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## Digressions and their relevance to the epic unity of Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*

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### Abstract

Though Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* is episodic and open in its construction, yet it cannot be denied that it is thoroughly plotted and its author is a master craftsman. No wonder, then, it has definite and pointed beginning, middle and ending, and it is difficult to disagree with Andrew Wright who holds that there is "an engraftment of sentimental dramatic plot upon the picaresque structure." In a way, this novel stands somewhere between the picaresque narrative and the intensive, well-made novel.

**Keywords:** Digressions, Relevance, Henry

### 1. Introduction

In *Joseph Andrews*, there are three noticeable digressions: the story of Leonora in chapters IV and VI of Book II; the story of Mr. Wilson in the third chapter of Book III; and the story of Leonard and Paul in the tenth chapter of Book IV. They are digressive in that each one stands completely apart from the central plot built around *Joseph Andrews* and Parson Adams. Of these three digressions, the last one is minor and does not need discussion. In the prefatory chapter to Book II, Fielding advises the reader to skip them if he finds them unnecessary and distracting: "... a chapter or two... may be often passed over without any injury to the whole." But, as the italicized portion of this extract evidences, the novelist, like his predecessors for hundreds of years as well as his contemporaries, regards these digressions as no great detriment to the unity that he undoubtedly believes his work possesses. Thus, it may be said that he believes in Aristotlean concept of epic unity which has much in common with what is called "organic unity," and that his digressions are not a contradiction to it but a positive contribution to it. Naturally, one should agree with Battestin when he states: "The structure of *Joseph Andrews*, however, including the so-called digression of Mr. Wilson, was quite carefully designed--given substance and shape by Fielding's Christian ethic and by the principle of what he liked to call 'that Epic Regularity.' From the start the novel had a life and direction of its own."

These so-called digressions are relevant because of their thematic bearing on the novel. The major theme of the book is the satiric exposure of vanity and hypocrisy of the contemporary society. The roadside odyssey of *Joseph Andrews* and Parson Adams brings them in contact with mainly the rural society--the country squires, the landlords and their wives, the priests, the justices of peace and others--and the novelist does not get the opportunity to delineate the urban society and its affectation. During Joseph's brief sojourn in London in the opening chapters of the novel, the novelist is preoccupied with the Joseph-Lady Booby relationship and he does not explore the society around, though he gives a few hints about the scandal-mongering of the fashionable ladies and the "genteel" vices of the town like drinking, gambling, swearing, frequenting playhouses, etc. The two interpolated stories expose the vanity and hypocrisy of the urban society, as the main narrative traces these vices in the rural folk. If we look at the episodes involving Parson Trulliber, the Squire of False Promises or the Squire of Fools, even these do not have much to do with Joseph's story and therefore, in a way, they are digressions. But as they ridicule vice and by implication encourage virtue, we do not consider them extraneous to Fielding's purpose. By the same logic, the tales of Leonora and Mr. Wilson reinforce the unity of Fielding's purpose because they ridicule the vices of hypocrisy and vanity in courtship and marriage, and in the life of the rake. Both Leonora and Mr. Wilson are guilty of a certain kind of affectation, suffer on account of this

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and ultimately realise their folly. Obviously, they are very relevant to the narrative. The story of Leonard and Paul offers another variation on the same theme. In a word, since they present a contrast between innocent goodness and corruption, they are deliberately designed by the author as a key to the meaning of the whole novel. Apropos of the artistic value of the long story of Mr. Wilson, Battestin rightly affirms:

Mr. Wilson's long history, then, is not really a "digression's at all, but rather an integral part of the plan and purpose of *Joseph Andrews*. The broad allegory of the novel represents the pilgrimage of *Joseph Andrews* and Abraham Adams--like their Scriptural namesake. Christian heroes exemplifying the essential virtues of the good man--from the vanity of the town to the relative naturalness and simplicity of the country. While the main narrative exposes selfishness and hypocrisy along the highway, Wilson's rake's progress through the vanities of London completes the panoramic satire of English society."

Defending the two digressions on the ground of aesthetic and thematic unity, Arnold Kettle holds that the artistic use of the two interpolated tales told by two unimportant characters, that seem to have no apparent connection with the novel and hold up the narrative for the time being, is a clear index of how far Fielding has come from the picaresque school because these digressions unmistakably contribute to the basic theme and design of the narrative. To quote his words: But in fact both Leonora (the first of these tales) and Mr. Wilson's story do contribute to the plan of *Joseph Andrews*; neither is a mere casual interlude. Not only do the two tales contrast with and balance each other, both provide variations on the main themes of the book: romance, charity, and love." True, Leonora's story is not merely a crude sermon on the disastrous results of her conduct; the basic aim of the novelist in inserting it in the book is to evince the inappropriateness of such a picture of life and the intrinsic immorality of Pamela's idea of love. Likewise, Mr. Wilson's story adds to the picture of life, presented by the author, by telling us more of the world of the Boobys for the sake of the basic pattern of the narrative.

Differing from F. Homes Dudden who asserts that Fielding's digressions, and particularly the Wilson episode, cannot be justified on artistic grounds, Robert Alter finds these interpolated tales very relevant to the plot and meaningful to the entire narrative even from the point of view of style and language. The style of these digressions tends to be very formal, and has nothing of the vigorous inventiveness of the major characters. Naturally, in contrast with these digressions, the ambient narrative appears to be living and realistic. Elaborating his contention, he avers:

The language and the conventions of the interpolated stories are intended to recall certain vogues of literature—especially the fashionable romance and the cautionary tale—, very different from Fielding's own experiment in creating a comic prose epic. The style of the interpolated material tends to be both formal and formulaic, with none of the animated inventiveness of the novel's main narrative; even the exchanges between characters within the interpolations are recitations of formal periods, not novelistic dialogue: and by contrast, the surrounding narrative is made to seem both livelier and more lifelike than it otherwise would."

The digressions are significant yet in another way; they richly contribute to the comic intentions of the author. When

these stories are being narrated, the characters of the novel respond to them in their own way. The stories belong to the formal plane, while the principal characters to the comic plane. Thus, by making one plane of literature interacting with another, the novelist is able to produce rich comedy. In Leonora's tale, Adams puzzles over the identity of "this Squire Horatio" and later condemns the "more than Corinthian assurance" of Leonora, the snobbish Miss Graveairs injects her own acid words on the "forward slut" Leonora, and Mrs. Slipslop thrusts her usual malapropisms into the elegant progress of the tale. Then, in the very middle of this digression, we get the description of a free-for-all in a country inn. In the story of Mr. Wilson, the comic responses come from Parson Adams every now and then. Besides his story, the person himself is relevant to the plot because in the end he is discovered to be *Joseph Andrews'* father, and he actually arrives at Lady Booby's country seat to solve the mystery of Joseph's parentage.

In the end, it maybe said that in *Joseph Andrews* Fielding has succeeded, to a very great extent, in fusing his diverse materials into a coherent whole, notwithstanding the fact that both his moral purpose and narrative intention are innately contradictory. What contributes to the remarkable cohesiveness of the novel are: first, almost everything that happens in the book is, in essence, plausible because all the main adventures take place during the course of a single journey, and none of the characters is outside the realm of commonplace experience; secondly, the narrative is dominated by the lightness of tone--satirical and ironical; and lastly, it possesses a coherence in matter and manner which lends it a unified totality. In fact, one basic difference between the novel and the picaresque fiction is that the former invariably presents a credible picture of real life, and that it is both more and less than the sum total of its parts. What is commendable about *Joseph Andrews* is that a careful adjustment of matter and manner imparts it remarkable unity. Moreover, even the digressions in it, though diverse in nature and purpose, are linked not only by an underlying consistency of attitude but also by a consistent tone of voice. In short, despite its apparent artlessness and improvisations, this first novel of Fielding is indubitably the creation of a conscious, deft craftsman.

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