Tobias Smollett and the Ramble Novel

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Whatever happened to transform the 'Age of Johnson' into an 'Age of Sensibility', one thing is certain. This newer version of the mid-eighteenth century leaves less room than ever for comic fiction. The Age of Johnson put Henry Fielding and Smollett front and centre; treated as narrative satirists, they were worth reading. Bawdy novels and 'spy' novels like Pompey the Little (1751) or Charles Johnson's Chrysalis (1760–3) were likewise cast as strings of satiric episodes. More recently, however, satire has lost its accepted status as the primary literary energy of the age. Fielding's stock fell and Smollett's plummeted. Once thought almost unreadable, Samuel Richardson's Clarissa (1748–9) now presides over a cluster of newly canonized sentimental novels (which might have been tailor-made for recent critical reception, each of them a fragmented and endlessly analyzable commentary on class, gender, and historical change). The much-needed recovery of mid-century women novelists has had a complementary effect; since these authors were struggling for legitimacy after the scandal of Behn, Manley, and Haywood, they tended to work in more didactic and sentimental modes. Now rebranded as 'it' narratives, the spy novels have lately returned to favour, but not necessarily for their humour (see also Festa, Chapter 18).

In these circumstances, it may seem counter-intuitive to assert that the real money for mid-century booksellers lay with comic fiction. Tom Jones (1749) went through four authorized editions within the first year alone, a total of 10,000 copies. Compared to this, Clarissa was a disappointment. While the first four volumes sold briskly enough, the first impression of volumes 5–7 (3,000 copies) took two years to sell, with at least a quarter of purchasers never even completing their sets (Keymer 1994). The fashionable world, as Richardson's major biographers acknowledge, found Clarissa 'very moral and very long and was not inclined to welcome novels with unhappy endings' (Fawkes and Kimpel 1971: 306). Ieven Smollett's Roderick Random (1748), so clearly a lesser achievement, sold 6,500 copies in less than two years. Closer attention to James Raven's statistics for these years brings further surprises. Sterne, Fielding, and Smollett all come before Richardson in Raven's list of best-selling authors (as do Haywood and Defoe). Not far behind are the big translations of Cervantes and Le Sage—both periodically reissued in large runs—and other French and Spanish texts that are only now gaining their rightful place in histories of British fiction. Early translations of Lazarillo de Tormes, Guzmán de Alfarache, and Quevedo's El Buscón went through multiple editions, as did the works of Rabelais, Sorel, and Scarron. And beyond these recognizable texts lie hundreds of now-forgotten comic novels, texts that were read for a season and then tossed aside. Raven counts 500 entirely new novels and a similar number of reprints for the two decades of his study, a total of almost 1,100 texts. A rough accounting of subgenres might put the proportion of comic fiction at 25 or 30 percent—at least as much as the sentimental fiction we have learned so much about in recent years. The statistics also suggest that so much good work on women's fiction has cumulatively overemphasized their actual contribution to the genre. Between 1750 and 1770, at least, Raven finds that women authors can positively be identified for just 14 percent of new fiction (1987: 14, 18, 2007b: 116).

Certainly contemporaries had no doubt that readers picked up novels for entertainment rather than morals or sentiment. Nothing but amusement would do, caped the critics; serious and useful works were scarcely read. The success of Tom Jones, the Critical Review complained in 1756, had 'fill'd half the world with imitating fools.' 'The ridiculous was so much the rage, bemoaned another mid-century essayist, 'that no sooner a droll rogue touches that foible, but he commands all our affections.' Moralist could put on their grave face, critics could complain, persons could harangue from the pulpit, but it was all no use. Readers wanted a good laugh, and anyone who tried to stop them 'may as well think of stemming a flood tide in the river Humber.' Fielding himself had turned towards sentimentalism with Amelia (1752), but his public scoffed and the book was a financial failure. 'Now the Humour, or Manners, of this Age are to laugh at every Thing,' he complained—and the only Way to please them is to make them laugh.3

My task in this chapter is to flesh out this immensely unfamiliar image of mid-eighteenth-century fiction. Inevitably the earlier Fielding looms large—Fielding the 'English Cervantes', the greatest humorist of his age. But it seems infinitely more important to write about the second great comic novelist of these years. Tobias Smollett is now the least familiar of Raven's top six authors, and it is easy to see why. No author sits less comfortably with the current emphasis on the politeness and sensibility of mid-century British culture, and no author is less amenable to feminist perspectives. Smollett's fiction is full of cruel caricatures and nasty torments. He seems to delight in blood, shit, and vomit. But the cripples, the brawls, the misogyny, and emptied chamber pots were all

1 Critical Review, 2 (October 1756), 276.
too typical of mid-eighteenth-century humour. Closer attention to this most unlikeable author might help us understand some of the most confounding incidents in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, and early sentimental fiction.

The present discussion begins with the least-read of Smollett's major novels, *Peregrine Pickle* (1731), a text that moves almost systematically through the everyday comic situations of its age. From this canonical text, it will move to the ephemeral comic fiction that Smollett's contemporaries were consuming in such quantities.

**Peregrine Pickle and the Hostility to Sentiment**

The rise and fall of Smollett's fortunes would itself make a fine case study of the changing preferences of eighteenth-century studies, and indeed of academic literary scholarship as a whole. The earliest real Smollett scholars—those who took up his cause in the early twentieth century—faced an uphill battle trying to rescue their author from the Victorian consensus that he was a coarse and brutal man who wrote dangerous and immoral books. Further difficulties came with the formalist standards then being codified by Henry James; Smollett's fiction was rambling and diffuse, full of digressions and needless attacks on personal enemies. He was a shameless pedlar and probably money to include the brazen 'memoirs' of Lady Vane in *Peregrine Pickle*.* Smollett had neither the formal unity nor the intense psychological realism that readers now expect from a truly great novelist. And most important for present purposes, Smollett's sense of humour had become almost incomprehensible. Thus George Bernard Shaw's comments on *Humphry Clinker* (1771):

> Poverty in rags is a joke, yellow fever is a joke, drunkenness is a joke, dyersery is a joke, kickings, floggings, falls, frights, humiliations, and painful accidents of all sorts are jokes. Hen-pecked husbands and cross-angry mothers-in-law are prime jokes. The infirmities of age and the inexperience and shyness of youth are jokes; and it is first-rate fun to insult and torment those that suffer from them... *Humphry Clinker* may not have become absolutely unreadable; but there is certainly a good deal in this book that is now simply disgusting to the class of readers that in its own day found it uproariously amusing. (1891: 200–1)

All this on the kindliest of Smollett's novels (the only one Shaw knew).

Smollett's studies long remained in a defensive posture, ever obliged to establish the moral and artistic worth of his fiction. Two particular arguments proved their mettle over the generations. First, Smollett's novels were conscious attempts to adapt the ethical functions of Augustan satire to the less formal medium of the novel (see, inter alia, Paulson 1967; Rousseau 1982; Beasley 1998). Here it helped that satire was itself such a loosely defined genre, and that copia or plenteor were expected characteristics of satiric writing. If Smollett was at heart a satirist, ethical functions could be ascribed to almost all his humour, and even the memoirs of Lady Vane could be treated as a pointed satire on upper-class vice. A second argument treated *Roderick Random* and *Peregrine Pickle* as novels of moral education, coming of age narratives comparable to Tom Jones and looking forward to David Copperfield and the rest (Putney 1949; Bouc 1976).

With these and other justifications behind him, Smollett was one of the Big Five for much of the twentieth century. Paired with Fielding in the old Cambridge History of English Literature (1913) and the subject of a long chapter in McKillop's Early Masters of English Fiction (1956), he remained one of the 'Four Major Authors' in the mid-eighteenth-century volume of the Oxford History of English Literature (1979). Modern Language Association (MLA) statistics for Smollett and Richardson scholarship ran close throughout the 1960s and 1970s. There were scores of dissertations and recognized centres of Smollett studies at Yale, Princeton, and the Scottish universities. Smollett and Cervantes, Smollett and Johnson, Smollett and British empiricism, Smollett and Voltaire: generations of scholar patiently traced such connections. Why had Smollett abandoned his early aspirations as a poet? Was he closer to Swift or to Pope as a satirist? As with the two great Augustans, much labour went into identifying historical originals for fictional characters. The Whiggish doctor in *Peregrine Pickle* was Mack Acken; Mr Sondy was Fielding; Garrick, Quin, Chesterfield, and Lyttleton all made their appearances. Such identifications buttressed the topical satire argument and produced serious-looking annotations for the editions. As befitted a major author, there was a long scholarly biography, competing editions of the letters, a volume in the Critical Heritage series, and dedicated sections in the big bibliographies. A bicentennial Smollett edition was announced in the late 1960s, although its first volume would not appear until 1988. Smollett featured on every survey course and there were student editions of all his novels. There was even a decent forgery scandal (1948–53), when the sometime Smollettian Frances Cordasco came up with five letters to solve some long-standing mysteries in Smollett studies.

Then it all went downhill. Smollett's MLA statistics halved between 1980 and 2010, even as eighteenth-century fiction received more attention that ever. New generations of researchers were quite naturally wondering if such an envolos and spiteful author was even worth reading. With Pope and Swift also in decline, satire no longer worked to justify widely differing genres. Above all, the rediscovery of early women novelists and the emergence of feminist criticism altered eighteenth-century studies almost beyond recognition. So much good work on Burney, Charlotte Lennox, Sarah Fielding, and Frances Sheridan has created a sort of replacement canon of mid-century fiction. Smollett has disappeared from most curricula and only *Humphry Clinker* remains consistently in print. Even more quickly than Oliver Goldsmith, Smollett sank into the undifferentiated mass of sources raided by broadly new historicist work. Smollett features prominently in recent studies of travel writing and the grand tour, of Enlightenment historiography,
and of gender, sexuality, and the body. Always recognized as a Scottish author, Smollett remains central to studies of linguistic regionalism, the codification of standard English, and the emergence of an inclusive British identity after the union of 1707 (see also Keymer, Chapter 23). But even with these newer topics, the annual total of articles has dwindled to a trickle. John Richetti's new Cambridge History of English Literature 1660–1780 (2005) gives just five index references to Smollett, only two of them to his fiction. A new volume of the Georgia Smollett comes out every few years, meticulously edited and annotated. But it is all a bit late.

One need not champion Smollett, nor revive the twentieth-century interpretations, to acknowledge his centrality to mid-century fiction. No author so instantly lends us to the long-buried comic strain in early British fiction. If this comedy is now alien and distasteful, all the more reason for striving to understand how eighteenth-century readers could enjoy it so much. And for these purposes, there may be no better place to start than the opening chapters of Peregrine Pickle, where one encounters all Smollett's signature characteristics: the general atmosphere of resentment and suspicion, the vicious pranks and delight in physical pain, and the linguistic gusto that made all his novels so good for reading aloud. The trio of naval characters bursts onto the scene like a travelling circus—all wallops, shrieks, and drunken brawls. In Commodore Trunnion, the one-eyed braggart mariner who runs his house like a man-of-war, Smollett created one of the great eccentricities of British fiction, a figure much admired by Burney, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, and many more. Trunnion provides a perfect victim for the book's earliest sequences of practical jokes, the work of Jack Hatchway (his one-legged former lieutenant) and Tom Pipes (his boatswain), both of them experts at getting the old man into a fit.

Also with the sailors comes the misogyny and the violence that so repels modern readers. This time the misogyny appears in appropriately nautical metaphor, which Smollett clearly delights in reproducing. Women are leaky vessels with desires as deep as the Bay of Biscay. They were painted galleys or hurricanes that blew from every side. Since Trunnion especially detests old maids—"devils incarnate sent from hell to torment mankind"—it is a huge joke for his old shipmates to trick him into marrying Mrs Grizell Pickle, the hero's meddling and puritanical aunt, 'a squinting, block-faced, chattering piss-kitchen' as the commodore has described her (Peregrine Pickle, ch. 5; 20). Husbands and wives always hate each other in Smollett, and the Trunnion–Grizell marriage is the first of many unlikely pairings. (Volume 3 is almost structured around the hero's encounters with the pitiful Mr Hornbeck, an aging cuckold who finds himself married to an oversexed oyster wench.) An early instance of the novel's spectacular violence comes in Trunnion's subjection to petit-coin government, completed only when his wife hires a carpenter to build them a bed. A great brawl ensues, with Trunnion furiously defending his hammock and the carpenter taking a hammer to the old man's remaining eye, leaving him to be 'led about the house like a blind bear growling for prey' (ch. 9; 48). And so it goes on. Since Trunnion hates everything Hanoverian, Hatchway mischievously summons the local exciseman. After much confusion, the man is tied to the household whipping-post and flogged by Pipes (who never goes anywhere without his trusty cat o' nine tails).

Pranks like this were easy enough for modern critics to cast as satiric vignettes. Like lawyers, moneylenders, card-sharpers, and quack doctors, excisemen were regular targets in Tory satire. Satire was routinely described as an act of corporal punishment, and the lash was its most traditional emblem, so the critics had their precedents to cite. But consider the details: the exciseman is flogged until his skin is 'flayed off' from his rump to the nape of his neck, while he is 'bellowed hideously with pain, to the infinite satisfaction of the spectators' (ch. 16; 76). Such concluding formulas recur throughout the book; a constant reminder that a good joke in Smollett's world depends both on extreme pain and an audience to witness it. In their most spectacular trick against the new Mrs Trunnion, the sailors spike her medicinal brandy with jalap, a laxative of explosive force. After watching through their spy hole for several days, they finally see the lady take several large gulps before church on Sunday. Result? 'Her bowels were afflicted with such agonies, as compelled her to retire in the face of the congregation'. Fits of swooning and defeating reduce her to the brink of the grave' (ch. 14; 67). And as usual in Smollett, the initial joke soon accumulates further comic consequences, with the whole village assuming that Trunnion must have poisoned his wife (after all, everyone knew proverbially that the best wife was a dead wife).

The stage thus set, our hero makes his appearance. Peregrine Pickle is a comic functionary with ancient roots, the descendant of native trickster figures and the heroes of continental picaresque. (Alliterative character names link all Smollett's early protagonist to folk heroes like Tom Thumb and jestbook personas such as Merry Martin or Ferdinando Furry.) As with Tom Thumb or the German Till Buelsenpleg, this special status is signalled by portents surrounding his appearance in the world. Mrs Pickle spends her pregnancy inventing odd errands to tease her sister-in-law, a fanatical reader of contemporary gynaecology who resolves to satisfy every craving. Two pineapples, a fricassee of frogs from Boulogne, a neighbouring gentleman's favourite chamber pot, three black hairs plucked (very painfully) from Trunnion's beard—all are procured to protect the delicate fetus. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Peregrine himself is miscast from birth. He already knows how to terrify the household, summoning everyone with a shriek or pretending to be dead only to cackle at their concern. He quickly learns to torment his uncle Trunnion, standing on the old man's gouty toe, twisting his nose, and putting snuff in his nose. This early promise is soon fulfilled in that set piece of so much early modern comic narrative, the extended torment of a tutor or clergyman. Peregrine's victim is Mr Kepstick (keep-stick), a low-German schoolmaster. The nasty boy hides his wig, puts soot in the soup, and kills all the chickens by pushing needles through their heads (a trick that goes back to Till Buelsenpleg).
recognized how close so many of these incidents were to the London newspaper anecdotes of Smollett’s day.6 Two hack authors who come to blows in a bookshop, a French fop pulled by the nose, scaldings and plucked wigs at the Bedford Coffee House: this sort of thing was comically described in newspapers and excitedly recounted in letters from the city. Mid-century men about town competed with each other to enact more and more complex hoaxes, and Smollett repeats or elaborates on some of the most celebrated (Dickle 2011: 149–50). Two fraudulent lawyers are summoned to do business with each other. As revenge against ‘an old peevish puritanical’ landlady, Pickle publishes an advertisement in which she offers to buy a black tomato. An angry crowd of forty gentry, each throwing their hat at the terrified old woman. Pipes and Pickle especially delight in fomenting brawls. Pipes punishes two insolent chairmen by getting into their chair with a heavy parcel (100 lbs). The chairmen trade accusations of laziness and soon come to blows. ‘Peregrine, who followed at a distance, enjoyed the pleasure of seeing them both beaten almost to jelly’ (ch. 93: 577). The ‘jelly reminds us that a really enjoyable fight in this culture—the sort that made one rise to the window or stop the coach—produced a decent show of blood and went on until the loser could hardly move. Ferocious boxing and short-sword displays were also profitable parts of the London entertainment economy, practised at dedicated venues like John Broughton's amphitheatre in Tottenham Court Road. Always up for a good fistfight, Smollett's Tom Pipes seems to be named after a famous boxer, 'the nearest box'er remember', a contemporary described the historical Pipes, one who placed his blows 'with surprising time and judgment'.”

None of the novel's early readers seem to have objected to the violence. Many agreed that Smollett went too far with his attacks on contemporaries. Some of the most tasteless pranks attracted criticism, like the one about holes drilled in Mrs Trunnion's chamber pot. But few objected to the elemental nastiness of this book. When he revised Peregrine Pickle for the second edition of 1758, Smollett took out the perforated chamber pot and a few of the most spiteful lampoons (Buck 1925). Gone was his cruel parody of Lord Lyttleton's Monody to his wife (1747) and the l Gerard’s account of Peregrine's affair with a nun. Yet most of the vicious practical humour remained—all those bleeding noses and broken heads. The near-drownings are still there, too, as are the burns from roasting pans and falling joints of meat. A troublesome balliff still falls into a fireplace, 'where his chin was encountered by the grate, which, in a moment, seared him to the bone' (ch. 97: 516). These scenes of brutal disorder: long remained favourites for illustrators: Trunnion and Hatchway trading blows at a tavern, the great 'battle' at the college of authors, all the packing and upset tables at the feast in the manner of the ancients.


6 Captain John Godfrey, A Treatise upon the Useful Science of Defence (London: for the Author, 1747), 37.
More strikingly, given current critical preferences, few contemporary readers might view anything about Smollett's starkly primitive misogyny. The cast of coquettes, adulteresses, and vindictive old maids was always problematic for academic readers (and always excused with a tip of the hat to Swift and Juvenal). With every year that passes, it all looks worse and worse. But in this, too, Smollett was typical of his age. His fiction rehearses mainstream early modern prejudices about women as carnal, deceitful, and irrational beings. Romance ideals are flatterly set out in heroines like Emilia Gauntlet or Narcissas in Roderick Random, but Smollett's real imaginative energy goes into the negative portraits. Mrs Trunnon is one of many grotesque old women. Three long chapters of Peregrine Pickle collect the stories of scandalous ladies of fashion who consult Pickle's friend Cadwallader Crabtree during his time as a London fortune teller, including one who has conceived a child with her black footman.

Without being pornographic, Pickle also offers a chilling record of contemporary assumptions about sexual violence. Women of lower status are always available in this novel, for a few coins at most. Pickle himself is a 'dragon among the chambermaids' from beginning to end (ch. 96: 553). One long sequence finds him roaming about the countryside with Emilia's brother: 'laying' close siege to every husom court damsel that fell in their way (ch. 34: 166). On another jaunt, Pickle buys a pretty beggar-girl from her mother, clearly for sexual purposes. And along the way come several explicit representations of rape. The hero's assault upon Emilia is a villainy for which he must atone, but the apparent clarity of this instance only points up the ambiguities of so many others. As in other early modern comic texts, rape in Peregrine Pickle is less about self-gratification than vengeance—against rival suitors or the victim herself. At one point during their early sex ramble, Pickle and Gauntlet decide to punish a recalcitrant farmer's wife who had rebuffed them both. Our hero easily imitates her husband's voice (trickster rapts are always accomplished mimics), and the pair burst in on her. With 'some seeming reluctance', the 'hale rosy wench' submits to Gauntlet while Pickle overcomes the household (ch. 34: 166–70). Volume 2 ends with Pickle's 'punishment' of a lady of Bath who dared to prefer a brawny soldier to himself. Its is as gruesome as any Jacobean bed trick: after hiring a pair of thugs to waylay his rival, Pickle sleeps with the lady himself and then completes his revenge by spreading the story about town. Presumably, this incident provided a satisfying sense of closure for readers obliged to wait for Volume 3.

At first sight, such episodes seem completely oblivious to the sentimental movement and the much-noted feminization of mid-eighteenth-century culture. If sympathies for paupers and invalids really were growing, Smollett shows scant recognition of them. Richardson may have created unprecedented first-person records of the traumas of sexual assault, but Peregrine Pickle perpetuates much more degraded representations of femininity and all the older comic treatments of rape. Just two years later, the narrator of Smollett's Fortinand Count Pathom would openly declare his intolerance of sentimentalism, 'the moral sense so warmly contended for by these ideal philosophers.' From this perspective, episodes like the burlesque of Lyttleton's Monody read like attacks on the movement's literary manifestations. Read aloud at the college of authors, the mock Monody attracts sharp criticism. Why indulge in 'imaginary sorrows', the chairman asks its blubbery author, when everyone has 'real grievances' to cope with (Peregrine Pickle, ch. 102: 655)? Burying one's wife was supposed to be fun. On closer inspection, even Pickle's assault on Emilia Gauntlet turns out to have an explicitly anti-Richardsonian subtext. Although druggled like Clarissa Harlowe, Smollett's heroine easily repels her attacker. 'With a most majestic severity', Emilia denounces Pickle, opens the door, walks downstairs, and entrusts herself to a watchman 'who accommodated her with a hackney-chair, in which she was safely conveyed to her uncle's house' (ch. 82: 408). This episode draws on a long pre-sentimental tradition of more physical and resistant heroines (see Dicks 1910: 584). But it also implies, more disturbingly, that women knew how to repel a sexual attacker if they really wanted to. By 1721, Richardson had made sexual violence the great test case for emerging sympathies towards women. Smollett and other comic authors reacted by restating beliefs that 'real' rape—genuinely non-consensual sex—was impossible.

Over the course of his career, as we know, Smollett's attitudes would soften. By the time of Humphry Clinker (1771), he had evidently developed some benevolence and at least a selective sympathy for women. Clinker works almost pedantically through the major set pieces of sentimental fiction. The penless consumptive relieved by Matt Bramble, the blacksmith's widow who has lost her senses, emotional reconciliations and reunions: such scenes waver between pathos and farce, but they are there nonetheless. The old misogyny, too, is now balanced by more rounded and sympathetic female characters like Lydia Melford. By adapting Richardson's multi-voiced epistolary, Smollett allowed Lydia, alone of all his genteel young ladies, to speak in her own voice. Twenty years earlier, however, Smollett was relentlessly scornful of tender-heartedness or refinement. 'In their purifications', as he complained in Fortinand Count Pathom, the right-minded critics of his age 'let humour evaporate, while they endeavour to preserve decorum' (ch. 1: 9). In this impatience with fine feelings and humourless moralizing, Smollett may have been typical rather than anomalous.

Ramble Fiction and its Readers

Rebarbative as they now seem, Peregrine Pickle and Roderick Random were in their time surrounded by dozens of brash comic novels very much like them. Every season

Throughout the 1750s and 1760s brought ten or twelve new 'lives' and 'histories', each of them using a skeletal plot and a rudimentary central character to unify a string of broad comic incidents. Orphans, sailors, rascally apprentices, waggish students: sent down for blasphemy: there were larky adventure novels about all these figures. There were also prize-fighters, fairground orators, dandy apothecaries, and a surprising range of trickster heroines. *Ramble novels*, these texts were often called, after the names of so many central characters and their careless progress through the world. And this term seems preferable to *picaresque*, which was not yet used in this period and too easily connotes the bleak survivalism of Defoe and his European predecessors. *Ramble fiction* is firmly rooted in the metropolitan culture of its day and altogether lighter in tone.

Among these long-lost novels are some spectacular best-sellers—texts like Edward Kimber's *Life and Adventures of Joe Thompson* (1730), which went through at least six editions before 1800, further reprints in the nineteenth century, and translations into French and German. We now know very little about Kimber (1719–69), but he was a prominent fixture in the mid-century literary world, the author of seven original novels and a translation from Crebillon fils (he was also a major contributor to the *London Magazine* and its editor from 1755). Kimber comes eighth on James Raven's hierarchy of top-selling novelists—just behind Richardson and ahead of Sarah Fielding, Lennox, and Goldsmith (1987: 14). Some of the earliest Irish novels are exercises in the ramble genre, most notably William Chaigneau's best-selling *History of Jack Connor* (1732 and four more editions), which soon entered the national folklore. Consider a few other titles from just one decade:

- The *Adventures of Shelim O'Blunster, The Irish Beau* (1751)
- *Adventures of the Revd. Mr Judas Hawke* (1751)
- *Young Scarrot* (1752)
- *The Female Rambler* (1754)
- *The Adventures of Jerry Buck* (1754)
- *The History of Jasper Banks, Commonly Call'd the Handsome Man* (2 vols, 1754)
- *The History of Will Ramble* (2 vols, 1755)
- *The Adventures of Dick Hazard* (1755)
- *Adventures of Jack Smart* (1756)
- *The History of Two Orphans* (4 vols, 1756)
- *The Adventures of a Rake, in the Character of a Public Onator* (2 vols, 1759)
- *The History of Tom Fool* (2 vols, 1760)


Where they are acknowledged at all, such texts are dismissed as *Tom Jones* knock-offs. This description is true up to a point. All go to Fielding for their high-written comic incidents. Kimber's *Joe Thompson* pays tribute by reversing the initial syllables of *Tom Jones*. But to cast them all as imitations is to obscure the variety and innovation of a hugely profitable subgenre. Like other types of fiction, ramble novels attracted talented authors who experimented with different sorts of protagonists and widely different narrative voices. Wil Ramble is a fairly mainstream practical joker, skilled from an early age with firecrackers and itching powders. Dick Hazard is one of many ingrate Irish rascals. *Jack Smart* and *Jerry Buck* are the lives of riotous London bucks (very close to *Peregrine Pickle* and packed with the same vicious torments, *Jerry Buck* went through three editions in 1754 alone). Young Scarrot is a lively Anglicization of Paul Scarou's *Le Roman comique*, the story of the actor Bob Loveplay and his hapless troupe of strolling players in the north of England. *Tom Fool* is the deliriously silly story of a handsomer simpleton by the comic orator George Stevens (running joke: 'You're a fool.' 'Thank you, Sir, I certainly am.'). Shelim O'Blunster is a hapless Irish fortune hunter, far too stupid to do much harm. Judas Hawke, by contrast, is an astonishingly depraved clergyman who reads pornography, prostitutes his wife for a living, and takes particular joy in literally terrifying nice people to death. These last texts might help us make better sense of books like *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, always the most confounding of Smollett's novels.

In narrative structure, the default setting was the picaresque *coute* romance formula of Fielding and Smollett. The same portents are there. Mrs Pickle's frog freecase sees its analogues in the disgusting cravings of other expectant mothers (vile concoctions from the village alewife, unmentionable bits of pig). There are bawling pre-natal dreams and gatherings of village gossips to interpret them. Heroes are born in boats (like Lazarillo de Tormes) or moving carts (like Ferdinand Count Fathom). There are bungled baptisms and contemporary obstetrical accidents of the sort made famous by Tristram Shandy. The childhood mischiefs are there, too: little turds on the housekeeper's Bible, wee-ee in the gin bottle, and corns or callusins to be stood upon. Pickle's treatment of Mr Kestick is also characteristic. Mr Surlly, Dr Birch, Revd Tickleton: almost every text includes some self-righteous pedagogue whose function is to torment or inveighed into bed with a whore. And as in *Peregrine Pickle*, the adversarial attitude and the practical jokes continue into adulthood, now alternating with amours and misfortunes (a spell in deboor's prison is one obligatory episode) before the hero settles down with a suitable heiress (Miss Rich, Miss Charlotte Lovely) and her £10,000.

These patterns also lent themselves to comic 'lives' of public figures. A few years after the success of *Joe Thompson*, Kimber rolled out his familiar formula in *The Juvenile Adventures of David Ranger* (1757). David Ranger is a heavily fictionalized 'life' of David Garrick, thinly disguised under the name of his most celebrated comic role (Ranger in Hoadly's *Suspicious Husband*, 1747). Kimber's hero bears little resemblance to the historical actor (for extra
fun, the book even turns him into an Irishman). What is interesting is how easily readers tolerated this blend of fact and fancy—how little they cared about consistency or formal realism. Little Davy is the child of a mother who behaves like a tragic queen and even scolds her servants in couplets. Almost as soon as he can walk, Davy is performing his exits from every room (‘Farewell’) and practising Garrick’s well-known death agonies on every carpet. The two long volumes of adventures that follow are entirely invented; only in its final chapter does the novel come closer to a roman à clef, with clear allusions to Lord Burlington and Garrick’s marriage to Eva Maria Veigel (the ‘most enchanting’ Miss Tulip). A much brasher example of the same subgenre is Christopher Anstey’s Memoirs of the Noted Buckhorse (1756), a fanciful ‘life’ of the prize-fighter John ‘Buckhorse’ Smith. By 1756, Buckhorse had retired from the ring, but he remained a familiar sight in Covent Garden, working as a pedlar and so fantastically ugly that provincial visitors came to gawk at him. Anstey himself would eventually become famous for his New Bath Guide (1766); Buckhorse sheds light on his apprentice years and situates ramble fiction alongside the jumble of odes, epistles, dialogues, and periodical essays with which aspiring authors tried to earn their living.

Like Peregrine Pickle and Tom Jones before them, ramble novels are packed with misogynist caricatures and unpleasant jokes about sexual violence. It is all the more peculiar, therefore, to find a large parallel body of comic novels about women. This general category has attracted greater attention in recent years, with cheerful ‘lives’ of actresses, pickpockets, female soldiers, and courtesans proving invaluable to feminist criticism. Still, this scholarship does not always convey the levity of so many feminocentric texts. Whore biographies, for example, drift insistently towards the ramble genre. Or consider The Authentic Memoirs of Nancy Dawson (c.1762), the story of a celebrated London dancer. The fictional Nancy is the daughter of a drunken basket-woman and a shiftless pimp, born in a stable near Clare Market. Her early feats include cursing other children during games (‘[B]last your eyes for a [b]itch of a!’) and getting wind when the local boys start fooling around with the butcher’s daughter—and when once she caught them in the fact, all came out’. A consistently lively text, Nancy Dawson points us towards an unsuspected variety of female protagonists. An immense continuum stretches between criminals like Moll Flanders and the well-known sentimental heroines at an opposite extreme. Somewhere in the middle, one finds clusters of witty and independent women who are nevertheless not sexually compromised (characters such as Clarissa’s Anna Howe or the unforgettable Charlotte Grandison, so fond of remarking that her brother ‘still kept his Maidenhead’). Feminized adaptations of Tom Jones—The History of Charlotte Summers (1730), Sophia Shakespear (1733), and others—generate particularly memorable reports of the social scene. Bested by her sex-crazed mother and a villainous quack named Poison, Sophia Shakespear is a plucky and endearing survivor.

These are all wildly heterogeneous texts—stuffed, like Peregrine Pickle and so many other early novels, with digressions and interpolations. There are passages of literary criticism and accounts of London actors. The action suddenly stops for five chapters about Abyssinia or some gloomy reflections on mortality. Didactic claims come and go, as they do in Smollett. But what really sticks in the mind is the raucoous and often nasty humour of these books. Long after the volumes have gone back to the stacks, one can still hear the thuds and screeches. Mad bulls on the loose. Terrified old ladies tumbling into privies. Blind men led into walls. Who could forget the fight with a London coachman in Nancy Dawson (one of the whores whips off his wig, pissed in it, and knocked it in his face’ [24])! There is vomit in the stew, vomit out the window onto a noisy ballad singer, vomit at the dinner table when someone convinces the vicar he has eaten a dead dog. Mortal terror is always hilarious: convincing someone that the ship was sinking or they had eaten something poisonous were prime jokes (and the second one would show up in Humphry Clinker). It is hard now to imagine getting someone arrested for a lark, yet this, too, was a mainstream practical joke. Pages and pages are devoted to elaborate acts of vengeance. Jerry Buck’s revenge on his Oxford tutor involves hiring a prostitute to seduce and infect the man with a good clap. Nauseating as it is, this joke might just tell us something about eighteenth-century student wit.

Much of this comic filler was entirely standardized and repeated from one text to another: ramble fiction catered to a significant demand for more of the same. Nocturnal commotion at a coaching inn, Pericocious kitchen brawls—all curses, spitting, and volleys of half-picked pork bones. ‘A Ludicrous Circumstance of Distress’, ‘Mischievous Contrivances’, ‘High Words Between the Ladies’, ‘An Alarm on the Road’: such chapter titles promised readers specific and familiar forms of amusement, most of it entirely irrelevant to plot. Authors plagiarised without shame (Jack Smart, sniffed the Critical Review, simply lifted everything from a comic miscellany called Laugh and Be Fat). The most self-conscious novelists even apologize for having to repeat so many tired old conventions: ‘We are obliged to introduce a Night Scene, for which we must beg the Reader’s Pardon’, begins Christopher Anstey’s example of that set piece. If he left it out, no one would believe him.10 But originality, a principle that looms so large in literary history and to which the imaginative force of early realist fictions is often ascribed, is manifestly less important than entertainment. Ramble novels therefore confound normative

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2 For contemporary commentary on Charlotte Grandison, see Francis Purman, A Candid Examination of the History of Sir Charles Grandison, 3rd edn (London: Dodsley, 1754), 49.
expectations not just about the nature and functions of the early novel, but about reading and narrative in general. Plot is so rudimentary and characterization so shallow, that the usual motors of narrative are just not there. Ramble novels are almost without desire, as a narratologist might say. There is no hermeneutic plot, no great mysteries to be resolved. But the predictably comic episodes were evidently satisfying to the readers who bought them in such quantities.

Ramble novels were in no way distinguished—not by the book trade nor by reviewers or readers—from texts now accepted as literary novels. Joe Thompson and Sophia Shakespeare were published in the same duodecimo format, and sold for the same price of 3s. per volume, as the canonical fiction of the age. At 12s. for four volumes, the longer ramble novels cost as much as Amelia or Frances Brooke's Emilia Montague (1769). At 6s. for two duodecimo volumes, Will Rambale and Jack Smart cost the same as Pamela or Sarah Fielding's The Countess of Dillingam (1759). Who was reading these books and paying so much for them? One easily imagines a readership of idle young men—boozey tempers like the young James Boswell, who kept himself 'well supplied' with novels throughout his first stay in London (1762–3).11 It comes as no surprise to find that Laurence Sterne owned The Adventures of a Valet (1752), David Rafter, and John Cleland's Memoirs of a Cuckold (1751), or that he read William Tolderry's unendurable History of Two Orphans (4 vols, 1756), which turns out to have demonstrable influences on Tristram Shandy (Keyner 2002: 30).

Much more unexpected is the evidence that these novels were read as much by women as by men. Increasingly empirical work on book-trade data is showing us just how wrong we were to infer male or female readers from a book's content. We now know that eighteenth-century men read romances, domestic fiction, and sentimental lyrics, just as eighteenth-century women read bawdy farces, low comic periodicals, and all the coarsest comic fiction (Peters 2003). Most of the early ramble novels are there on the list of 200 books that George Colman attacks to his preface to Polly Honeycombe (1760)—the 'grassy' and 'much thumbe' Catalogue of the Circulating Library'.12 Young ladies ran away with rascals because they were charmed by bluff male heroes like Dick Hazard and Jerry Back, Colman suggests, not just because of all the foolish romances. Ramble fiction also looms large in surviving records of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's reading. During her Italian years (1746–61), Lady Mary scoured the English newspapers for recent titles, which would then be shipped out by her dutiful daughter. She loved Smollett and Fielding, but she also ordered a striking proportion of the ephemeral fiction that appeared each year. Joe Thompson, Dick Hazard, Jack Smart, Jasper Banks, Charlotte Summers, Sophia Shakespeare, Young Starnon: Lady Mary read all these books. 'Wiser people may think it trifling,' she concedes to one of her daughter's routine objections, 'but it serves to sweeten life to me.'

This diverting, recreational consumption is only slowly gaining its rightful place in the history of reading. Probably it should always have been obvious that eighteenth-century people read rather like we do: intermittently and in bits and pieces, at the interstices of busy lives. Even so, the incongruities take some getting used to. Jerry Buck and Will Rambale were read alongside sermons, sentimental fiction, travel narratives, and London newspapers. One first-person record of these practices must stand for many. In March 1748, Roderick Random and Clarissa had just appeared within a few weeks of each other. In Caledon, Co. Tyrone, the Earl of Orrery and his family were reading them on alternate nights. 'Clarissa kept us up till two in the morning', wrote the Earl to his friend Thomas Carew. 'Roderick will keep us up all night, and he, I am told, is to be succeeded again by Clarissa, whom I left, adorable girl, at St Albans.' Every bit as nasty as Peregrine Pickle—stuffed with all the standard burns, flesh-wounds, and rape jokes—Random was read alongside Richardson's feminocentric masterpiece, and in explicitly higher doses.

Why read these texts now? Beyond their obvious interest as historical documents, ramble novels may also have much to tell us about the canonical fiction of their age, the texts that they both imitated and influenced. In a strict sense, as Pierre Bourdieu points out in his fascinating analysis of minor novelists around Flaubert, any critic who fails to explore the lesser publications around a major literary text is doomed to an 'unknowing poetics'—destined to take up the book with modern expectations rather than the norms of its own time (1993: 202). This is not to say that a fully 'knowing' poetics could ever be possible, or that anyone could read every minor novel around the accepted literary ones. Yet once approached from the comic archive, the occluded moments of many canonical novels start to make sense. One sees, for example, how Fielding refined his comic raw material while his contemporaries retained or elaborated it. The baby Tom shows up in Allworthy's bed. His proleptic act is not an impish cackle, but a gentle squeeze of the old man's finger. Prosody and Tickletext have their equivalents in Thwackum and Square, but there is no poke, no soiled breeches, and Square makes his own way to Molly's garret. Here and everywhere else, Tom is the witness of comic humiliations rather than their agent. At the same time, after working through so many ramble novels, one begins to notice other less differentiated details—as in the heavy-handed vulgarity of the Seagrim family; or the stupifying gay-bashing episode in Amelia (which takes its place beside similar episodes in Peregrine Pickle and other texts).

12 Polly Honeycombe; A Dramatick Novel of One Act (London: T. Becket and T. Davies, 1760), [v]-xiii.

Frances Burney, too, starts to look rather different. Captain Mirvan, the boorish practical joker in Evelina (1778), is openly indebted to the nautical characters in Pencroft Pickle. The taunting of Mme Duval, the old women's footrace, and the humiliation of Mr Lovel are all very close to rambles fiction. Other incidents easily come to mind. The hysterical Mrs Delvile bursting a blood vessel in Cecilia (1782). All those frenetic scenes in Camilla (1796)—the dogfight, the orchestra of naked monkeys at Northwick Fair, the disastrous provincial Othello (straight out of Young Scarron and Le Roman comique before it). One easily thinks of other episodes in Lennox, Edgeworth, and, by way of the Juvenilia, in Jane Austen. And then one begins to notice odd comic traces in more overtly didactic or sentimental novels. Yorick's encounter with the dwarf in Sterne's A Sentimental Journey (1768). The enclosure of rescued freaks in Sarah Scott's Millennium Hall (1762). And what to make of the farcical rape accusation in Sarah Fielding's The History of Ophelia (1760)? This dire piece of comic business is a way of humiliating the nasty Mrs Herner, first when the alleged rapist insists that the lady had actually got into bed with him, and then when a candle comes in and the man announces that Mrs Herner was too ugly to rape anyway. Read alongside the forgotten comic fiction of the age, such scenes start to make an appalling kind of sense.