# Fielding and Food

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Few authors have glorified the act of eating quite so magnificently as Henry Fielding. This is the man, after all, whose famous song is "The Roast Beef of Old England" (1731-34) and whose most celebrated scene depicts Mrs Waters and the roast beef competing for Tom Jones' attention. In fact, Fielding speaks so frequently and feelingly of food that at times it seems, as more than one critic has noted, almost obsessive. (See O'Brien 617).

For example, it seems safe to assume that most readers have interpreted Pope's "True Wit is Nature to Advantage Drest" as a clothing metaphor. In *Tom Jones* (1749) Fielding interprets it as a cooking metaphor (33). Similarly, while Ulysses certainly has many laudable traits, it is doubtful that many would think to praise him, as Fielding does, for having "had the best stomach of all the Heroes in that eating poem of the *Odyssey*" (*Tom Jones* 509).

Still, if Fielding does seem preoccupied with food, that may be understandable. He himself was as robust physically as he was mentally, and he relished eating. In fact, even near the end when the condition of his teeth made chewing a not-always-happy adventure, one of his last requests was that a "very good perfect cook" be sent to him in Lisbon (cited in Dudden 1081).

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While he loved to eat, however, he sometimes lacked the means to do so. In *The Author's Farce* (1734), he depicts starving writers whose mouths are set to watering by culinary similes (30), and there is little doubt that Fielding was drawing his portrait of these food-obsessed authors from life, his own life. For confirmation, one need only consult his piece "On eating" in *The Universal Spectator* (14-21 August 1736) "if any part . . . of this essay has a particular dullness in it, I . . . confess it is owing, not so much to a want of genius as a want of dinner; for it was composed . . . not to divert the town with my writings but divert myself in contemplation of a subject, which though pleasing even in the theory would be much more so could I put it in practice; which that I may . . . is the sincere prayer of your hungry correspondent" (530). He signed the essay "Will Lovemeal."

To a man who relished food but sometimes had to go without, eating would become a highly charged subject. In fact, so charged is it for Fielding that in his works it frequently serves as a touchstone of behaviour. Characters can to some extent be judged by what they eat. For example, Booth's fondness for fowl with egg sauce leads Fielding to praise his "simplicity of . . . taste" (488), much as in *The Champion* (10 May 1740) a couple "enjoying the humble comforts of a mutton chop and a pint of port" are described as "a picture of happiness . . . which the world hath rarely seen" (307-08). As this suggests, Fielding presents good plain food as the ideal, preferring English meat and pudding to the elegancy of the "Bon Goût à la Française" (cited in Battestin 108).

Fielding was in fact, as Martin Battestin says (109), every inch the gastronomic chauvinist. This is most apparent in his unswerving insistence on the superiority of beef, or the Baronet, as he called its sirloin (*Tom Jones*, 188). He carries this praise so far that in his *Don Quixote in England* (1734) he actually has Sancho Panza become "so fond of . . . English roast beef" that he refuses "ever to set . . . foot in Spain again" (25).

For Fielding, English food became a symbol of all things English, including religion. To him, roast beef and pudding was "a *Protestant Meal*" as opposed to French soups and fricassees, which he dubbed "an emblem of the *Popish Religion*" ("On Eating" 528). Consequently, he regarded the English nobility's preference for French and Italian cuisine as downright unpatriotic, if not sacrilegious. Susan the cook speaks for him in *The Grub Street Opera* (1731) in her nostalgia for the days when one could relish the "smell of the old English hospitality . . . before we had learnt this French politeness and been taught to dress our meat by nations that have no meat to dress" (54).

If characters can be judged by what they eat, however, they can also be judged by how they eat — by whether they deny themselves food or whether they indulge themselves in it. For example, Fielding's works are peppered with attacks on ascetics, whom he viewed as sour, dour, and in a sense unnatural. Thus, in *A Journey from This World to the Next* (1743) he has Julian the Apostate tell of how such a man "filled my ears with good things, but not my belly. Instead of high food to fatten . . . my flesh, I had receipts to mortify and to reduce it. With these I edified so well, that within a few months I became a skeleton" (62). In fact, Fielding was such an inveterate enemy of denial that he even ridiculed the King's declaration of a national day of fasting (*The Champion* 142).

However, if excessive denial was wrong, so in his view was excessive indulgence. In *The Champion*, he sarcastically refers to gluttons as "knights of the trencher" (280-83), much as he mocks Parson Trulliber in *Joseph Andrews* (1742) as a man whose shadow ascended "very near as far in height when he lay on his Back, as when he stood on his Legs" (162). To quote Fielding, there is no reason that a creature "should be reckoned less a beast who carries his /burden/ in his belly, than he who carries it at his back" (*The Champion* 280-83).

Indeed, Fielding's ideal on this subject as on many others was moderation. If Booth must learn the error of "quitting the Directions of Prudence, and following the blind Guidance of a predominant Passion" (16), temperance is very much the essence of Fielding's definition of true wisdom. Thus, both Heartfree and Allworthy are described as enjoying in moderation the pleasures of this world while still remaining "as wise as any sour Popish Recluse, who . . . starves his Belly while he lashes his Back" (*Tom Jones* 282; *Jonathan Wild* [1743] 53).

Still, if your attitude toward feeding yourself is important, even more crucial in Fielding is your attitude toward feeding others. What Timothy O'Brien (619-23) has pointed out in regard to *Tom Jones* is true of Fielding's works in general: good characters feed the hungry while bad ones supply food grudgingly, if at all. For example, Amelia's old nurse shelters Amelia and Booth from the storm, dressing for them a chicken and offering the best of her ale (*Amelia* [1751] 86), while the Wilsons generously feed Joseph Andrews and his band by putting "every thing eatable in /their/ House on the Table" (200).

On the other hand, Squire Western in *Tom Jones* is at his worst when he threatens to starve Sophia if she refuses to marry Blifil (305-06), and Peter Pounce in *Joseph Andrews* rejects the notion of relieving the hungry altogether, arguing, "How can any Man complain of Hunger . . . in a Country where such excellent Salads are to be gathered in almost every Field?" (275).

Moreover, Fielding saw the feeding of the hungry as more than simply a moral duty. Allworthy declares that charity is required not just by Christian law but "by the Law of Nature" (*Tom Jones* 95), and Fielding did regard food as a natural right. Nature affords more than enough for everyone, so no one in his view has "any Right or Title to withhold from his Neighbour that Bread which he himself doth not want, and which his Neighbour absolutely" needs (*Covent-Garden Journal* [May 16 1752] 227). In fact, Fielding had such scorn for those who denied food to the hungry that he proposed legal punishment, declaring that no crime is worthier of hanging, without benefit of clergy, than depriving the poor of sustenance (*Voyage* [1755] 306).

Conversely, if he would condemn those who wrongly withhold food, he would pardon those who steal out of need. Fielding felt so strongly about this that he repeatedly dramatises it in his writings. For example, he has Tom Jones not only forgive the inept highwayman who tries to rob him but even offer him some guineas on discovering that the man's wife and five children are starving (680). Or there is the case in *Amelia* of the incarcerated and pitiable father and child, "the latter . . . committed for stealing a Loaf, in order to support the former, and the former receiving it knowing it to be stolen" (34).

The dinner table represents community as appetite connects us to our kind, a fact that underlines the famous opening metaphor in *Tom Jones*. Fielding represents himself as an innkeeper who offers the readers the hospitality of his table, thus establishing a communal bond between himself and the reader that develops in intimacy as the novel progresses. In fact, the social nature of the eating experience lies behind many of Fielding's scenes of characters breaking bread together.

For example, a mood of fellowship and harmony descends as the justice who finally unravels the Booths' case invites the principals home for dinner, where he opens to them "his Heart and [his] Cellars" (525). Similarly, the final chapter of *Tom Jones* presents us with Sophia performing "the Honours of the Table" as — after all they have been through — the characters join together and partake of the feast (978). Their conflicts disappear in an act suggesting the intimacy of the human community, with Blifil however excluded.

Absence from a meal can in fact be a telling point. For instance, when Amelia receives good news about her friend Atkinson, her immediate impulse is to prepare a favourite dinner for Booth and the children. However, when everything is ready, Booth arrives home only to announce that he will not be joining them at table, the reason being his secret meeting with the lustful Miss Matthews. His absenting himself from dinner exemplifies his breaking of the bonds of mutuality (487-89).

Finally, though, the very fact that Amelia wishes to celebrate good news through a special meal makes a point in itself. If Fielding celebrates the act of eating, it is in part because he sees the act of eating as a celebration. It is a natural pleasure that God means us to enjoy. Thus, in *Tom Jones*, Fielding declares that their bodies are "the major Part of most" heroes and ridicules "wise Men" who regard eating "as extremely mean and derogatory from the Philosophic Dignity" (509).

Tom may be spiritual enough to look at the moon and contemplate his love (436-38), but Fielding sees no shame in the fact that he can also consume at one sitting "three Pounds at least of that Flesh which formerly had contributed to the Composition of an Ox" (509). Humans are a combination of the mental and the physical, of the mind and the body, and both must be fed.

Indeed, if Fielding opposes asceticism, it is not merely because it violates his ideal of temperance but because it denies a basic part of our human condition. By showing the great pleasure his characters take in food, Fielding in a sense is affirming the worth of all facets of our nature.

In this context the stress on food as a pleasure that we ought to enjoy acts as a celebration of the essential goodness of our existence. In "heartily and voraciously" devouring "an excellent smoking Dish of Eggs and Bacon" (637), Tom Jones is showing his simple zeal for living, making him — in Guthrie's phrase — a "comic celebrant of life" (Guthrie 91). It is no accident that Fielding's two best novels both end with wedding banquets, implying the desire to sustain and propagate our existence in this world and endorsing its inherent rightness.

If Fielding presents himself as an innkeeper offering us the hospitality of his table, he does indeed see life as a festive gathering. Like his novel, the world itself is an entertaining banquet, and he would have us all — without shame and with relish — join him at the feast.

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