Laughing at Leadership

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Abstract

‘Laughing at leadership’ reconsiders an early chapter in the intellectual history of theories of leadership. This paper draws on British novelist Henry Fielding’s forgotten attempt to evaluate political leaders against standards of leadership in his 1743 satirical novel Jonathan Wild, which models political leadership on the exploits of noted English ‘thief-taker general’ Jonathan Wild, who was hanged in 1725. This work is a pioneer in leadership studies: it dates from the beginning of modern studies of the chief political executive, with a biting satire on the emerging power of the British prime-ministership under Walpole. Fielding was politically active as a member of the ‘loyal opposition’ triggered into formation by Walpole’s unprecedented pre-eminence as a party and parliamentary leader and his remarkable 21 year tenure as head of government (1721-42). Is Fielding laughing simply at Walpole, or at the office of the prime ministership or at political leaders as such? What is the standard of ‘greatness’ against which Fielding measures political leadership? What constructive models of ‘great’ political leadership would pass the laughter test?

Introduction

This paper traces a few brief steps which form part of larger project examining theories of political leadership. Oddly perhaps, the few steps taken in this paper are all backwards: trying to recover some of the lost foundations in the eighteenth century of modern theories of political leadership. Standard accounts of political leadership say very little about the intellectual history of political leadership, and those accounts which do rake over the past fail to identify a place for the English novelist, Henry Fielding. This paper is a modest attempt to correct this oversight, based on my conviction that, precisely because of his neglect, Fielding provides us today with a refreshing appraisal of models of political leadership.

Fielding is best remembered as the author of the novel *Tom Jones*. But he deserves to be remembered also as a pioneer of the political novel in England: his early work *Jonathan Wild* has been sadly neglected by literary scholars as well as political theorists. This very puzzling work is a satire on political leadership, sparked by Fielding’s antagonistic relationship with Sir Robert Walpole, acknowledged as England’s first effective prime minister. Fielding was part of the famous Opposition circle of writers who worked unsuccessfully to unseat Walpole and his administration (Nokes 1982, 12-14).

Fielding has a genius for political satire and it is thought that Walpole might even have paid Fielding not to publish *Jonathan Wild* until after his retirement from the political executive to the comfortable backbench in the House of Lords (Battestin 1989, 282, 291-2, 309). For whatever reasons, Fielding did not publish this novel until after Walpole’s retirement. The fact that he did eventually publish it as one of the three volumes in his *Miscellanies* suggests that Fielding might have considered the work to have a significance beyond its anti-Walpole origins. I argue that Fielding saw the wider significance in the novel’s anatomy of political leadership, based on the rise of the powers of the prime-ministerial political executive, typified by but not confined to Walpole.

The novel contrasts the claims to greatness made by the notorious English criminal Jonathan Wild with the more conventional claims about political greatness made on behalf of the emerging office of the prime minister. Fielding’s pathology of greatness
exposes the conventional separation of greatness from goodness, in the world of politics as much as in the world of crime. My thesis is that Fielding provides a classic account of leadership in terms of the two categories of ‘the great’ and ‘the good’, intended to identify the unconventional rarity of that ideal union of the great and the good. Just as many conventional leaders fail to exhibit real leadership, so too many conventionally great public figures fail to exhibit real greatness, precisely because they approach the path to leadership in terms of a choice between greatness and goodness.

But is it really feasible to think of public greatness in terms of a union of ‘the great’ and ‘the good’? Can the two categories ever really be combined in one person? My thesis is that Fielding’s larger point was the need for collective rather than individual leadership, drawing in different ways on the diverse sources of greatness and goodness. Hence his suspicions about the constitutional fitness of prime ministerial pre-eminence, and his now-neglected but pioneering defence of the rights of opposition, of dispersed political power, and of the judiciary as a protection of civil liberties against the rising might of the political executive. Fielding’s practical starting point is this: just because so many great figures have not been totally dominated by the vices of ‘the great’ does not mean that we abandon the search for leaders who take the virtues of ‘the good’ seriously.

Why Jonathan Wild?

The title of the novel identifies it as ‘a Life’, modeled perhaps on Plutarch’s famous lives, but in this case dealing with ‘Jonathan Wild the Great’ (bracketed numbers which follow refer to pages in the Nokes edition of 1982). A Plutarch parallel might be the life of Alexander the Great, who is mentioned at important points in Fielding’s novel about false greatness (see eg, 40, 47, 52, 79). One possibility is that Fielding is suggesting that Alexander and other putative ‘greats’ are perhaps fakes: great fakes not doubt but fakes nonetheless. This interpretation is tentative at best, since the least admiring comments that are made about Alexander the Great come from the character of Wild rather than the author himself (see eg 79). Wild is clearly not a mouthpiece for all the private opinions of Fielding, given his many praises of crime and his contempt for goodness. Yet Wild holds that his life of honest graft is superior to that of many great political leaders, including Alexander the Great. Wild believes that the modest greatness of his life of crime is more appealing and rewarding that the hard grind of political greatness modeled by Alexander.
The historical Jonathan Wild was a prominent criminal who boasted that he was England’s ‘Thief-Taker General’. He was London’s most notorious ‘gang leader, receiver and racketeer’ (Nokes 1982, 7) who, after a life of daring criminality and high publicity, was eventually caught, charged and hanged in 1725. One celebrated version of his life had been written up by Daniel Defoe very soon after his death. Fielding was far from the first to think of Wild as modelling the criminal misconduct at the heart of political life. Even during Wild’s lifetime, ‘the thief-statesman parallel’ (Nokes 1982, 12) circulated quite openly, drawing attention to the similarities between Wild’s excellence as a criminal and the ambiguous excellence required of leading politicians.

Within 15 years or so, Fielding has turned this mixture of history and fable into an original political novel. The grounds for calling it a political novel are set out in a very general way by Fielding himself in his Preface in his discussion of the perils of public greatness. Fielding later pays much closer attention to the political implications of criminal greatness in the text of the novel itself where, in his apparently anti-Walpole strategy, he explicitly compares Wild with prominent statesmen and prime ministers. I will examine the initial and more general discussion before reviewing the body of the text.

Preface to Leadership

Fielding’s is famous for his Prefaces, where he reflects on the intentions and implications of his works of art. That part of his Preface to his collected Miscellanies which deals with the final volume containing Jonathan Wild is a fine example of Fielding’s reflective bent (Nokes 1982, 29-33). This Preface contains four topics or themes which, like four edges around a portrait, frame Fielding’s understanding or at least his presentation of leadership.

The first theme of the Preface is history. Fielding excuses his ‘history of Jonathan Wild’ for its departures from history in his narrative account of ‘this great man’. Fielding claims that his narrative deals with the sort of conduct that Wild ‘might have performed, or would, or should have performed, than what he really did’. This is an imaginary life of a real person designed to reveal the real character of what we can only imagine lies beneath the surface of political life.
The second theme is roguery. Fielding acknowledges that his interest in Wild is less the particular vices of the historical figure of Wild and more the general vices of Wild-like figures. Although Jonathan Wild was a real-life rogue, Fielding’s primary interest is in roguery which is a striking feature of what he terms ‘the great world’. But Fielding protests that he does not mean that ‘my hero’ illustrates ‘nature in general’ or even that roguery expresses the underlying character of English public life. This would only ‘encourage and sooth men in their villainies’. More cynical observers might hold that Newgate (i.e., Newgate prison which features so prominently in Fielding’s novel) reveals ‘human nature with its mask off’. Fielding begs to differ, defending his alternative view that ‘the splendid palaces of the great are often no other than Newgate with the mask on’. Claiming to represent little more than ‘an honest man’s indignation’, Fielding maps out his theme about the masked nature of roguery in civil society as distinct from the unmasked nature of roguery in criminal society.

The third theme is that of greatness. This novel is history generalised, with Wild’s life being retold in ways that would ‘suit any other great man’. Fielding is not universalising his account of greatness as roguery. He is trying to reserve a very special space for genuine greatness by revealing the roguery that lies beneath so much of what passes for greatness. By definition, greatness is a term of distinction, marking out the few from the many. But a reputation for greatness depends not only on the capacity of the few but also on the confidence and credibility of the many who are prepared to acknowledge the great. That is, greatness is relational: it is the label placed on leaders by their followers, albeit at the urging of adept leaders.

The point is that leaders need followers to sustain their claims to greatness. Fielding intends to defend true greatness by distinguishing it from sham greatness. Jonathan Wild is not so much a critique of greatness as a critique of popularly accepted greatness. True greatness is the distinguishing mark of the truly great leader, i.e., the one with genuine leadership. But the few who obtain positions of greatness frequently obtain them by deceiving the many. Fielding makes a distinction between ‘the deceived multitude’ and ‘the few’: and although ‘the glare of riches, and the awe of title, may dazzle and terrify the vulgar’, the few who can see greatness for what it is must do what they can to defend ‘true honour’. Greatness is a social rather than a natural category: it reflects claims made by the few that are accepted by the many. Fielding’s insight is that one of
the troubling problems of greatness is not so much the scarcity of supply but the excess of demand. Fielding attempts to unmask the masking quality of greatness by reducing greatness to variations on the theme of theft: ie, the theft of public confidence by those seeking greatness. The people are too willing to take on trust the claims made by those seeking greatness. Fielding poses as the trust-buster who will unmask ‘the greatness which is commonly worshipped’. The problem with so-called greatness is that its bombastic nature is misconstrued as ‘true greatness of mind’ by ‘the ignorant and ill-judging vulgar’.

The fourth and final theme is goodness, which brings us closer to what Fielding means when he refers in the Preface to ‘the doctrine which I have endeavoured to inculcate in this history’. Fielding is quite open in his claim that he is trying to teach a useful lesson. But is it a lesson about criminal behaviour or social behaviour more generally? His story suggests that most of what passes for greatness is villainy. Despite the fact that so many villains obtain ‘some transitory imperfect honour’, most share and eventually suffer the fate of ‘my hero’ who is hanged. So is the lesson the socially useful one that crime does not pay? Or is it the rather more troubling one that public greatness is frequently a mask for crime, and that very often it does pay? Unlike Wild, Walpole retires to the comfort of the House of Lords. Fielding’s theme is that the people are fallible; worse, they are gullible, with a foible for followership. Crime is the more direct response to this popular predisposition to ‘follow the leader’. Wild turns his back on politics and engages in honest graft, claiming that political greatness is too compromised, with too many unshirkable burdens of public duty which detract from the simpler pursuit of self-interest of the life of crime.

Fielding apologises for placing greatness ‘in so disgraceful and contemptuous a light’. But this is essential to his fundamental distinction between greatness and goodness, and between the moral status of the great and the good. A person ‘may be great without being good, or good without being great’. Fielding is at pains to argue that greatness and goodness can indeed be combined, even if only rarely. He gives two examples of this rare distinction: Socrates and Brutus, a leading philosopher executed for subverting the authority of the city and a politician who executed a political leader, Caesar, for subverting established political authority.
Consolidating his observations, Fielding identifies ‘three distinct characters: the great, the good, and the great and good’, the last of which is ‘the true sublime in human nature’. Again, it is important to recognise Fielding’s acknowledgement of the genuine article of true greatness, of what he calls the union of ‘the great and the admirable’ in his Preface to *Joseph Andrews*. Socrates and Brutus illustrate two of the rare but not impossible paths of convergence of the great and the good. But if one has to choose between greatness without goodness or goodness without greatness, without hesitation Fielding defends the choice of goodness over greatness. Critics see this as his siding with the sociable philosophy of Shaftesbury over that of self-interest celebrated by Hobbes (Nokes 1982, 22). Fielding regards the passion for goodness as ‘the only true and proper object’. He freely notes that the good frequently fall far short of greatness because they lack ‘parts or courage’, but this is preferable to the situation of the great who often have ‘parts and courage’, but little else.

Thus, we begin to appreciate that Fielding intends in *Jonathan Wild* to expose so-called or ‘bombast greatness’ and ‘to strip the monster of its false colours’. The novel is a deconstruction of sham greatness which uses the criminal figure of Wild to send more general lessons about other forms of sham greatness, notably sham political greatness. The grounds for Fielding’s preoccupation with the dangers of political greatness will become clearer if we briefly step outside the novel and look at *Jonathan Wild* in the context of Fielding’s other works dating from around the same time.

*The Political Context*

Fielding’s first attempt to write in the novel form was *Shamela*, his acerbic satire in response to Richardson’s pioneering attempt to portray and promote feminine virtue in his *Pamela: or Virtue Rewarded*. The title page to *Shamela* identifies it as an exposition and correction to *Pamela* by revealing ‘all the matchless arts of that young politician, set in a true and just light’ (Brooks 1971, 313). By extension, Fielding is suggesting that the character of Pamela as portrayed by Richardson is really a sham. Further, that sham virtue is characteristic of politics, in that politicians use these ‘matchless arts’ of deceit to win over and subordinate those subject to their political power.

In less that a year, Fielding followed *Shamela* with *Joseph Andrews*, which like *Jonathan Wild*, is styled a ‘history’, one ‘written in imitation of the manner of
Cervantes’ (Ehrenpreis 1960, iii; cf Watt 1960, , 251; cf 85-6, 133, 197, 205, 251) Where Shamela is all mockery of the pretensions of the wily Pamela, this new and much longer novel presents an alternative picture through the character of Pamela’s naïve and innocent brother, Joseph. The comedy moves beyond satire by constructing a new world with Fielding’s own characters rather than reconstructing Richardson’s imaginary world.

In the Preface to Joseph Andrews, Fielding outlines what would now be called his theory of the novel, which for our purposes is noteworthy because it clarifies the place of goodness in Fielding’s highly original formulation of the art of the comic novel (Ehrenpreis 1960, v-xi). Fielding claims that there are subjects beyond comedy, one of which is villainy which make it unthinkable that a responsible author would write ‘the comedy of Nero’ or any such great villain. Comedy by its nature investigates the vices of the ridiculous rather than ‘ugliness, infirmity, or poverty’, or even less appropriately, the vices of the vile. So is the vile Jonathan Wild a fit subject for Fielding’s comedy? My answer is Yes, because Wild explicitly rejects the Nero option, preferring to remain the leader of a minor gang rather than a party leader of a ruling faction. Wild remains a gangster, never taking seriously the option of becoming a major politician. The comedy of Wild is related to his decision to opt out of political greatness in order to concentrate on the more reliable and uncomplicated life of criminal greatness, even though his supporters are convinced that he has the qualities required for political eminence.

This option makes sense for the author Fielding, because Wild is thereby reduced to the profile of a ridiculously talented person with unfulfilled political potential. The ridiculous quality of his talent is explained in part by his refusal to take the high road of political eminence, and by the fervour of his supporters who hold that Wild has what it takes to make a success of high political office. Wild appreciates the very real cost of that extra mile of hypocrisy that political life would require. To this extent, Wild is a realist, knowing when to back off from schemes that are too ambitious. Yet his life still lends itself to comedy because he celebrates the vice of hypocrisy. The two sources of the ridiculous singled out by Fielding are the comparatively innocent vice of vanity and the less tolerable vice of hypocrisy. Both manage public relations: the tolerable vice of ostentation is designed to overcome indifference by securing applause while the less tolerable vice of deceit is designed to overcome the censure deservedly attaching to roguery.
Joseph Andrews and Jonathan Wild deserve comparison. They are companion pieces. Their leading characters, Joseph and Jonathan, lend themselves to treatment in terms of parallel lives. Joseph helps clarify Fielding’s best case for goodness, while Jonathan helps illuminate Fielding’s worst case against greatness. Fielding’s two novels are each organised into four books, each tending to deal with a different theme. Both novels are picaresque, although critics have long noted that Fielding’s art can never be reduced to this particular narrative type (Watt 1960, 288). But narratives they most certainly are, and it is impossible to pluck any single theme, such as greatness or leadership, out of the moving context of the narrative and hold it up to detached analysis.

Joseph Andrews is the more complex novel because we encounter that second character mentioned on the title page, Abraham Adams, Joseph’s pastor and friend. In fact, Adams dominates the novel, suggesting that Fielding is growing away from the original device of having Pamela’s brother hold focus at the centre of the novel. Joseph certainly begins on centre stage but Fielding soon lets Adams replace Joseph as the central character in the work. This replacement is not unrelated to the issues originally aroused by the publication of Pamela, because in that work Richardson used the clergy as the voice of moral authority to reinforce his own authorial voice. With Adams, Fielding presents an alternative moral authority: ‘a character of perfect simplicity’ in contrast to the political skillfulness of the clergy in Pamela, and one constructed so that the ‘the goodness of his heart will recommend him to the good-natured’ who comprise Fielding’s ideal readership (Ehrenpreis 1960, x-xi).

Political Novels and Novel Politics

To what extent is Jonathan Wild a political novel? I would argue that, despite its neglect by so many analysts of the political novel, it is the pioneering English political novel. It has two distinctive qualities as a political novel: first, the use of the image of criminal conduct to model politics generally; and second, the more specific depreciation of prime-ministerial leadership in terms of greatness divorced from goodness. The first element is daring but not unprecedented. The second element is more revolutionary, in the sense that Fielding seems to be trying to revolve or roll back constitutional developments to deflate the emerging pretensions associated with the office of the prime minister.
Jonathan Wild is perhaps the very first sustained examination of the institution of the prime ministership, which Fielding takes as typical of the emerging model of political leadership. Historically, the prime ministership of Robert Walpole transformed English politics by establishing a new form of executive power around a prime minister as distinct from a ministry. Walpole was responsible for consolidating the power of the ‘primus inter pares’ figure occupying an office with little or no recognition in the classical English constitution so celebrated as the centrepiece of the Glorious Revolution (see eg Hennessy 2000, 38-44). Jonathan Wild is the first of modern political novels because it is an account of the emerging power-house of modern politics which is the prime ministership. It is such an effective political novel because its account is so cleverly ironic in relating the fiction of Wild to the reality of Walpole, or more correctly, in relating criminal to political leadership.

One additional matter should be flagged here, even if only in passing in this presentation. Wild is wily beyond belief and easily capable of enlisting his arts of deception in a political cause, if he had the will. But Fielding shows that there are potentially greater powers at work through the medium of other characters who, although conventionally marginal to society, are at least his equal when they put their mind at work against Wild. Two examples are the two prominent female characters, Laetitia and Mrs Heartfree. Wild is unable to dominate either of them, and is in fact outwitted by both of them at various times, rendered weak by his very passion for their company (Paulson 2000, 127; Nokes 1982, 22). His number one subordinate, Fireblood, eventually steals Laetitia away from him right under his nose as it were, before going that extra step and double-crossing Wild and getting him charged, convicted, jailed and hanged. Mrs Heartfree remains chaste despite being chased almost around the globe by Wild, and she survives to see her husband freed from the false charges brought by Wild and freed from Newgate just as Wild himself enters it in his last days.

These two female characters highlight the limitations of Wild’s greatness. Laetitia is from comfortable society yet is more than a match for Wild in the arts of deception and duplicity. In fact, she gets more of what she wants than Wild ever dreams she is capable of. Mrs Heartfree comes from more modest circles but displays life-skills that keep her safely ahead of the pursuing Wild. Her simple decency shines through, convincing others to come to her aid in her flight from Wild and her quest to free her wrongfully-
imprisoned husband. Both of these characters outwit Wild, suggesting that his criminal
daring is limited by its reactive quality, defining itself by reference to conventional
norms of public life in ways that make it limited when confronted by non-conventional
norms of either the awakening-criminality of Laetitia or the growing-in-greatness
goodness of Mrs Heartfree.

In what follows, I briefly examine Fielding’s treatment of leadership, first by reference
to the general account of greatness as criminality and second by reference to the more
specific criminal greatness available to holders of the office of prime minister.

The Politics of Greatness

Jonathan Wild is not simply a criminal but a leader of criminals: his claim to greatness
rests not simply on his personal abilities as a thief but also his skills as a leader of
thieves. He is a gang leader and much of Fielding’s novel deals with Wild’s
management of tensions within the gang and between the gang and its leader, who so
notably initiates, forms, shapes and motivates the gang. The gang attracts greatness not
because it is itself great but because of the greatness of its leader. Wild is a master
villain, capable of mastering his gang and using them to ‘grow the business’ of his
greatness. He is great not simply because of his criminal excellence but because of his
leadership excellence which drills the gang in the arts of subordination, including the
fearful respect for Wild’s leadership. This fear is the platform for Wild’s reputation for
greatness, probably as much for the public as in the eyes of his followers. Power is not a
word much used in this novel but the power of Wild’s leadership is practised day after
day, and never more clearly than in the power relationships between Wild and his gang
which are staged to such great effect by Wild himself. For Fielding, much of the interest
in Wild is in this side of his character dealing less with his skills as a thief than with his
command of his gang.

The novel might be subtle but it is far from shy in equating crime and politics. Fielding
has Jonathan himself bring up the topic of political leadership in response to the
surprising praise heaped on Jonathan by his earliest co-conspirator that aging figure of
the criminal establishment Count La Ruse, who is repeatedly taken advantage of by the
younger and more ambitious Jonathan. Astonished at the ease with which Jonathan is
able to pick the pockets of and generally cheat the established masters of thievery,
Count la Ruse undertakes to help the lowly-born Jonathan to break into society and to obtain ‘honour and profit in a superior station’ (51). Jonathan claims that he is happy enough with his lot as ‘head of a small party or gang’, arguing that the same skills are required by ‘the statesman and the prig’ to lead either type of gang or party (52). The count cannot believe that anyone could ‘doubt whether it is better to be a great statesman or a common thief’.

Convinced that Jonathan has ‘no superior’ in thievery, the count claims that he has the makings of ‘a complete tool of state, or perhaps a statesman himself’ (53). Jonathan’s reply is that he is unpersuaded that the statesman is happier than the lowly prig, even though they deploy much the same set of wily arts (see eg 50-55). Strikingly, Jonathan argues that the conscience of the prig is calmer than that of the statesman because it has less criminality to endure than that associated with the enlarged ‘breach of confidence’ and betrayals of ‘public confidence’ of statesmen (55). Politicians play for higher stakes and, for Wild at least, the payoff is not worth the considerable costs. Put otherwise: politicians can not be as completely criminal as criminals can be almost completely political, ruling absolutely over their gang in ways that self-interested politicians can only envy.

Successful criminals and successful politicians exercise very similar arts of rule. Both work through others, leading their followers to do their dirty work for them. Both understand the importance of team work, and both appreciate the role that leaders have in forming and sustaining teams. Gangs are much like political parties: the leader orchestrates the collective efforts in ways that maximise the leader’s personal benefits. Leadership is the art of using others for one’s own ends. Greatness in leadership requires the deceitful management of the followers as well as the management of public deception. Wild confesses that mankind is divided initially into two classes: those ‘the base and rabble’ who use their own hands and those ‘the genteel part of the creation’ who use the hands of others (78). This second class is also divided into two sub-classes: those like the gentlemen in commerce who use their ‘employing hands’ for some community benefit and those, like ‘that noble and great part’, who use them for ‘merely for their own use’. Into this sub-class Wild places ‘conquerors, absolute princes, statesmen, and prigs’ (79).
Great criminals can not do it all alone. They require allies in order to pull off the greatest hauls of stolen goods. The real test of criminal greatness is this ability to manage alliances. At its best, it calls for leadership of a very high order, exemplified by Wild’s astute management through fear. Wild illustrates how fear can help support the leader’s reputation for honour and eminence. Honour is properly an attribute of any leader who can maintain the confidence of his followers in his ‘own party or gang’ (75). The ‘highest excellence of a prig’ is displayed in Wild’s cheerful dispatch of those unworthy gang members who he will ‘transport and hang at my pleasure’ (80).

Fielding gives us an example of the importance of what is now called the ethic of dirty hands. At one point near the height of his career, Wild directs one of his gang to commit a robbery with murder. The gang member replies with a principled speech about the virtues of robbery but condemns murder as a vice that is beyond the pale (129-31). Wild invites his follower to reconsider ‘your conscience (a pretty word)’. Wild defends murder in merciful terms as an act to relieve those robbed of their remaining misery. Criminals can not have it both ways: either they are outlaws prepared to live and die for the glory of what they believe, or they retreat within the law and give up their glory and their life of crime. As Wild puts it: it is better to be ‘an honest man than half a rogue’. Turning then on his reluctant follower, Wild says that one can not remain ‘in my gang without abandoning yourself absolutely to my pleasure’, bound by no ‘other law than that of my will’ (131). Wild then ‘impeached and executed’ his reluctant follower who has been sacrificed ‘not to his roguery, but to his conscience’. This is a good example of Wild’s very traditional leadership strategy of governing through fear (163-4).

What distinguishes greatness from lesser forms of rule and domination? Wild’s greatness derives from his restless villainy: he knows no bounds and can never be satisfied with any level of material gain. Fielding notes that ‘the truest mark of greatness is insatiability’ (90). The reason for this boundless ambition has less to do with a passion for other people’s property than with an unquenchable thirst for pre-eminence. Wild’s criminal ambition is a stripped-down version of political ambition, with his love of notoriety acting as a rough and ready proxy for the politician’s love of fame and glory. It is in the nature of greatness always to want more: ‘this restless, amiable disposition, this noble avidity which increases with feeding, is the first principle of or constituent quality of these our great men’ (77).
The classic crisis summarising the politics of greatness is the challenge to Wild posed by the criminally-inclined butcher, Blueskin (160-4). Blueskin claims that any gang leader serves the interests of the gang, and can be deposed whenever the leader fails to satisfy the gang’s interests. He challenges the principle underlying the leadership practices of Wild. Wild’s response sets the scene for his later demise, in which Blueskin draws a knife and stabs Wild in Newgate just before going to his own Wild-arranged hanging. But at the time of Blueskin’s initial defiance, Wild gets the upper hand, responding with his own political doctrine about the distinction between two types of gang. Wild says that Blueskin confuses Wild’s gang with ‘a legal society, where the chief magistrate is always chosen for the public good’. Alas, Wild’s gang is different and it obeys different laws. Illegal gangs depend on their leadership structure: ‘Nothing but a head, and obedience to that head, can preserve a gang a moment from destruction’. Fielding reports that Blueskin’s ‘disobedience and revolt’ fizzles out when his supporters cave in to Wild and hand Blueskin over to him, who in turn hands him over to the authorities as a much-wanted thief.

*The Greatness of Politics*

Nothing recedes like success. Wild is eventually hanged for his crimes. Fate, it seems, determines whether ‘you shall be hanged or be a prime minister’ (212). This leaves open the possibility that prime ministers might deserve to be hanged but escape that fate, either through cleverness above and beyond that demonstrated by Jonathan Wild, or simply through the luck of never having been caught out. In many ways, Wild stands out as a dare to politicians, egging them on to compete with him for the honours of true greatness for a life lived with as few compromises as necessary. In this perspective, politicians are timid leaders who are not prepared to give their all to the pursuit of greatness. They are too dependent on conventional respect and too fearful of their own followers.

Politicians are slavish in ways that Wild is not: in most cases, they are creatures instead of masters of their followers. In most of *Jonathan Wild*, the comparisons between prigs and politicians are seen through the eyes of the non-politician character of Wild himself. Wild wants others to know not only the external story: that he deserves to be considered as great as any political ruler; but also the internal story that he is happier than any political ruler (see eg 79-80). The main difference between the two types of rule is the
range of ‘tools’ available to the leader. The great leader, in criminal or political activities, should follow Wild’s advice on his secrets about his own approach to team leadership: quickly to ‘procure a gang, and to make the use of this gang centre in myself’.

Fielding lets Wild define the similarity between the two offices. As author, Fielding confines his own comparison mainly to their shared profile, as proud high officers in charge of their respective gangs. Fielding notes the presence of ‘that amazing confidence which was indeed the most striking virtue in our hero’ (148). Fielding focuses on their shared capacity to perform as confidence men, through his double portrait of this shared profile with its prominent self-confidence which takes in the confidence of their followers. For instance, we see Wild frequently turning around unpromising situations by the strategic use of ‘the exquisite address of our hero’ (75): so that through this capacity for ‘infinite address did this truly great man know how to play with the passions of men’ (102).

Another shared quality of these two leadership offices is their ability to manage disappointment within the ranks of their followers. Decisions about appointment are one mark of the great leader; but Fielding lets us see the reverse side which is the decisive management of disappointment, typically over those followers who have been led to think that a reward was their due, which the leader now judges as not suitable. Thus for instance, we see that Wild has ‘that noble, bold, great confidence with which a prime minister assures his dependent that the place he promised him was disposed of before’ (108). In this approach, great leadership includes the ability to take hard decisions to discipline and disappoint one’s followers.

Why does Fielding use theft as the particular example of crime to model politics? Wild boasts that he is the ‘thief-taker general’ of the nation: ie, not only a thief but also a fence who profits both ways by stealing and then selling back unwanted stolen goods to their distressed former owners. Greatness is a matter of degree; and according to Wild the degrees of greatness turn on ‘those two little words more and less’ (78). Thievery is the art of obtaining more for oneself and leaving others with less for their use. It is an art which requires extraordinary resourcefulness but minimal financial resources. It is therefore something of a universal art, open to merit with an aura of equality of opportunity about it. Although Wild comes from a modest family background, he rises
and rises before finally falling to the hangman, albeit as a widely-regarded figure of
greatness. Thievery resembles the political arts because it performs a kind of taxation
function: it reallocates resources from those with conventional claims of ownership to
those with unconventional claims of need. Wild holds that ‘the art of policy is the art of
multiplication’: in the crude but understandable sense of getting more than one starts out
with (78).

In this orientation, political rule looks similar because it uses taxation to obtain
resources to reward the needy from the surplus of the wealthy. But whereas political
rule is conventionally judged according to standards of natural justice spelling out
criteria of need, desert or merit, criminal rule is different. It is about reallocation in an
environment with no respect for any standard of natural justice, where truly murderous
thieves like Wild know that the established powers will chase them all the way to the
grave, if necessary. Hence, really ambitious thieves need a gang of supporters to defend
their enterprise. It is this step of recognition which links crime to politics. Gangs are
much like political parties: groups of followers assembled by leaders to protect leaders
from challenge, either internally or from other gangs or parties. It is not so much the
solo art of thievery but the collective art of gangsterism which defines the rough
equivalence between crime and politics.

Gansterism and politics each require leadership to sustain their operations. The focus of
leadership is similar in both cases: mobilising and retaining the support of followers so
that they serve the interests of the leader. Often this requires acts of treachery against
suspect followers and various other forms of divide and rule, as common in political
parties as they are in criminal gangs. Wild praises ‘those great arts which the vulgar call
treachery’, while noting that for ‘great men’ these black arts go by ‘the collective name
of policy, or politics, or rather pollitrics’ (102).

Wild is a master of ‘pollitrics’ or political-tricks. But is all politics just a matter of
deception and trickery? The evidence of Jonathan Wild is ambiguous. On Wild’s own
account, he has more opportunities for greatness through criminal deception than any
prime minister, yet in the end he is deceived and out-tricked by one of his own hand-
picked associates, Fireblood. It might be that ‘pollitrics’ is the way politics is seen from
the distorted perspective of the criminal trickster.
Is there a more sober and balanced perspective on politics? The famous chapter ‘Of Hats’ (102-4) would suggest that Fielding’s only alternative to ‘pollitics’ presented in Jonathan Wild is a kind of hands-off realism which sees all forms of partisanship as equally defective: there is not hat-orthodoxy because no hat style carries any more authority than any other. All hat styles are equally acceptable, and none is naturally privileged as a source of power and authority. Presumably, Fielding is not suggesting that civil society can dispense with all forms of political garb, including the sort of so-called garbage that criminals find so offensive in laws restricting anti-social conduct. The positive doctrine Fielding is advancing emerges only when we move from the critique of greatness to the cultivation of goodness, to which I now turn.

The Case for Goodness

What if anything can be said in favour of goodness? Jonathan Wild contains no example of characters combining greatness and goodness. But it does contain a number of examples of powerfully-placed public officials who act to defend goodness when they see it in others who suffer at the whim of Wild. The novel also contains a number of examples of simple good people who are never close to greatness but who survive their encounters with Wild. The exemplars of goodness are the endearing if simple Heartfree couple and their supporter during the hard times of adversity, the persistent and eventually successful lawyer, Friendly. Perhaps inspired by Plutarch, Fielding constructs a kind of parallel lives out of the Wild and Heartfree characters, balancing the separate worlds of greatness and goodness (Paulson 2000, 128; Nokes 1982, 14).

In addition to these examples of good characters, we have the final reckoning for Wild himself, where goodness in some form at least catches up with his greatness. In the end, Wild hangs; although many innocent persons have suffered at the hands of Wild and his gang, Wild’s demise comes about because of the limitations of his own power to rule over his gang. Treachery turns in on him: he is stabbed by Blueskin, one of his former associates who is on his way to an undeserved death sentence resulting from Wild’s false testimony; and then Wild is turned over to the authorities by Fireblood, yet another former associate who rats on him. Thus, the case for goodness comes in two versions. First, the picture of simple decency Fielding conveys through the good but not great characters. And second, the moral energy at the end of the narrative when the great
villain gets what he deserves and knows that he really deserves it, if his criminal
conduct has been as great as he wants to believe.

But there is another bridge between the sustainably good characters and the demise of
Wild. This bridge is composed of those exercising the public authority of the judicial
system which responds sympathetically to Friendly’s appeals for protection. We learn
that Wild is finally undone by ‘a learned judge’ who ‘is a great enemy to this kind of
greatness’ practised by Wild and labelled ‘priggish greatness’ (168). This is the first of
three instances of judicial review which promote goodness and restrict greatness. The
second is seen when Mrs Heartfree regains her liberty through the intervention of ‘the
chief magistrate’ of the country where she found herself exiled (see eg 201-3). The third
is seen when Mr Heartfree regains his freedom through the intervention of ‘the good
magistrate’ who grants him the requested pardon (see eg 219). These are two examples
of appealing goodness, in the sense that their capacity for goodness is brought into play
through appeals against the usual authority exercised by political powers.

Knowing readers will incline to the view that all this can be explained by the fact that
Fielding himself was a prominent magistrate and brother of the founder of the Bow
Street Runners, the original London police force established at arms’ length from
political control. This is true, but of more direct relevance is the theme of civil liberty
that emerges in the final book of Jonathan Wild. Civil liberty is placed at risk not only
by the cool villainy of Wild but also the warm politics of partisans of executive power.
The importance of civil liberty first emerges in side comments made by Fielding when
narrating Wild’s adventures in pursuit of Mrs Heartfree. (see eg 169). In classic Fielding
irony: free governments tend to be ungrateful ‘towards their great men’, based on ‘a
foolish zeal for a certain ridiculous imaginary thing called liberty’ (169). This theme of
liberty reaches a highpoint in the famous Newgate debate initiated by one Roger
Johnson who is apparently ‘a very great man’, possibly the ‘very grave man’ who, in a
speech that some take to represent Fielding’s own position, unsuccessfully challenges
Wild to lay aside roguery in favour of liberty (see eg 172-6; cf Battersin 1989, 338-9).
One critic calls Johnson ‘that democratic but unsuccessful leader’ (Saintsbury 1932, ix).
Wild, by contrast, is a successful autocrat, ironically praised by Fielding for his
greatness as a leader. But this greatness does not and can not last. Wild’s gang wins this
Newgate contest, but only in the short-term, during the interval it takes for Johnson’s
plea for liberty to win over enough of Wild’s former gang members to sway them to come clean and deprive him of his remaining liberty.

Conclusion

Who really knows what Fielding intended *Jonathan Wild* to mean? I have argued that the novel provides a fresh approach to the study of political leadership. Others will argue that the novel teaches something altogether different, with some critics claiming that Fielding is at heart a protestant moralist with others contending that he is a disciple of Shaftesbury and a fellow-traveller promoting Shaftesbury’s revival of pre-Christian Socratic philosophy. I tend to this latter view. But all agree that *Jonathan Wild* is a difficult work to comprehend, with the real meaning hidden behind veils of delicate irony.

Fielding’s veils of notorious irony are at their most elaborate in *Jonathan Wild*. It might well be that Fielding wrote ‘no greater book’ but it is also true that the novel is ‘the least general favourite’ of his works (Saintsbury 1932, vii). There is no consensus about the anti-Walpole implications of this puzzling novel. At the end of the day, the truth is probably that Fielding is not so much exposing real and potential Walpoles as exposing we the reader-citizens who allow the Walpoles to get away with their less than deserving political leadership (see eg Nokes 1982 16-18). This paper has simply tried to keep alive the possibility that Fielding’s *Jonathan Wild* deserves renewed critical attention for the help it can provide on the intellectual foundations of political leadership.

References


