

# Compulsory heterosexuality and male power in Henry Fielding's Tom Jones



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According to 18th-century feminist writer Mary Montagu, “ Men, biased by custom, prejudice, and interest, have presumed boldly to pronounce sentence in their own favor, because possession empowered them to make violence take place of justice.” Over two centuries after Montagu published *Woman Not Inferior to Man*, the source of these words, feminist writer Adrienne Rich published her essay “ Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” In writing this essay, Rich intended to explore the ways in which the same male violence, power, and heterosexuality that Montagu describes disempower women in addition to challenging the erasure of non-heterosexual experiences from literature. Although it is unlikely that the non-heterosexual experience was within the scope of Montagu or any other 18th-century writers, the characteristics of male power that Rich identifies in this essay are applicable to a wide range of literature from that era, including Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*. According to literary scholar Ian Watt, the novel as a literary form established by 18th-century writers such as Fielding is rooted in realism, which attempts to capture the rawest aspects of the human experience, from sexual appetite to the need to steal to blind and overwhelming hypocrisy, and this includes the portrayal of compulsory heterosexuality--or the assumed heterosexuality and desire for heterosexual sex enforced by the patriarchy --being forced on female characters (Watt, 364). The methods Rich lists that Fielding presents include controlling women’s sexuality, their children, their labor, their movement, their purpose, and their knowledge and understanding of the world. In some scenarios, this novel’s comedic tone suggests that Fielding is critical of these behaviors, such as the use of Sophia as an object of her father’s business transactions, but the way in which he presents certain conflicts, such as Bridget Allworthy

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abandoning her child, suggests that this is not always the case. In this essay, I intend to explore which of the characteristics of male power Henry Fielding satirically condemns and which he accidentally or intentionally supports in Tom Jones.

The first two characteristics of male power on Rich's list are first to deny women of their own sexuality or, secondly, to force male sexuality upon them (638). Rich includes several examples of these, including rape, incest, deprivation of what is desired (such as a partner), the public idealization of heterosexual relationships, and punishment for female indiscretion, which are all present in Tom Jones. Perhaps the most obvious example of male sexuality being forced upon a female character is when Lord Fellamar and Lady Bellaston's orchestrated attempt to sexually assault Sophia Western. Lord Fellamar, an evil aristocrat infatuated with the sweet, innocent daughter of Squire Western, falls victim to Sophia's vengeful cousin Lady Bellaston, who convinces him that he must force himself on Sophia so that she will have to marry him. Additionally, this will eliminate Sophia as Lady Bellaston's competition for the affection of protagonist Tom Jones. Rich would likely argue that in attempting to assault her, Lord Fellamar is trying to confuse sexuality and violence for Sophia, which is a method of reinforcing his male power (642). Rich quotes that:... taking rape from the realm of "the sexual," and placing it in the realm of "the violent," allows one to be against it without raising any questions about the extent to which the institution of heterosexuality has defined force as a normal part of "the preliminaries." Never is it asked whether, under conditions of male supremacy, the notion of 'consent' has any meaning. 642.

When applied to Tom Jones, this quote highlights Lord Fellamar's attempted assault as an attack not only on Sophia herself, but on female agency in the novel as a whole. The fact that he did not complete Lady Bellaston's questionable instructions suggests that Henry Fielding condemns this type of behavior and consequently needs to criticize it without completing the act. This may also be the case in the novel's lone suggestion of incest. When Partridge, a bumbling school teacher, waltzes into Tom's cell only to discover that he has slept with Mrs. Waters, who was formerly known as Jenny Jones and Tom's birth mother. It is shortly after revealed that the two are not related, but the suggestion that Tom pursued his Oedipal complex and that she did not recognize her own son robs her of the knowledge typically associated with motherhood. It is also logistically unlikely that a mother and son would accidentally sleep together in the 18th century, so by criticizing behavior that is both problematic and infeasible, Fielding is reiterating his critical views of male power. Although acts of sexual violence are easiest to identify as overwhelming forces of male power, depriving female characters from their desires is another method of asserting dominance that Fielding criticizes.

Sophia is not the novel's only victim of deprivation, but hers is the most aggressive and intentional: when her desire to be with Tom becomes public, the majority of male characters present at this point in attempt to prevent her from being with him. Most notably, Squire Western refuses to let her leave the house as a result of her affections and attempts to force her into another marriage, and Lord Fallamar's attempt to assault her is rooted not only in his desire to force her to be his bride, but also his aggressive desire

not to see her with Tom, who he believes is below him. Additionally, although Lady Bellaston is not a male character and therefore it is challenging to view her as an enforcer of male power, much of her vengefulness towards Sophia comes from her desire to be with Tom and therefore for Sophia to be with anyone else. Because she is somewhat sexually motivated, this may be another instance in which Fielding is criticizing the dictation of women's partners by mocking it with Lady Bellaston's interest in Tom, whereas a "good-natured" attempt to keep him away from Sophia may instead suggest that Fielding believes that others, especially men, ought to be able to control who women love. In addition to literally controlling female sexuality, the constant public idealization of heterosexual relationships is a method of asserting dominance over all of the female characters, especially the ones who are unsatisfied in their current romantic or sexual situations.

Molly Seagrim, Tom's on-again-off-again lover described as "bold and forward" and extremely masculine in personality and behavior, has more sexual partners than nearly all of the other female characters combined and in doing so makes them look prude in comparison (Fielding, 190). According to Rich, this is a force mechanism that is used both in and by literature to surround women with the male sexuality so heavily that it becomes their duty and priority to fulfill it. She writes that "heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure" so much that women believe it is the only way they can find fulfillment in addition to it being a role they must fill (654). Although Fielding does not seem to write Lady Bellaston and Sophia as characters to be pitied in this regard, they seem to be especially impacted by this. Although she has jealousy as a motive for her

behavior, Lady Bellaston is crushed by the revelations of Tom's sexual escapades. While this could be because she desires to be with Tom, the problem may be deeper than that: it is possible that the constant presence of sex reminds Lady Bellaston of her failure to fulfill her sexual duty. However, Fielding contradicts himself by both idealizing and punishing the same character to reinforce the complexities of male power: although the depiction of Molly's sexual freedom forces male sexuality onto the other female characters, it also reminds them that males still have the power to reprimand them for being too sexually liberal. Molly's pregnancy, although perhaps not surprising to a contemporary reader, creates an uproar among those around her. After Molly points out that her mother, too, was "guilty" of fornication, Mrs. Seagrim says to her daughter: "Yes, hussy," answered the enraged mother, "so I was, and what was the mighty matter of that? I was made an honest woman then; and if you was to be made an honest woman, I should not be angry; but you must have to do with a gentleman, you nasty slut; you will have a bastard, hussy, you will; and that I defy anyone to say of me." (Fielding, 198). Her mother's verbal brutality expresses the severity of shame associated with pregnancy and foreshadows the challenges which Molly will face having been impregnated premaritally. The greatest criticism comes from the other women in town, which is also how Sophia learns of Molly and Tom's relationship. Sophia's maid, Mrs. Honour, tells her after seeing Molly at Church that:... [Molly] hath been carried before the justice for being big with child. She seemed to me to look like a confident slut: and to be sure she hath laid the child to young Mr. Jones. And all the parish says Mr. Allworthy is so angry with young Mr. Jones, that he won't see him. To be sure, one can't help pitying the poor young man, and yet he doth

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not deserve much pity neither, for demeaning himself with such kind of trumpery. Yet he is so pretty a gentleman, I should be sorry to have him turned out of doors. (Fielding, 210).

In saying this, Mrs. Honour is not only shaming Molly for her behavior, but she is completely excusing Tom's even though he is, himself a bastard, which opens him up for criticism throughout the novel. It is unclear in these circumstances whether Fielding is using comedy to point out the sexual double-standard or if he is lightly offering a warning about the repercussions of living too carefree a life. The fact that he presents numerous characters forgiving Jones or suggesting that he merely deserves a slap on the wrist (which is ultimately all he gets for his indiscretions) while Molly should be shamed and punished suggests that he finds the dichotomy in treatment of males and females as sexual beings peculiar. Considering the time in which he was writing, it is unlikely that he was intentionally supporting female sexual liberation or the destruction of compulsory heterosexuality, but it is possible that he is using his characters' contradictory yet ridiculous behavior to criticize the frigidity of 18th-century Englishmen.

As Montagu wrote, 18th-century English society collectively behaved as if "Women [were] never to be indulged the sweets of liberty; but ought to pass their whole lives in a state of subordination to the Men, and in an absolute dependence upon them." However, this dependence that results in overwhelming male power, which is reiterated throughout the novel, is not only expressed throughout the sexual control, but is also expressed by the ways in which male characters control female characters in their daily lives.

As Rich explains, denying women of their own sexuality and forcing male  
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sexuality upon them are perhaps the most prominent domination tactics, but they not the only ways to assert male power: controlling or robbing women of their children is another strategy for enforcing compulsory heterosexuality since it is by extension a method of controlling female reproduction. This seems to be the characteristic of male power which Fielding is the least critical of, since he does not seem to criticize it or satirize it at all at any point in the novel. For instance, several of the female characters express dislike of their children, if they are unable to keep them. Bridget Allworthy is the first female character to be impacted by the reinforcement of male power in this way, although it is not revealed until the end of the story that societal pressure and shame for the father caused her to abandon Tom and allow Squire Allworthy and the rest of the town to believe that the child belongs to Jenny Jones.

Likewise, Mrs. Blifil expresses dislike or discontent with their children, which is another technique for asserting male power since here, the male author is taking controlling and robbing the female characters of their children. For instance, it is said of Mrs. Blifil that she:... was not over and above pleased with the behaviour of her husband; nay, to be honest, she absolutely hated him, till his death at last a little reconciled him to her affections. It will not be therefore greatly wondered at, if she had not the most violent regard to the offspring she had by him... that in his infancy she seldom saw her son, or took any notice of him; and hence she acquiesced, after a little reluctance, in all the favors which Mr. Allworthy showered on the foundling; whom the good man called his own boy, and in all things put on an entire equality with Master Blifil. This acquiescence in Mrs. Blifil was considered by the



neighbors, and by the family, as a mark of her condescension to her brother's humour, and she was imagined by all others, as well as Thwackum and Square, to hate the foundling in her heart; nay, the more civility she showed him, the more they conceived she detested him, and the surer schemes she was laying for his ruin: for as they thought it her interest to hate him, it was very difficult for her to persuade them she did not (Fielding, 120). The way in which she describes her serious dissatisfaction with her son implies that is dissatisfied with her husband and life her life in general, but here, Fielding is also taking her child away from her as a writer. Since producing an heir was one of the requirements of a valid marriage in the 18th century, this the ultimate blow, which suggests that he is not too concerned and does not find the need to be critical on issues with children.

In addition to controlling women's reproduction, male power sometimes takes the form of fathers controlling their daughters, as Squire Western controls Sophia. This is nearly the opposite of what Fielding does with Mrs. Blifil and her son, but both have the same impact. Squire Western is guilty of having two of the characteristics of male power in his control of his daughter: he confines her physically and prevents her movement, and he uses her as an object in his inter-male transactions. ... Mrs. Western summoned Sophia into her apartment; and having first acquainted her that she had obtained her liberty of her father, she proceeded to read her a long lecture on the subject of matrimony; which she treated not as a romantic scheme of happiness arising from love, as it hath been described by the poets; nor did she mention any of those purposes for which we are taught by divines to regard it as instituted by sacred authority; she considered it rather as a fund

in which prudent women deposit their fortunes to the best advantage, in order to receive a larger interest for them than they could have elsewhere. (Fielding, 329) This suggests that the need to control his daughter is so great, even his sister agrees with it, despite the fact that it is something she does not want. His male power permeates his daughter through his sister, the same way male power permeates Sophia through Lady Bellaston. As the narrator states, “ her father treated her in so violent and outrageous a manner, that he frightened her into an affected compliance with his will; which so highly pleased the good squire, that he changed his frowns into smiles, and his menaces into promises” (Fielding, 354) The final way in which male power is asserted over female characters is not one that Rich identifies as a quality of male power, but is no less significant: the absence of female-to-female relationships. If they were present, they would be the greatest challenge to male power and overwhelming compulsory heterosexuality as is demonstrated in novels like Daniel Defoe’s *Roxana*, which is filled with platonic but potentially homoerotic undertones.

In *Tom Jones*, there is no room for these relationships because female characters are isolated from one another by the other male characters. Several female characters openly conflict with each other over Tom, such as Lady Bellaston unhidden discontent with Tom and Sophia’s relationship, while Sophia internally stewes over his relationship with Molly Seagrim and his many other indiscretions. Relationships characterized by jealousy over men reiterates the power that they have over women. Additionally, there are no female-to-female relationships that are not mediated through male characters or do not exist as reference to male characters: the female

characters in Tom Jones exist primarily between the mothers, sisters, and daughters of their fathers, brothers, and sons. Tom's oldest friend and the widow of a clergyman, Mrs. Miller's life is described with an obvious lack of personal, non-familial, female relationships. She says: We were three sisters. One of us had the good luck to die soon after of the small-pox; a lady was so kind as to take the second out of charity, as she said, to wait upon her... she likewise died within a twelvemonth after my father. Fortune thought proper to provide better for me, and within a month from his decease I was married to a clergyman, who had been my lover a long time before, and who had been very ill used by my father on that account: for though my poor father could not give any of us a shilling, yet he bred us up as delicately, considered us, and would have had us consider ourselves, as highly as if we had been the richest heiresses... Five years did I live in a state of perfect happiness with that best of men, till at last—Oh! cruel! cruel fortune, that ever separated us, that deprived me of the kindest of husbands and my poor girls of the tenderest parent. (Fielding, 663) In describing the ways in which she has lost women around her and is now isolated from society since her husband has died, she is reminding the reader of the fact that her family is her life and she has nothing outside of it, which is the doing of her husband and her father. This ultimately suggests that these are extremely important relationships and that Fielding may be leaving them out in order to isolate his female characters.

In conclusion, although it is unlikely that Fielding's goal in writing Tom Jones was to portray the expression of male power as completely problematic in nature, he did so by exploring the raunchiest parts of human life that Ian

Watt describes as characteristic of the novel, which set a precedent for honesty in literature to come. In satirizing and criticizing male power and the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality is forced upon women, he is also exploring the feminine deviant: in some way, most of Fielding's female characters fail to adhere to societal norms and fail to meet the needs of the men in their lives, which is why male power must be reinforced in the ways that Rich describes. Although Rich and Fielding would probably disagree on the best ways to improve or inform their contemporary readers with literature, and although the roles and "labours" of women changed dramatically between the publishing of *Tom Jones* in 1749 and the publishing of "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" in 1980, they would probably both agree with Montagu's statement that "Surely Women were created by heaven for some better end, than to labour in vain their whole life long." The few goals they shared continue to appear in literary criticisms and will continue to be explored by writers and scholars in the future.

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