frustrations in his attempts to be a good husband. Miss Mathews is all too happy to egg on his self-deprecating remarks, and when the moment is right she offers him her physical charms as a solace to his miserable spirit. His confession opens him to the possibility of such an involvement; indeed, it makes it inevitable. When the narrator draws the curtain over the scene of Booth's adulterous liaison with Miss Mathews, he does so in terms which insist not that we consider the action as worthy or unworthy in its own terms, but rather that we consider its effect on the heroine: "To say the Truth, we are much more concerned for the Behaviour of the Gentleman, than of the Lady, not only for his Sake, but for the Sake of the best Woman in the World, whom we should be sorry to consider as yoked to a Man of no Worth nor Honour" (p. 154). The private implications of an act which is indirectly related to Booth's public role are carefully articulated here, as action becomes secondary to its effects. Critics who regret the scenes of "sensibility" in *Amelia* or suggest that they cast a maudlin pall over what is otherwise a straightforward novel misunderstand the basic relation between experience and reflection which is central to the confessional structure of the novel.[23] No action performed or even contemplated in the public world—adultery, war, duelling, arrest, imprisonment—is without its private reverberations. Fielding insists on this connection as a way of reintegrating fragmented experience within the novel, but he must also be looking beyond the narrow lives of his characters into his own cultural situation. Fielding's "sensibility" represents an aggressive rethinking of the significance of marriage as the site at which public and private are resolved. Of course, Fielding falters by insisting on the weakness and passivity of his heroine.[24] Still, Amelia has an uncannily powerful presence here, often more aware of what is going on around her than the narrative reveals.[25] Crucially, the reader is made to think that Amelia is unaware of Booth's infidelity and that his inability to confess his crime to her creates a barrier to full intimacy between them. The resulting dramatic irony, so different from the

23 See Robert Alter, *Fielding and the Nature of the Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 167–69.

24 For a discussion of this process, see studies such as Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) and Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). For a powerful argument exonerating Fielding's depiction of Amelia, see Angela Smallwood, *Fielding and the Woman Question: The Novels of Henry Fielding and Feminist Debate 1700–1750* (New York: St Martin's, 1989), pp. 102–6.

25 Cynthia Griffin Wolff suggests that Amelia's "innocence" makes her "often unaware of the intrigue going on around her," "Fielding's *Amelia*: Private Virtue and Public Good," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 10 (1968), 41.

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narrative irony in *Tom Jones* or *Joseph Andrews*, causes the reader constantly to anticipate her disillusionment as Amelia grows in awareness. In that sense, her innocence is not passive but an active element in the unfolding drama.

"The Governor was now approaching with a long Roll of Paper, when a faint Voice was heard to cry out hastily, 'where is he?'—and presently a female Spectre, all pale and breathless, rushed into the Room, and fell into Mr. *Booth's* Arms, where she immediately fainted away" (p. 159). Fielding has disembodied his heroine in this, her first "live" appearance on the sentimental stage. There are various reasons for this: he most obviously needs to contrast her to the strikingly physical Miss Mathews, with whom Booth has been intimately engaged. Her situation also emphasizes her love and her vulnerability, which together compose her sensibility. Amelia exists here as a disembodied voice, a pale and breathless spectre, in part because the world which she as devoted wife has entered has been carefully calculated to negate her existence. The private world has no meaning, no physical presence, no conscious force, in the public world of duplicity and double-dealing. Fielding sees the consequences of such a dichotomy but falters in his attempt to move beyond it. "Wife" is not a liberating label, but in this context it is an empowering one. It puts the terms of Fielding's exploration in vivid relief.

Amelia does not seem to have the strength to confront the horrors of what in other contexts would be called the real world.[26] In a scene analogous to that of her first appearance in the novel, close to the dénouement, Amelia calls at the door of the sponging house, only to be mistaken by the wife of the bailiff for a whore. She is mistaken, as it were, for Blear-eyed Moll. Surely no more violent misinterpretation of Amelia is possible, yet Fielding makes the mistake perfectly understandable: "When she came to the House, and ask'd for the Captain, the Bailiff's Wife, who came to the Door, guessing by the Greatness of her Beauty, and the Disorder of her Dress, that she was a young Lady of Pleasure, answered surlily, 'Captain! I do not know of any Captain that is here, not I'" (p. 496). The woman's assumptions concerning Amelia reflect less on the heroine, of course, than they do on the state of the world into which her husband's "debts" have again caused her to enter.[27] At this stage in the novel,

26 See Hunter, p. 194.

27 In *Joseph Andrews*, Parson Adams criticizes Mr Wilson's creditor as follows: "How can such a Wretch repeat the Lord's Prayer, where the Word which is translated, I know not for what Reason, *Trespasses*, is in the Original *Debts*? And as surely as we do not forgive others their Debts when they are unable to pay them; so surely shall we ourselves be unforgiven, when we are in no condition of paying." Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Martin C. Battestin, Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 219.

she remains conscious and even insists upon her true identity. She asserts, in other words, the private role of wife as a feature in this distorted social realm: "'I ask your Pardon, Madam,' cries *Amelia*, 'in my Confusion I really forgot you did not know me—tell him, if you please, that I am his Wife'" (p. 497). Amelia's ability to be herself in this context and to assert the primacy of private meaning assures us that what has transpired and, more important, is about to transpire between her and her husband has more than private significance.

Tears and fainting are not isolated instances of melodrama; they are rather the direct result of the confrontation of the public and private worlds of the novel. As long as Amelia is vulnerable, which she is so long as Booth remains deceptive, she registers events as directly and personally threatening to her. Without a husband she can fully trust, of course, they are. The sexual implications of the plot—the constant danger of Amelia's victimization by false friends and threatening protectors—is in a sense the product of her very goodness. Mary Poovey suggests an explanation of this duality: "what most moralists described as the most fundamental female characteristic—a woman's emotional responsiveness—was regarded as a profoundly ambivalent trait." Poovey's explanation of this ambivalence has direct bearing on the character of Amelia: "This 'amiableness of disposition,' which was thought to form the basis of a woman's benevolence, her 'sprightliness of imagination,' and her 'sensibility of heart,' is, if properly governed, productive of the greatest personal and social good: the domestic harmony and social charm celebrated by numerous moralists. But if, by chance or oversight, this female receptivity is exposed to internal or external temptations, it can rapidly degenerate into sexual appetite."[28] Many of the histories we are told play out the kind of degeneration that Poovey describes: sensibility gives way to sexuality, decorum is corrupted by desire. Booth's jealousy can partly be explained by a fear that Amelia is easily corruptible. It is also informed by an awareness of his own behaviour and a degree of self-contempt.

Booth obviously struggles against his own best interest throughout most of the novel. Like the tragic hero Othello, with whom he is most often compared, he lives in a public world as soldier, debtor, gentleman, lover, roles which reduce his freedom and alienate him from himself.[29] When Amelia meets him, for instance, in the first of the scenes quoted above, he feels enervated and at odds with himself simply because of his infidelity:

28 Poovey, p. 18.

29 For a comparison of Booth and Othello, see Robert Folkenflik, "Purpose and Narration in Fielding's *Amelia*," *Novel* 7 (1974), 168–74.

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Booth was naturally of a sanguine Temper; nor would any such Apprehensions as he mentioned have been sufficient to have restrained his Joy, at meeting with his *Amelia*. In fact, a Reflection on the Injury he had done her was the sole Cause of his Grief. This it was that enervated his Heart, and threw him into Agonies, which all that Profusion of heroic Tenderness that the most excellent of Women intended for his Comfort, served only to heighten and aggravate; as the more she rose in his Admiration, the more she quickened his Sense of his own Unworthiness. (pp. 162–63)

Booth's "naturally" sanguine temper is undone by "Reflection." What had seemed a mere product of youth and vigour—"remember that Mr. *Booth* was a young Fellow, in the highest Vigour of Life" (p. 154)—returns here to alienate him from himself. Self-indulgence becomes a source of shame and self-contempt. Booth's guilt renders him passive, and it is Amelia who assumes the heroic role in this private realm. Tenderness becomes heroic in a world of deceit and duplicity, for the simplicity of Amelia's emotional response is precisely what Booth's world has ceased to value. She asserts the value of the personal, here and elsewhere in the novel, as a measure of the power of emotion in a world which conceives of heroism as a rejection of emotion.[30] Booth, the active public figure, has perhaps resigned all pretensions to "heroism," not by his indiscretion with Miss Mathews, but by allowing his wife's tenderness to make him feel guilty.[31] But the significance of heroism itself is being placed under scrutiny here, and Booth's uneasiness at Amelia's "heroic Tenderness" is a measure of his own confusion, his own inability to understand the heroic quality of private life.

In this novel, people rarely say what they mean. The intensity of linguistic duplicity renders language itself corrupt.[32] Again and again we find that the most soothing or reassuring language functions only to seduce and undermine. Language is so readily available for dishonest manipulation that it can taint with falsity even the most deeply felt private encounter. This may be one reason why the narrator so often stops short of describing intimate conversations. Even between husband and wife, language begins to seem strange, unfamiliar, and corrupting.

Amelia articulates the problematic nature of language vividly when Booth has admitted his jealousy about her relations with the Noble Lord:

30 As another example of the heroics of private emotion, see Amelia's "heroic Passion" for Sergeant Atkinson, pp. 482–83.

31 See Claude Rawson, *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal under Stress* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 95–96.

32 On this quality of language in the literature of sensibility, see Haggerty, "Amelia's Nose," pp. 148–50.

"O Mr. *Booth*, can I bear to hear the word Jealousy from your Mouth?"

"Why, my Love," said *Booth*, "will you so fatally misunderstand my Meaning? How often shall I protest that it is not of you, but of him that I was jealous. If you could look into my Breast, and there read all the most secret Thoughts of my Heart, you would not see one faint Idea to your Dishonour."

"I don't misunderstand you, my Dear," said she, "so much as I am afraid you misunderstand yourself." (p. 252)

In addition to underlining the limitations of Booth's faith, this passage plays with the notion of private meaning and demonstrates that even the most intimate language can be corrupt and alienating. Booth's "fatally" suggests both how crucial it is for them to understand one another and how impossible such understanding is to achieve. For the Richardsonian proposal he makes here is precisely what Amelia cannot do, nor would he want her to. The secrets of his heart must remain secret until he finds the strength to reveal them in language. Booth is looking for an emotional way of communicating, without the complications of language and the embarrassment of self-exposure. But such communication is what is getting in the way of self-knowledge here. Booth has to confront his own secrets and take responsibility for them before he can be redeemed not only in Amelia's eyes but also in his own.

More important still, Amelia's accusation rings with significance. By bringing the double standard that his jealousy represents into the privacy of his married life, Booth undermines the mutual trust that marriage would ideally presuppose. His fears may in fact turn out to be justified but in relying on vague accusation and innuendo he has resigned his heroic role and even jeopardized his private one. He has used language as a thoughtless label rather than an agent of honest communication, and as a result, he has endangered his most important personal relation.

Booth's inability to converse with Amelia is analogous to his refusal to trust her: Booth seems to fear the implications of the personal and the force of his own emotions. Self-love, in other words, is precisely what he neglects in his heroically sceptical stance. As a result he becomes the victim of self-contempt and near-despair. Relatively early in the novel, "He debated ... with himself, whether he should not throw himself at *Amelia's* Feet, and confess a Crime to her, which he found so little Hopes of concealing, and which he foresaw would occasion him so many Difficulties and Terrors to endeavour to conceal" (p. 176). When he does finally learn to trust Amelia, it is the first step of the final resolution, indeed the only aspect of that resolution which is both necessary and sufficient cause to their personal happiness. Booth's confession is the act of integration towards which the novel has been striving and which only Booth's own failure to trust his wife and her sensibility has prevented.

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Booth can achieve "conversion" only after he has been able to make language a bond rather than a divisive force between himself and his wife. He attempts to do this by inscribing his crimes in the language of confession and presenting them to Amelia. Foster usefully reminds us of an odd feature of confession: "to be absolved, it is enough to submit to the rite of the sacrament."[33] Confession is ideally suited to the reinvestment of trust in language. Unlike the awkward status of the illocutionary "I feel," where hypocrisy is always possible, "I confess" rings out with qualities of what Austin calls a "performative."[34] When Booth therefore puts pen to paper to tell Amelia the truth, he has the opportunity to use language in the most open and honest way possible. If he could stop hiding behind his scepticism and for once place his "soul" in language, he would begin the process of regeneration that the novel promises. He almost does:

> *My dearest sweetest Love*, I write this from the Bailiff's House, where I was formerly, and to which I am again brought at the Suit of that Villain, *Trent*. I have the Misfortune to think I owe this Accident (I mean that it happened to Night) to my own Folly, in endeavouring to keep a Secret from you—O my Dear, had I had Resolution to confess my Crime to you, your Forgiveness would, I am convinced, have cost me only a few Blushes, and I had now been happy in your Arms. Fool that I was to leave you on such an Account, and to add to a former Transgression a new one.—Yet by Heavens I mean not a Transgression of the like kind; for of that I am not, nor ever will be guilty; and when you know the true Reason of my leaving you To-night, I think you will pity, rather than upbraid me. I am sure you would, if you knew the Compunction with which I left you to go to the most worthless, the most infamous—Do guess the rest—Guess that Crime with which I cannot stain my Paper—but still believe me no more guilty than I am—or, if it will lessen your Vexation at what hath befallen me, believe me as guilty as you please, and think me, for a while at least, as undeserving of you, as I think myself. (p. 492)

After this odd confession Booth finds it perfectly easy to articulate his crime in specific terms. It might be argued that in articulating his own guilt and depending on Amelia's understanding and her sympathy, Booth is placing her above his own fear of the past and in that sense changing the terms on which the relationship between them has been based. His strange syntax here and his refusal to come to the point suggest a more direct relation between language and feeling than he has elsewhere managed. His urgent ejaculations, his violent self-reproach, his

33 Foster, p. 3.

34 See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Shibsá (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 54.

trust in Amelia's goodness—all these things come across because of the language in which they are expressed. No more of Booth's studied and superior periods here: he is committing himself to Amelia in the language of confession at last. If he stops short of articulating his crime, perhaps that is because he has found a way to expose rather than conceal his secrets in language. Here his silence speaks with the love and concern he has been afraid to express.

But still something more is happening. Fielding's use of the epistolary mode at this juncture of the novel completely effaces his own narrative presence. At the centre of the emotional structure of the novel, this letter challenges what is at times an awkward narrative perspective with the unmediated writing of the central character. But it also an indirect confrontation on Booth's part—so indirect as to seem impersonal. What explains this odd shift? It is tempting to think that this letter answers a confessional need on the part of the author himself—a cry of atonement to the wife he had adored and who is lost to him—and that the resolution that is here promised is a resolution for Fielding as well. Booth's honesty, tentative and even hedged at times, is at least an attempt to break through the limits of his secret guilt and open himself to the love that Amelia offers.

It may express even more for Fielding himself. Battestin has made it clear that Booth has many features of Fielding's father: like Booth, Edmund Fielding was a gallant military officer; the circumstances of his courtship were similar to those that Booth describes; and again like Booth, he was reduced to half-pay and a weakness for gambling. Battestin suggests that perhaps Henry "came to understand Edmund better and to forgive him." "I suspect," Battestin says, "that in *Amelia* Fielding tried to expiate his former bitterness toward Edmund, that in the character of Captain Booth—a soldier too weak to follow his own good intentions, who nearly ruins his family through his gaming and dissipation—Fielding sought not only to come to terms with his own all too fallible nature, but to reconcile himself to his father's memory."[35] I think that this is a reasonable suggestion, but I would take it one step further. At this moment when Booth steps out of the surface of the novel, as it were, to write an open-ended confession for past crimes, Fielding may be imagining that his father has at last asked him for forgiveness: confession redeems the past and makes it possible to reimagine history.[36]

35 See Battestin, *Henry Fielding*, pp. 541–42.

36 At least one further autobiographical element may reverberate in this heartfelt plea; see Martin C. Battestin, "Henry Fielding, Sarah Fielding, and 'the Dreadful Sin of Incest,'" *Novel* 13 (1979), 6–18.

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Booth's confession makes the resolution possible as well, and when Booth tells Dr Harrison of his return of faith, the good man utters his oft-quoted simile: "at present, as the Devil hath thought proper to set you free, I will try if I can prevail on the Bailiff to do the same" (p. 512). Booth is freed from his guilt and from his scepticism at the same moment. Harrison moves so easily from the private rectification to the public one that it is possible to forget how painfully bifurcated the novel has been all along. In confessing his crimes not to God but to Amelia, Booth has reinvested the private world of personal relation with the power to resolve the crisis of his public humiliation. His faith, a latitudinarian belief in man's goodness, finds its first object in the figure of his wife. If at the end of the novel, Booth and Amelia have "enjoyed an uninterrupted Course of Health and Happiness" (p. 532), Fielding's prescription for society is clear enough. Booth's confession is an act of faith in the possibility of personal success in a sceptical age. He places marriage at the centre of his scheme for the "Welfare of Society," because he sees in the trust that develops between two people a basis for the social contract.

Other critics have discusses the function of domestic experience in the construction of bourgeois ideology.[37] Fielding could be seen to be participating in such a cultural shift. His depiction of the experience of marriage, his emphasis on the vice of mid-century society, and his use of the figure of confession, however, all go to make his version of the domestic more formative than "transitional." For better or worse, that is, Fielding articulates an ideology of the personal that includes mutual trust, sentimental expectation, and erotic pleasure. By placing confession at the centre of this configuration, moreover, he explains how individuals can move beyond the merely personal into the world of public experience and back again. This is not only the resolution of a single novel, but it is also an articulation of the value of the private that ordered middle-class experience for the next two centuries. Fielding has made his own confession in this novel, offering a rare portrait of intimate experience, and depicting happiness for once as more than a closing cliché.

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37 See, for instance, Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, esp. pp. 3–27.