

## A Re-Evaluation of *Tom Jones* and *Roderick Random*

Keisuke KODAMA

Mark RICHARDSON

For whatever reason novels of the eighteenth century are read, they are generally studied as predecessors of the great Victorian novels. Almost every introduction to an eighteenth century work deals with its relevance to the creation of the novel as a genre and with its technical innovations. For this reason, structure and compositional proficiency take on added significance, and so *Tom Jones* becomes acclaimed primarily as the most perfectly structured novel, while *Roderick Random* is relegated to relative obscurity as little more than a Picaresque romp. According to H. W. Hodges, in his Introduction to the Everyman edition of *Roderick Random*, "Appreciation of Smollett's work as a whole, apart from his contribution to our knowledge of the Navy in the eighteenth century, is a difficult task. This is due to a certain 'methodlessness' in his writing and an almost entire absence of form or plot."<sup>(1)</sup> This paper will suggest that the difference between these two novels, even in structure, is not so great, and that the two should be regarded with more equal merit.

A close examination of *Roderick Random* and *Tom Jones* reveals a striking similarity between them, in incidental detail, structure, and theme. The most obvious similarity is that they both belong to the Picaresque school. Hodges remarks that the structure of *Roderick Random* is,

derived consciously from the Picaresque school of writers, the best exponents of which were Cervantes, Le Sage, and Defoe. Smollett intends to provide us with a novel depicting crowded hours of adventurous life by sea and land, in the tavern or gambling-den, and introducing in almost bewildering succession types of all sorts and conditions of men.<sup>(2)</sup>

Disregarding the comment about sea adventure, this description applies equally well to *Tom Jones*.

The mention of Cervantes is particularly apt, for both Smollett and Fielding took

---

1 Tobias Smollett, *Roderick Random* (London: The Garden City Press, 1964)p. xiii.

2 *Ibid.*, p. ix.

him as a conscious model.<sup>(3)</sup> Following Cervantes' pattern, both authors pair up a main character with an antithetical companion, so Tom and Partridge, and Roderick and Strap can be thought of as complementary halves of a unit, as can Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

The companion is cast in the roll of a servant who expects an eventual reward for his devotion and pains. As Sancho Panza awaits his governorship, Strap and Partridge anticipate monetary recompense. Though their relationship to the main character is mercenary at the outset, it soon becomes an emotional attachment. And even though the companion characters of all three works are naturally cowardly and tend to desert the hero in a pinch, this is to point out the extraordinary courage and natural superiority of the main character and in no way detracts from the genuine attachment existing between members of each pair.

The parallel with Don Quixote continues as the hero and his companion encounter, in their travels, various strangers who relate their histories in extraneous interludes. "The History of the Man of the Hill", "The History of Miss Williams", and "Mr. Melophyn's Story" are similar to the pastoral intermissions of *Don Quixote* in that they contribute little to the development of the main story. But all are in the Picaresque tradition and help to bind the three more firmly into the same sub-genre.

Other incidental details abound, though some are barely noticeable (for example, both Strap and Partridge are barbers who have an unusual knowledge of Latin literature). But the truly significant similarity between the two books is thematic: a "foundling" (Roderick and Tom are both essentially parentless) pursues his rightful place as a gentleman of notable social standing, his true love, and reunion with his lost parentage. This search is essentially a quest for identity, which has been lost through the machinations of deceitful kinsmen and a harshly judgemental society. (It should be noted that both Tom and Roderick are educated as gentlemen, making them unfit for any kind of practical work. Their knowledge of the classics greatly surprises those around them, rendering their identity progressively more questionable and mysterious. In every tavern they visit, speculative histories are attributed to them, and the theme of "Who is he?" re-echoes, underlining the thematic proposition of the

---

3 Though *Gil Blas* is the rightful parent of *Roderick Random* (as Smollett explains in his Preface), and though *Don Quixote* more strictly applies as a model for *Joseph Andrews* than for *Tom Jones*; still, the adventures of the Knight of the Woeful Countenance were continually translated and parodied; they permeated many major works of the period. *Tom Jones* contains many direct references to *Don Quixote*.

book).

The recovery of identity for both Tom and Roderick is accomplished through the means of a painful educational process, the nature of which is two-fold: the hero of the story must learn what is of true value in life, and he must, to an extent, suffer a fire of purification before he can obtain the woman he loves and the social standing he deserves by right of birth and education.

Both Roderick and Tom set out on a journey to the city, where each hopes to make his fortune. City life, however, quickly becomes synonymous with double-dealing, and "knowledge of the world" a euphemism for cynicism and betrayal. Tom and Roderick fall prey to sharpers, and both are subjected to the temptation of adopting similar unsavory methods in order to survive. At this point, the innocence of both turns to opportunism, and gradually we see them reduced to practicing upon the affections of rich heiresses. So we have Tom as kept-man and gigolo, ostensibly to open a way to Sophia, but actually pushing her farther and farther into inaccessibility. The shame and ruin that follow closely upon his liaison with Molly Seagrim, Mrs. Waters, and Lady Bellaston are more than a matter of sowing wild oats. A constant comparison of the appearances and behavior of these ladies with "the perfections of Sophia" impresses upon Tom the qualities which are truly important, but the suffering he undergoes drives this awareness to a deeper level than can be approached by rational thought. Tom has been the butt of ridicule and the object of persecution by those in the social world whom he sought to impress, but his humiliation serves to illustrate clearly the fickleness of the social world and the constancy of Sophia; the juxtaposition of the two gives Tom the passion to win Sophia.

In a parallel situation we see Roderick cutting an absurd figure at the play house.

I was guilty of a thousand ridiculous coquetries; and I dare say, how favourable soever the thoughts of the company might be at my first appearance, they were soon changed, by my absurd behaviour, into pity or contempt. I rose and sat down, covered and uncovered my head twenty times between the acts; pulled out my watch, clapped it to my ear, wound it up, set it, gave it the hearing again; displayed my snuff-box, affected to take snuff, that I might have an opportunity of showing my brilliant, and wiped my nose with a perfumed handkerchief; then dangled my cane, and adjusted my swordknot, and acted many more fooleries of the same kind, in hopes of obtaining the character of a pretty fellow... (Ch. XLV)

The persona of the narrative recognizes, with the value of hindsight, the absurdity of his behavior ("ridiculous coquetries," "fooleries," "a pretty fellow") and anticipates that the culmination of all this affectation will be the conquest of a foul-mouthed whore. Many of Roderick's speculations produce similar results, and he learns piecemeal who his genuine friends are and which ladies are truly worthy of devotion. As in *Tom Jones*, the shams are eventually penetrated, the social humiliation and suffering have a purgative effect, and true love generates the passion to overcome all obstacles:

This good old gentlewoman (Mrs. Sagely), to give me a convincing proof of my dear Narcissa's unalterable love, gratified me with a sight of the last letter she had favoured her with, in which I was mentioned with so much honour, tenderness, and concern, that my soul was fired with impatience, and I determined to ride all night, that I might have it the sooner in my power to make her happy. (Ch. LXVII)

The fire of purification is personified in both novels as Fortune, who sometimes smiles, but usually frowns, on the aspirations of Tom and Roderick. Each time they acquire a measure of fortune or social standing (requisites for obtaining the lady of their dreams), Fortune pulls the rug from underneath them and has them start from the beginning. No less than six times in his adventures does Roderick find himself friendless, penniless, and abandoned. Each time he laments his fate using almost identical phraseology:

... I passed the night in a very solitary manner, reflecting on the severity of my fate, and endeavoring to protect some likely scheme of life for the future; but my invention failed me; I saw nothing but insurmountable difficulties in my way, and was ready to despair at the miserable prospects. (Ch. XLII)

Jones suffers similar afflictions, which commence at the outset of his journey:

... He had, in his frantic disposition, tossed everything from him, and, amongst the rest, his pocket-book, which he had received from Mr. Allworthy, which he had never opened, and which now first occurred to his memory. (Ch. XII)

The pocketbook contains the five hundred pounds that would have secured him a comfortable entrance into some profession, military or commercial. But Fortune has decreed that Tom is not to succeed comfortably, so each minor triumph, social, economic, or romantic, is quickly followed by blistering failure. When Tom has suffered enough, even at the hands of Sophia herself, he is at last permitted to claim

his reward: true love. The "revelation" chapters ensue, in which his parentage is discovered and his identity established.

The thematic progression of the two novels is, therefore, parallel: the hero moves from innocence to knowledge of himself and the world, the objective correlative of this being the movement from the country to the city in an identical structural parallel. In this progression, both heroes suffer as innocent victims and finally as victims of their own pursuit of glory and gain. But they rise from the ashes of pecuniary and social humiliation to be better and wiser men, and they find the same happiness: true love, fortune, the status of gentlemen, and their fathers (or the father-figure of Mr. Allworthy). These gains culminate in the recovery of their identity; they have exchanged the status of disconnected orphan for that of beloved son. This recovery, or discovery, of identity is of pivotal importance to both novels because it defines the nature of the hero's journey and raises it to the level of the spiritual quest.

If the reader is impressed by superficial technical dexterity in plot-making, then *Tom Jones* is by far the better novel. But David Goldknoph, in "The Failure of Plot in *Tom Jones*," suggests that Fielding may not deserve the respect for this which he has customarily received.<sup>(4)</sup> And far from being "Methodless" and deficient in form or structure, *Roderick Random* consists of a sequence of educational events of significant thematic importance. Both works transcend the merely Picaresque. It is curious, therefore, that two works of such striking similarity should be so differently valued. If *Tom Jones* has been reclaimed from its nineteenth-century detractors, should not the forgotten orphan of *Roderick Random* be reclaimed as well?

---

4 David Goldknoph, "The Failure of Plot in *Tom Jones*" reprinted in The Norton Critical Edition of *Tom Jones* edited by Sheridan Baker (London: W. W. Norton & Co, 1973) pp. 792-804. Goldknoph points out what he considers to be the "inadequacy of the novel's inner structure—that is to say, its plot—to its sense-supporting task, " necessitating the imposition "upon this meticulously organized work an elaborate superstructure of authorial interpretation, supplied mainly, but by no means entirely by the famous introductory chapters. " (p. 792)