

# Lady Bellaston or Third Wave Feminism in Eighteenth-Century Trenches

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*“Matrimony itself was  
perhaps the enchanted castle  
in which the nymphs  
were said to be confined.”*

*Henry Fielding*

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IT IS a well known fact that literary scholarship on eighteenth-century British literature still owes more attention to Henry Fielding’s female characters. It is some kind of common knowledge that Fielding’s feminine characters are very concerned with fraud, sham, and masks. Some of them lack psychological realism, they are static characters constructed according to the neo-classical recipe.

Out of the rich bibliography dedicated to Henry Fielding’s feminine characters, I only want to mention Carla A. Wilputte because of her perceptive comments on Fielding’s female characters. Wilputte noticed, in her article “‘Women Buried’: Henry Fielding and Feminine Absence” published in *The Modern Language Review* in 2000, that feminine absence, such as Sophia Western’s mother in *Tom Jones* or Mrs. Bennet’s mother in *Amelia*, points to the consequences of erasing women from society. Spiritual and moral values are at stake. In another paper relevant for our topic, this time it is an essay on the continuously pervasive influence of the Restoration rake upon

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the Enlightenment and his survival in the century of the luminaries, Alvin Snider mentions Tiffany Potter's great acumen in commenting on English libertinism and the influence this ethic trend had upon the construction of Fielding's characters.

*Originally cruel, manipulative, and self-serving, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Restoration rake evolved into a more cheerful sinner: the good-natured libertine. While Tom Jones was Henry Fielding's most complete embodiment of this new ideal, Tiffany Potter shows that the revised Georgian libertinism informs and illuminates all of his work. Potter is the first author to make clear how English libertinism changed during the eighteenth century as the violent, hypersexualized Hobbesian libertine, typified by the Earl of Rochester, was tempered by England's cultures of sentiment and sensibility. The good-natured Georgian libertinism that emerged maintained the subversive social, religious, sexual, and philosophical tenets of the old libertinism, but misogynist brutality was replaced by freedom and autonomy for the individual, whether male or female. Libertinism encompasses issues of gender, sexuality, and literary and cultural history and thus provides a useful cultural context for a discussion of a number of critical approaches to Fielding's work, including feminism, queer theory, new historicism, and cultural studies. (Snider 1989, 376)*

Potter and Snider understood the great potential of some of Fielding's characters for modern approaches that paradoxically link late twentieth century understandings of love and sexuality with the apparently prudish century of the Enlightenment, keen on virtue and abstinence. Their approach is very close to what Frederic Will has demonstrated in his article "Cultural Illusions" (2012). We are all part of a culture and consequently, we have to be aware that we are limited and we can only know ourselves as limited. In our case, understanding Fielding's characters is not possible out of the limitations and the specificities of the culture of their time.

This paper comes in the wake of preceding attempts to cast a modern and uninhabited glance at eighteenth century classics. In this paper we try to tackle the problem of Fielding's female characters by analyzing Lady Bellaston, one of the most interesting characters in *Tom Jones*, through a feminist grid. Her voluntary character as well as her capacity to accept female bodily realities seem, in our opinion, to bring her closer to third wave feminism rather than the first wave feminism, the eighteenth-century feminism. A rebel, but not a rebel without a cause, Lady Bellaston seems to be a character for ahead of her time, a character who escaped the moralistic harangue of her time. Whether she did this subversively supported by the author or in spite of her literary father is a question that we shall try to answer. The second problem approached in this paper is Henry

Fielding's own relation to feminist claims and the extent to which he presaged feminism, in general, and the feminism of his century, in particular, as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was published almost half a century after Fielding's death (1754).

Freedom and its particular understanding from a woman's perspective, i.e. women's freedom to marry whom they wanted, is a very important issue in Fielding's *Tom Jones*. The libertarian discourse is not only represented by Sophia who runs away from home in order to escape from parental tyranny or by Lady Bellaston who tries to live according to her own moral recipe. Mrs. Waters, though a less important character, also claims the right to live freely and away from conventions. "I am convinced that particular ceremonies are only requisite to give legal sanction to marriage, and have only a worldly use in giving a woman the privileges of a wife, but that she who lives constant to one man after a solemn private affiance, whatever the world may call her, hath little to charge on her own conscience" (Fielding 1749/1994, 818).

Freedom is a very important problem for Lady Bellaston but, in her case, freedom must be regarded in connection with libertinism. Robert D. Hume's considerations upon the relation between libertinism and freedom are mentioned in Alvin Snider's article "Professing a Libertine in *The Way of the World*." *Libertinism* encompasses a range of meanings that includes Epicureanism, atheism, doctrinal error, free-thinking heterodoxy, *le libertinage érudit* and skepticism, radical politics, sexual immorality—or a heady combination of these (Snider 1989, 376). Therefore, libertinism includes a variety of philosophical and ethical tendencies that go astray from conventional and conservative behavior and ratiocination and imply freedom of thinking and freedom of behavior as well as the risks of freedom. One of the important philosophical foils of libertinism is Epicureanism. This philosophical and ethical trend entered British culture via Pierre Gassendi. The French philosopher made Epicurus "a repository for anxieties concerning gender and sexuality" (ibid., 383). In order to fulfill this role "Gassendi was particularly anxious to dispose of the charges of gluttony against Epicurus and of the long list of sexual transgressions rehearsed and dismissed by Diogenes Laertius" (ibid.). Even in ancient times Epicurus was associated with the discussion of a thorny issue: women's freedom. He opened his school in Athens to women of ability who could discuss philosophy with men. This was possible because he never wanted to prepare leaders in his school. Epicurus made a clear distinction between pleasure and passion: he said pleasure *yes*, and passion *no*. As everybody knows the eighteenth century was the century of reason. Sexual intercourse was viewed as dangerous and destabilizing. That is why one had to stop at pleasure and not indulge in passions which could harm him/her forever. Hence the connection between the ethos of the eighteenth century

and libertinism and the Enlightenment man and woman's obligation not to turn a pleasurable addiction into a passion.

The neo-Epicureans of the Restoration and of the eighteenth century went much farther than libertinism. They supported the Hobbesian contractual liberties which conflated power and pleasure and were characteristic of the time. Marriage and friendship got dislocated and revalued as property transactions. Lady Bellaston participates in such a system of exchange and negotiation as if she were a trader. On the other hand, the pursuit of libertarian pleasure is also egalitarian in the sense that everybody is free to pursue freedom. Concretely, erotic pleasure, at least as it appears in *Tom Jones*, is based on partnership. In that sense, Lady Bellaston's erotic partner is an aristocrat, Lord Fellamar, and not Tom who seems to be just a handsome commoner till his relation to Mr. Allworthy is discovered. Class interferes with pleasure and determines roles and agencies.

From a twenty-first century point of view, I think that Lady Bellaston is a much more interesting character than, for instance, Sophia Western, a character idealized for her desire to marry, by all means. Sophia's beloved is a man whose premarital irregularities should have worried her much more than they actually do. Let us remember Mrs. Waters, Molly Seagrim, Lady Bellaston, even poor Mrs. Miller's younger daughter whom Tom Jones called "my dear wife." "Tom not only gave her many playthings but spent whole hours in playing with her himself" (Fielding 1749/1994, 757). The ambiguity of these preoccupations and the gap that the reader must fill as he/she thinks best makes place for some possibly perverse activities. That Tom pretends that he is innocent and calls these irregularities "faults of youth and wildness" (*ibid.*) is as unconvincing as possible. Sophia, however, seems to be blind and deaf to all these.

On the one hand, Fielding is very interested in women's issues, he defends women's rights, especially women's right to choose whom they want for matrimony. On the other hand, Fielding and his spokesman, Tom Jones, are partial, biased and they expect the highest levels of restraint and morality from their idealized female icon, Sophia Western. Also Fielding understands, even accepts that there may be a lot of amorous by-paths on Tom's not very straight road to virtue.

The idea that freedom is a right of English women is often reiterated in the novel and it echoes the rising British nationalism. Characters as diverse as Mrs. Western or Lady Bellaston make it their motto. Here is, for instance, Mrs. Western's opinion about the issue: "How often have I told you that English women are not to be treated like Circassian women. We have the protection of the world; we are to be won by gentle means only, and not to be hectorred and bullied and beat into compliance" (470). The specificity of English women

comes from the insularity of the British character but also from a feeling of superiority that colonialist nationalism was fed by and on. Racism tinges and limits Fielding's support of women's freedom in the sense that was common in the European Enlightenment. Freedom was deserved only by European women, Circassian ones were to embellish male fantasies of an Orient that neither understands, nor desires freedom.

Also according to Mrs. Western, freedom is the natural condition of women, who deserve it better than men. "We are as free as the men—and I heartily wish I could not say we deserved that freedom better" (727). Understandably, although the good lady does not make this clear, at the back of her mind is the idea that she can only refer to British women. It is only they who deserve and understand freedom as their natural condition. Unfortunately, the good lady does not elaborate more and we are obliged to conclude that freedom is to be taken and not given; hence it is up to women whether they are to be free. The social conditioning of gender is not taken into account. Women are to be blamed if they do not deploy all their natural freedoms.

Of course, the issue of women's freedom refers particularly, according to Fielding, to the moment of entering matrimony although there are in *Tom Jones* women who work, women who try to find an economic niche for themselves. But that kind of freedom is not considered. Notice, in this context, Fielding's irony when he talks about the male pretence to decide by itself upon matrimony. "As to the wedding, it had the evening before been fixed by the male parties to be celebrated on the next morning save one" (468). Fielding refers here to Sophia's father's decision to marry his daughter the very night when the impetuous young woman decides to run away from home. The male and female characters' parallel movement creates an irresistible humorous effect and clarifies Fielding's opinion about women's freedom.

Marriage itself becomes a place of confinement if men and women do not confer upon it. Fielding refuses any idealization, in this respect: "those very enchanters with which romance everywhere abounds were in reality no other than the husbands of those days, and matrimony itself was perhaps the enchanted castle in which the nymphs were said to be confined" (515).

Fielding goes as far as to call a forced marriage "almost an equal prostitution" (723) in this land of liberty. What is more tragic is that the father "felt the same compunction as the bawd" (722) who asks some innocent whom he has ensnared to keep company. Finally, the cause of women's freedom to marry whomever they want comes to be defended by Tom himself. England's glorious reputation as the land of freedom cannot be affected by the stubbornness of some tyrannical parents. "Women in this land of liberty cannot be married by actual brutal force" (691).

IN THIS societal and ideological context Lady Bellaston is a feminist if we consider that empowerment is the most important element of feminism. Also if we take into consideration Mihaela Frunză's article (2003) on "Feminism as/and Ideology" where she agrees with Michael Freedon's argument that feminism is always a reaction or an alternative to masculine ideological constructions, then Lady Bellaston's refusal to marry becomes a feminist reaction to one of the most conservative ideological constructions. I am referring to matrimony, a miniature societal structure that mirrors to perfection the gendered hierarchies of society at large. Lady Bellaston doesn't want to make, with Tom, "that monstrous animal—a husband and wife" (Fielding 1749/1994, 703). Cold-headed and rational, she never forgets that freedom does not exist outside the financial means to support it. That is why she totally rejects the idea of matrimony. "Do you fancy yourself capable of so entirely persuading me out of my senses that I should deliver my whole fortune into your power in order to enable you to support your pleasures at my expense?" (703) Women's freedom is often an argument justifying the lady's decisions. That is one of the reasons why, for instance, she refuses to let Mr. Western know about Sophia's whereabouts in London. Mr. Western is "such a brute" (591). It is Lady Bellaston's strong conviction that she "cannot consent to put any woman under his power who has escaped from it... for he is one of those wretches who think they have a right to tyrannize over us, and from such I shall overesteem it the cause of my sex to rescue any woman who is so unfortunate to be under their power" (591).

Mature, even in the autumn of her life, Lady Bellaston has a history and this makes her even more convincing when she refuses marriage. "You know, Di, I have tried the comforts [of matrimony] once already and once I think is enough for any reasonable women" (744).

What made me think of third wave feminism in connection with Lady Bellaston is that she is so much concerned with differences and the discursive power of feminism. Amber Kinser (2004) emphasizes in her very detailed article about third wave feminism the characteristics of this latest wave in the evolution of this ideological trend. Third wave feminism is particularly interested in women's reproductive rights as well as in reclaiming the derogatory terms that identified woman's free behavior as immorality and independent, free women as whores.

Obliged to play virtue in order to be accepted in the world, Lady Bellaston is the type of woman "whom everybody knows to be what nobody calls her" (Fielding 1749/1994, 700). The chiasmatic construction points to the contradictions between the societal discourses and the societal norms which hypocritically play upon the difference between essence and reality. This is the utmost freedom society allows (for upper class women) at the time. Lady Bellaston reclaims, in her own way, the open expression of her sexuality, which is classified according



to the conventions of the time as whoredom. Consequently, what Lady Bellaston wants and is obliged to want by society is freedom and the ability to play deceit. Lady Bellaston's freedom is not with the others, namely not with other women, but against the others, where others represent society, and her freedom is restricted by class limitations. Let us remember the famous episode when she mercilessly leaves Sophia in the hands of Lord Fellamar, selfishly thinking only of her own freedom.

In this she is definitely a woman of her time and her feminism, i.e. empowerment is class-oriented. Only women of quality, such as herself, deserve freedom. She "had often ridiculed romantic love and indiscreet marriages in her conversation" (589). Cold and rational, Lady Bellaston foreshadows Wollstonecraft's well-known critique of femininity as a vine obliged to depend upon its supportive husband/partner. Lady Bellaston challenges romantic love, she is a rebel satisfied to have the second place in the erotic scale of the time, the second place after the respectable wife, of course. Lady Bellaston was "contented with the possession of that of which another woman had the reversion" (636). More than rebellious, Lady Bellaston verges on prostitution, according to the strict moral norms of the times. She wants to be free to use her body as she pleases. In Sorin Călin's article an interesting exploration of the body as a metaphor, mention is made of I. P. Culianu's theory that the human body is just a prolongation of the mind and a game of the mind. From this perspective, Lady Bellaston's body is the metaphor of her freedom and her sexually enticing clothing is both an obstacle lest the masculine eye should relish in her nudity and a marker of her dependence on the avid eye of her admirers. In order to be admired in its freedom, the body must be covered in such a way that it titillates desires and foreshadows pleasures. Freedom cannot be appreciated in the absence of the tyrannical clothing. Fielding gives us the information that Lady Bellaston used to have a house where she met people, whatever this might mean. The vague referent of her activities and of her visitors suggests that this might be a brothel where it was possible that she entertained both men and women. On the other hand, she is discrete, "her favours are bestowed prudently" (Fielding 1749/1994, 701). Still, she can also be remarkably liberal with her sexual gifts where and when she likes. Actually, through Lady Bellaston the term "whore" is reclaimed, a whore becomes a woman who is not afraid of her sexual drives and wants to use her body freely. Or we know that the issues of reclaiming sexual identities with negative moral connotations are central to third wave feminism. In this sense, Lady Bellaston overpasses some eighteenth-century ideologies and hovers on third wave feminism.

On the other hand, let us not forget that Lady Bellaston is empowered by her affluence and, actually, she turns Tom into a male prostitute, a very unusual

position challenging the usual gender hierarchy of the time. “Lady Bellaston heaped upon him [Tom] violent fondness . . . and turned him into one of the best dressed men in town... [Tom] was actually raised to a state of affluence beyond what he had ever known” (615).

Preoccupied with fraud, sham, and masks, Lady Bellaston is a negative character. No wonder! A feminist must be a negative character! Fielding does not go against the so-called common sense approach of his time. But she is a strong and utterly interesting character. Much more ridiculous in his prudishness is, for instance, Tom Jones who pretends that in his “heart he was never unfaithful” (621) to Sophia. At least, the lady is consistent with herself. Fielding himself characterizes her as being one of those “ladies as much distinguished by their noble intrepidity and a certain superior contempt of reputation from the frail ones of a meaner degree as a virtuous woman of quality is by the elegance and delicacy of her sentiments from the honest wife of a yeoman or a shopkeeper. Lady Bellaston was of this intrepid character” (63).

On the other hand, can the lady be a feminist if she plots a rape and thus betrays her own sex? In this, Lady Bellaston represents an apparently appeasing symbolic defeat of feminism. Fielding was obliged by the constraints of his time to teach her a lesson. At the end, she has to give a cold shoulder to Tom. In order to save her independence she is obliged to make a retreat into morality, at least apparently. Willful and rebellious, Lady Bellaston wants to escape the moralistic constraints of her time. Thus, she becomes a character that is much more interesting than the idealized Sophia Western, at least for a twenty-first century reading.

Foreshadowing some elements of third wave feminism, Lady Bellaston is also a woman of her time. Let us not forget in this respect that Reason was valorized as the most important human faculty during the Enlightenment. Lady Bellaston’s actions and words emphasize the importance of reason in framing the real equality between men and women. Romantic love is one of the most important impediments that women construct against themselves via their own reason. Fielding satirizes such an outlook with words that foreshadow the importance of a season in Oscar Wilde’s characters: “the bane of all women is the country. There they learn a set of romantic notions of love, and I know not what folly, which this town and good companion can scarce eradicate in a whole winter” (673). Rationality prevents Lady Bellaston from forgetting the material aspect of life because she knows that money always talks. “She is remarkably liberal where she likes; though, let me tell you, her favours are so prudently bestowed that they should rather raise a man’s vanity than his gratitude” (701). Discussing Lady Bellaston’s relation to money, it is useful to apply Teodor Negru’s considerations from his article on “Culture and Capitalism: Genealogy of Consumer



Culture.” The economic agency of the capital was discovered during the modern age. As the speed of the capital increases, the capital is more and more profitable. On the other hand, this increasing velocity of the capital leads to a very interesting phenomenon. The capital slowly leaves aside its relations with production and is reinvented according to man or woman’s desires. From the existential point of view, this means that if during the modern age the essence of the being is its becoming, during the post-modern age beings become volatile. Or, on the one hand, Lady Bellaston’s prudently bestowed favours lead her beneficiaries to a certain ontological effacement by the effect of their vanity, on the other hand, Lady Bellaston herself prefers the volatilization of her self as a freedom strategy. Her hidings, her secrecy, her discretion are meant to give the others only partial views of her life and self. The rest, the essence is volatilized by deft manipulation and is meant to create and protect a space of freedom for Lady Bellaston.

The performance of femininity presupposes diplomacy in any dealings with the opposite sex. Sophia will turn into the wife who “always showed the highest deference to the understandings of men, a quality absolutely essential to the making of a good wife” (Fielding 1749/1994, 760). And Lady Bellaston will perform her femininity in ways that surpass her time, She amazes us by her versatility to do what she likes and by her make-believe virtue to the extent that this is necessary in society.

The present analytical exercise shows that beyond categories and classifications and waves upstreaming and downstreaming history or women’s history, there are characters that constitute entities in themselves: unique, fascinating, challenging. Lady Bellaston is, undoubtedly, such a character.

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**Abstract****Lady Bellaston or Third Wave Feminism in Eighteenth-Century Trenches**

This paper tries to tackle the problem of Henry Fielding's female characters by analyzing Lady Bellaston, one of the most interesting characters in *Tom Jones*, through a feminist grid. The second problem this paper deals with is Fielding's own relation to feminist claims and the extent to which he presaged feminism, in general, and the feminism of his century, in particular, taking into account that Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was published almost half a century after Fielding's death (1754).

**Keywords**

feminism, third wave, Enlightenment, freedom, Henry Fielding, Lady Bellaston