

**THE NOVEL OF NATURE AND THE NOVEL OF MANNERS:
AN INQUIRY INTO JOHNSON'S VIEW OF THE
NOVELS OF RICHARDSON AND FIELDING**

A Thesis

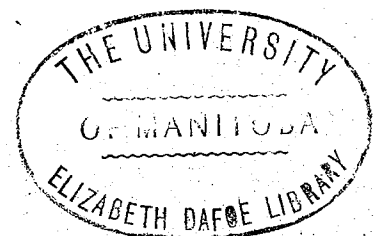
**Presented to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies
University of Manitoba**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts**

by

Lionel W. Brathwaite

Fall 1970



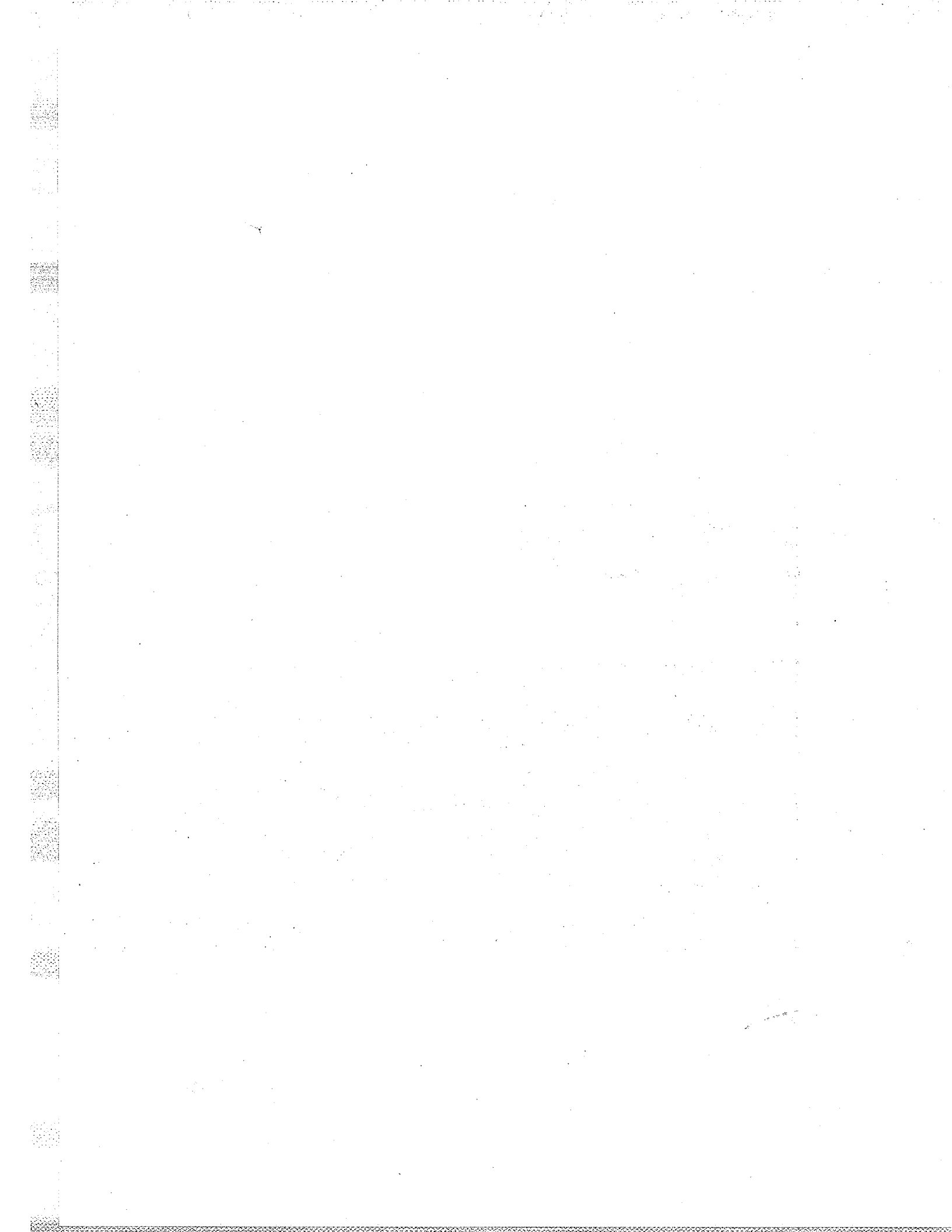


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
INTRODUCTION	iv
I. JOHNSON'S VIEWS ON RICHARDSON AND FIELDING	1
II. JOHNSON'S THEORY OF "NATURE" IN FICTION	14
III. "NATURE" IN RICHARDSON AND FIELDING	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY	74

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I dissent from and attempt to disprove Johnson's strongly held opinion that Fielding, unlike his contemporary Richardson, does not draw "characters of nature." Johnson's opinion was based chiefly on the novels Clarissa and Tom Jones. It was a most provocative criticism which was disputed by some of his contemporaries including Boswell, his devoted friend and biographer. Johnson's precise statement was: "there is all the difference in the world between characters of nature and characters of manners; and there is all the difference between the characters of Fielding and those of Richardson." Boswell explains that Johnson saw Fielding as the writer who portrayed "manners," and Richardson as the writer who showed "human nature." Modern scholarship still argues over the issue. Ian Watt in The Rise of the Novel sees the Johnsonian opinion in terms of the difference between "realism of presentation" and "realism of assessment." Robert Alter in Fielding and the Nature of the Novel commends Fielding for his ability to translate real life characters into fiction.

I will restrict my thesis to the specific issue of "nature" versus "manners" and try to show that both novelists draw "characters of nature" while using different creative techniques to achieve their purpose. My thesis will be presented in three chapters: first, I will recount all Johnson had to say about the novel and examine his attitude to the two writers; secondly, I will make a thorough study

of his theory of "nature" and how it relates to prose fiction; and finally I will try to show that both novelists represent life, through "characters of nature." This last part of my thesis will be presented in the form of a detailed comparison of some of the major characters in the novelists' major works. In the process I will try to show that Johnson's criticism, though not an impartial judgment because of a moral bias and a preference for Richardson's epistolary technique, is critically significant. It does point to a difference between the two novelists, though not the difference Johnson saw.

In the following pages, I have referred only to the criticism of Richardson and Fielding that relates directly to my purpose. I am, however, indebted to much of modern scholarly criticism that is not quoted herein.

This thesis would not have been completed without the grace of God, and without the advice, encouragement and patient guidance of Professor David Curnow, of the University of Manitoba, to whom I am deeply grateful.

CHAPTER I

JOHNSON ON RICHARDSON AND FIELDING

Although Richardson and Fielding do not constitute a literary school in the usual sense, they are nonetheless regarded as the joint founders of the novel as it appeared in the early 1740's.

This new form of prose fiction was considered by Dr. Samuel Johnson as being far superior to the works of earlier prose writers who had exceeded the bounds of probability by including giants or supernatural and "fantastical" happenings in their fictions. In his Rambler 4, written in 1750, Johnson outlines the merits of this new kind of prose fiction. He refers to the essential feature which, in his opinion, distinguishes "the works of fiction, with which the present generation seems more particularly delighted" from "the fictions of the last age." This defining characteristic is the novel's attempt to "exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind." He points out that because of the novelists' intention to represent real life, this form of prose fiction "is precluded from the machines and expedients of the old romances," since the modern writer tried to portray familiar experiences, real manners, and true-life situations.

Johnson likes this new approach to prose fiction because contemporary writers sought "to bring about natural events by easy

means, and to keep up curiosity without the help of wonder."¹ Johnson found this type of fiction most interesting because of its consistent closeness to life and probability. He remarked to Boswell that "a story is a picture either of an individual or of human nature in general; if it be false, it is a picture of nothing."² It is quite evident from these comments that Johnson insists that fiction ought to show what is true. Furthermore, he associates fiction with the representation of real life.

Johnson not only commented on the merits of the novel, but gave his opinions as to the task of the novelist. He felt that the writer should acquire not only "that learning which is to be gained from books," but the authentic experience and knowledge that are to be obtained from "general converse and accurate observation of the living world." To Johnson this was vital because he believed that these books should "serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life."³

Richardson and Fielding advocated a similar theory of the novel. They both wished to satisfy the demands of nature and morality and each tried to show "nature as it is." To them,

¹ The Works of Samuel Johnson, ed. Arthur Murphy (12 vols. London: 1806), IV, 22. [Hereafter cited as Works.]

² The Life of Samuel Johnson, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (5 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), II, 433. [Hereafter cited as Life.]

³ Works, IV, 20.

depicting the snares and pitfalls of life, which were to act as warnings to the young, was not sufficient. They both insisted on providing a positive example of human behaviour which others could imitate. Though it has been argued that Tom Jones was too mixed a character to provide a good example, nevertheless such was Fielding's avowed intention in writing the book.¹ Robert E. Moore defends Fielding's position, and tries to show that both Fielding's theory of the nature of the novel and his very practice accorded with Johnson's idea of the novel.² Ironically enough Johnson never acknowledged any correlation of thought between Fielding and himself, and in fact was the most articulate and vehement critic of Fielding among the latter's contemporaries.

It seems a sad omission on Johnson's part, however, that, after having briefly pointed out the salient features of the novel in Rambler 4, he did not make a more comprehensive study of this new literary form, and its effects upon the literature of his time. Richardson and Fielding made an impact on their times and it was apparent, before Johnson's death, that the novel was gaining much popularity. Johnson's failure to make a more thorough study of the novel is surprising because he was personally acquainted with both Richardson and Fielding, its co-founders, and he had certainly read Richardson's novels and at least some of Fielding's. Apart from Rambler 4, he

¹ Henry Fielding, Tom Jones (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. ix.

² Robert E. Moore, "Dr. Johnson on Fielding and Richardson," PMLA, LXVI (March, 1951), 162-181.

made no further critical investigation into the nature of the novel. Scattered through his writings and in his recorded conversations, however, are comments on individual novelists - Sterne, Fanny Burney, Goldsmith, Richardson and Fielding. These comments seem to indicate that he had more than a cursory interest in the novel. From these statements, a consistent view emerges to indicate that he was particularly concerned with the works of Richardson and Fielding. It is this view that will be analyzed in this paper.

Johnson's comments on these two novelists appear in the form of anecdotes or records compiled mainly by biographers and friends of Johnson: James Boswell, Sir John Hawkins, and, to a lesser degree, Hannah More, and Mrs. Piozzi (Thrale). Among these biographers and friends, Boswell, whose acquaintance with Johnson dates only from 1763, when Johnson was already fifty-four, kept a very close journal of what he said. The account given by Boswell of Johnson's attitude to the two novelists reveals Johnson's marked preference for Richardson over Fielding. This is explicitly stated in one conversation that Boswell recorded in 1768.

"Sir," continued he, "there is all the difference in the world between characters of nature and characters of manners; and there is the difference between the characters of Fielding and those of Richardson. Characters of manners are very entertaining; but they are to be understood by a more superficial observer than characters of nature, where a man must dive into the recesses of the human heart." ¹

¹ Life, II, 48-49.

The key words in this statement are "manners" as opposed to "nature;" "superficial observer" versus "recesses of the human heart." This is the distinction that Johnson draws between Fielding and Richardson. He is stating that Fielding's characters are, in a strictly descriptive sense of the word, superficial, and Richardson's characters are the ones in which the reader sees an accurate picture of human nature.

Robert Alter considers Johnson's critical terminology and his conception of literature and reality to be strikingly modern. Johnson sees "characters of manners" as characters patterned upon social stereotypes: "the novelist looks around him in society, and with what meets the eye and strikes the ear, he composes his squires, parsons, hostlers, innkeepers - vividly fresh yet familiar figures." "Nature" in Johnson's statement, is discovered when the observer plumbs below the surface and explores "the recesses of the human heart" to seek out the personality within and understand the true springs of human nature and character. His concept "characters of nature" might be modernized to "characters of psychological depth and complexity."

Johnson, according to Boswell, rarely mentioned Richardson without referring to Fielding, and vice versa. Whenever the occasion arose, he always exhibited a distinct bias against Fielding. Boswell related that when Johnson drew the distinction of "nature" versus "manners," he was referring to a cardinal difference between

¹ Robert Alter, Fielding and the Nature of the Novel (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 10.

² Ibid., pp 10-11.

the two men. In the same conversation Johnson attempted to clarify his statement by describing Richardson as "a man who knew how a watch was made" and Fielding as one who "could tell the hour by looking at the dial plate." This, Boswell observes, was Johnson's way of distinguishing "between drawing characters of nature and characters of manners."¹ Johnson, by the use of the watch metaphor, leaves no doubt about his conviction that Richardson exhibits a more intimate knowledge of people and "life in its true state" than Fielding, since the watchmaker must obviously possess a thorough knowledge of the inner workings of the watch. Johnson consistently held to this opinion. Mrs. Piozzi (Thrale) records two statements in which he maintained his view of Richardson as the "observer of nature." "Richardson," he is reported to have said, "had picked the kernel of life, while Fielding was contented with the husk."² In this statement Johnson is again making the "nature" versus "manners" comparison between the two writers. Mrs. Piozzi also records that "Johnson used to say that he believed no combination could be found and few sentiments that might not be traced up to Homer, Shakespeare and Richardson."³ This is one of the few occasions on which Johnson is reported to have mentioned only one of the writers - Richardson - without referring to his rival, Fielding. In this instance too,

¹ Life, II, 49.

² Quoted in Johnsonian Miscellanies, ed. G. B. Hill (London: Constable & Co., 1966), I, 282.

³ Quoted in Life, IV, 524.

he remains steadfast to his opinion that Richardson shows "nature."
Miss Burney's Cecilia occasioned another remark, and on this occasion
he mentions Fielding without Richardson.

"Tis far superior to Fielding's, says Mr. Johnson;
"her characters are nicer discriminated, and less
prominent, Fielding could only describe a Horse or
an Ass, but he never reached to a mule..."

(Thraliana, I, 555)¹

The implication here is that Fielding can describe particulars only,
but not the hybrid which is arrived at by a combination of the "horse"
and the "ass." This appears to be another Johnsonian way of describing
Fielding as the "superficial observer" who was concerned only with
stereotypes and not the general.

Whenever Johnson spoke of the two novelists he seemed in-
variably to be judging them on their major works, Clarissa and Tom
Jones. He admitted that Clarissa "is not a performance to be read
with eagerness" because of its very prolixity. He even requested
Richardson to add an index rerum because it was a work of such a
kind as "will be occasionally consulted by the busy, the aged and
the studious" [*Italics mine*]². He thought that in this novel
Richardson demonstrated an accurate and profound knowledge of human
nature, something he found lacking in Fielding. He comments:

¹ Quoted in Robert E. Moore, Op. Cit., p. 171.

² Life, II, 175. Johnson seems to have had Clarissa in mind
when he wrote Rambler 4, (Works, IV, 23). There he states novels
are "written chiefly to the young, the ignorant and the idle, to
whom they serve as lectures of conduct." [*Italics mine*].

"Sir, there is more knowledge of the heart in one letter of Richardson's, than in all Tom Jones: I indeed never read Joseph Andrews." Erskine:
 "Surely, Sir, Richardson is very tedious."
 Johnson: "Why Sir, if you were to read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be so much fretted that you would hang yourself. But you must read him for the sentiment and consider the story as only giving occasion to the sentiment."¹

When Johnson uses the word "sentiment" in the above context he is not merely referring to the moral tone of the work, but in particular to the author's ability to appeal to human sensibility. This is only occasioned by the accurate representation of human nature. This is the true view of life, in Johnson's opinion, when the author "dives into the recesses of the human heart" to discover where the real springs of thought, emotion and action lie hidden. He considers that Richardson shows the psychological and emotional nature of man through his realistically drawn characters. Thus, when Johnson considers the novels of Richardson and Fielding, he is not merely concerned with two different kinds of characters but also with two different novelistic techniques.

Johnson was also concerned about the moral tone of their works. He believed that a novel "involves the revelation of moral character through action."² In Rambler 4, he had been strongly critical of "familiar histories" whose wicked heroes were made so attractive that "we lose abhorrence of their faults." When the

¹ Ibid., 174.

² Robert Alter, Op. Cit., p. 15.

question of morality was raised Johnson was always in favour of the promotion of virtue over vice. He unreservedly expressed his disapproval of the novel Tom Jones. Boswell records his heated outburst at the mention of Fielding's name during a conversation in 1772.

"He was a blockhead; ... What I mean by his being a blockhead is that he was a barren rascal." Boswell.
 "Will you not allow, Sir, that he draws very natural pictures of human life?" Johnson. "Why Sir, it is of very low life. Richardson used to say that had he not known who Fielding was, he should have believed he was an ostler."¹

Johnson does not deny that Fielding represents life and what is true about people; what he seems primarily concerned about here are the moral overtones of his work. There is no doubt that Johnson's antipathy towards Fielding is indelibly affected by a strong moral bias. He remained consistent in his attitude. Boswell records another conversation in the same year (1772), when Thomas Erskine ventured to praise Tom Jones, whereupon Johnson sharply retorted.

"Why Sir, Richardson was worth a whole race of Fieldings, supposing every individual of the race to be a regiment."²

There is another instance when Johnson again contrasts the two novelists and his remarks about Fielding are derogatory. On this occasion he is talking to a close female friend. This conversation is recounted by Hannah More in her Memoirs.

¹ Life, II, 173-174. This conversation recorded in the Life is taken verbatim from Boswell's daily journal, and may have been recorded just a few hours after it took place. See Boswell for the Defence, ed. W.K. Wimsatt & F.A. Pottle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 97.

² Ibid., pp 494-495.

I alluded rather flippantly, I fear, to some witty passage in Tom Jones: he replied, "I am shocked to hear you quote from so vicious a book. I am sorry to hear you have read it: a confession which no modest lady should ever make. I scarcely know a more corrupt work."¹

Hannah More goes on to relate that Johnson "went so far as to refuse to Fielding the great talents which are ascribed to him" and highly extolled his competitor Richardson claiming he was superior to Fielding "in talents as in virtue; and whom he pronounced to be the greatest genius that had shed its lustre on this path of literature."² In Johnson's view, Fielding's fiction - Tom Jones - is morally reprehensible; and his subjects are unconscionably "low."

Richardson on the other hand was highly commended for Clarissa. Johnson liked this work because he thought that Richardson, in this exercise in prose fiction, had shown himself as an "author who has enlarged the knowledge of human nature and taught the passions to move at the command of virtue."³ His praise of Richardson's efforts to promote moral edification in his readers is consistent with his views expressed in Rambler 4. There Johnson insists that the writer should describe what is worthy of imitation in nature; that virtue be unsullied, and that vice, because it must be shown as it is a part of nature, should always be made repulsive. In Rambler 4,

¹ Quoted in Life, II, 174, and in Johnsonian Miscellanies, II, 190.

² Ibid., II, 174.

³ Works, V, 164.