

The Duality of Heroic Identity in Fielding's *Tom Thumb*

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Abstract

This paper examines Henry Fielding's 1730 burlesque afterpiece *Tom Thumb* as a dual narrative performance which seeks to satirise the heroic tragedies of the 1710s and '20s while simultaneously presenting itself as a serious contribution to the same genre. The piece thus speaks to two audiences: an imagined audience who accept Tom Thumb as a genuine tragic hero, as well as a real audience who recognise the clichés of heroic tragedy and are consequently able to laugh at both the performance and the imagined audience. As such, I will look at the regularity of plot in *Tom Thumb* in spite of its absurd logic, overblown dialogue, and the counter-casting of a female child as an adult male hero. I will then consider how Tom Thumb both subverts and contributes to expectations of heroic appearance and behaviour, looking at his conduct when fighting, as well as discussing how the other characters view him.

During the 1710s and '20s, the genre of heroic tragedy experienced a great revival on the stage. Shakespearean drama and the most popular tragedies of the Restoration vied with more recent works, such as *Cato* and *Jane Shore*, to appear in the London theatres. Although the locations of these plays were frequently separated by time and distance – ranging from classical Greece and the Roman republic (*The Rival Queens*, *Tamerlane*, and *Cato*) to late medieval Britain (*Jane Shore* and *Richard III*) and occasionally further afield, to India and the Americas (*Aurengzebe* and *Oroonoko*) – there were sets of values common to most of them. The importance of patriotic duty and public spiritedness was one of these (Kelsall 158). For example, Cato's 'What pity is it / That we can die but once to serve our country!' (Addison IV:IV 80-2) is comparable with the bodily sacrifice of Jane Shore and Hastings, the latter of whom 'die[s] with pleasure for my country's good' (Rowe III:I 262).

Furthermore, popular tragic heroes rarely faced any real moral contradiction: their enemies were corrupt and self-interested

while their supporters – Juba in *Cato*, Belmour and Dumont in *Jane Shore* – agreed with them almost fanatically. Inevitably, such a prevailing and influential genre garnered a parodic response, but in spite of numerous attempts to replicate the success of Buckingham's *The Rehearsal*, the first real victory was Fielding's *Tom Thumb*, a short burlesque written as an afterpiece to *The Author's Farce* in 1730. Incredibly popular at the time – playing for thirty-three nights during its first run (Rivero 54) – this is a play that deserves discussion as an example of how serious and farcical examples of the same genre coexist.

Set in the court of King Arthur, *Tom Thumb* mimics the basic plot structure and dramatic blank verse of heroic tragedies. Much of the play is made up of a patchwork of dialogue taken from authors ranging widely from Dryden to Gay (Morrissey 4). The title character is represented as a celebrated warrior who wins the hand of the princess following his triumph in battle. However, a jealous enemy, Lord Grizzle, plots against him. Although his schemes come to nothing, Thumb is swallowed by a cow, is revived as a ghost, and is finally killed again by Grizzle. The final scene sees a mass slaughter as each character in the play is killed by another before, finally, King Arthur kills himself.

The burlesquing of the heroic genre lies in both the lowness of the subject matter and the deployment of Tom Thumb's physical form; a female child was usually cast in the role, in the case of the initial run, a Miss Jones (Highfill Jr., Burnim, and Langhams 226-7). Here, Fielding 'uses ridicule of a character's compromised masculinity to associate that character with the compromising of traditional political, cultural, or social standards' (Campbell 59). Campbell's discussion of *Tom Thumb* is chiefly within the context of feminine intrusion upon conventional masculine roles, particularly on the subject of contemporary claims that Queen Caroline was attempting to rule England through George II. We can see that Queen Dollalolla's special preferment of Tom Thumb mimics Queen Caroline's perceived preferment of Walpole (Campbell 58; Morrissey 4). By using a deliberately unheroic hero in the place of the muscular warrior, Tom Thumb can be read as an attempt to draw attention to the absurdities of heroic tragedy, thus extending our understanding of compromised masculinity.

Tom Thumb was a standard chapbook character who was

familiar to his audience, and therefore an excellent choice of mock hero; set in the distant past like *Cato*, *The Rival Queens*, and *The Briton*, Thumb may be mythologised and used as an expression of a tragi-heroic story. Indeed, Fielding's use of Tom Thumb follows in the footsteps of William Wagstaffe's *A Comment Upon the History of Tom Thumb*, written to satirise Steele's admiring critique of *The Ballad of Chevy Chase*.

Tom Thumb is presented as a genuine contribution to heroic tragedy in the same tradition as the serious plays of the same genre, and the logic that runs through it, though absurd, is consistent from start to finish. This is a society in which a diminutive hero may conceivably overcome giants and appear as a desirable matrimonial partner. Tom Thumb's characterisation as a hero is met with the full belief of the other characters in the play. Even Lord Grizzle's schemes are founded upon the concept of Thumb as a hero, and Queen Dollalolla's response to his doubts reinforce the fundamental belief in Thumb as a warrior:

QUEEN: Hence! from my Sight! thou Traytor, hie away;
By all my Stars! thou enviest Tom Thumb.
Go, Sirrah! go; hie away! hie! – thou art
A Setting Dog – and like one I use thee. (I:IV 45-8)

The inarticulate horror and confusion she expresses here suggests that she cannot understand Lord Grizzle's suggestion that Thumb might not be a hero, and she is not alone in this. There is no sense of the spectacle among the characters of the play; each partakes in the comic absurdity with great candour.

Although similar speeches appear in serious heroic tragedy (Morrissey 4), no audience could mistake the play as a sincere attempt at the genre, and the dual narratives – one tragic, one farcical – occurring onstage while *Tom Thumb* is being performed would be clear to all. In the first narrative, Thumb is genuinely a tragic hero, dominating a story about his downfall, and the (imagined) audience is one of poor taste, willing to accept the clichés and absurdities of the plot.

In the second narrative, Thumb is obviously a farcical hero, and the conventions of heroic tragedy are outraged in order to draw attention to the flaws and clichés of the genre. The (real)

audience here is more sophisticated, and in recognising the plot inanities so admired by the first audience as stock formulas of heroic tragedy, they are able to laugh at the events on stage. This second, silent narrative rests heavily on the first: there is an implied understanding in the absence of 'fourth wall' dialogic commentary that if *Tom Thumb* is performed without explicit comic interruption, it may join the ranks of other heroic tragedies. Indeed, Fielding's use of lines from other plays acts as a levelling device, suggesting that serious heroic tragedy and the idiotic, overwrought *Tom Thumb* of the first narrative can be considered to be of the same artistic quality. In this case, the real audience of the second narrative is being asked to accept the inherent outlandishness of heroic tragedy.

If *Tom Thumb* is to be recognised as both a contribution to and a satire on heroic tragedy, we must try to understand how Thumb himself fits into both categories. His heroic behaviour is certainly a dominant characteristic, but his physical form is also the subject of much discussion. He is compared to Alexander, Caesar, and Scipio (I:III 39-42), men famed for their military prowess in other heroic tragedies; so when likened to a piece of gristle his friend cries, 'Wou'd Arthur's Subjects were such Gristle, all!' (I:I 20). In spite of the nonsense beliefs which dominate the play, the characters are not actually wrong in understanding Thumb as a hero; Thumb *is* a successful warrior, even though he does not look the part. By refusing to have the other characters directly recognise Thumb's unheroic qualities, Fielding is obliged to rely on the audience's assumptions about the nature of heroism, and thus poses the question: is the *belief* of the collective in the protagonist's heroism in fact the force that confers heroism upon him?

The assumptions about heroic appearance and behaviour that contribute to the audience's belief in the actor playing the part are suggested in contemporary memoirs and histories of the eighteenth century stage. For example, in *The Life of Mr. James Quin*, his contemporary Robert Wilks is described as 'a very handsome man, of a graceful mien... [and] no contemptible tragedian' (16). Here, the attractive physicality of Wilks is underscored as one of his fine qualities as an actor. In his *Apology*, Colley Cibber further stresses the connection between heroic roles and handsomeness when he describes the parts an audience would expect an ugly man to play. His example is the Restoration character actor Samuel Sandford,

who was only successful in roles in which he played a villain, 'for, having a low and crooked person, such bodily defects were too strong to be admitted into great, or amiable character' (138). If Sandford's failure to be accepted in heroic roles was attributed by his contemporaries to his lack of good looks and muscularity, this adds weight to the view that the heroic form demanded these two qualities of physical appearance.

In spite of Sandford's failure, other actors did attempt to make the transition from comic and villainous parts to those of the dramatic hero. Cibber himself had made his name as an actor with his comic fop roles but he also had some limited success as a tragedian; he was the original Gloster in *Jane Shore*, for example. Nevertheless, he remained best known for his modish Lord Foppington, while his tragic efforts were met with widespread derision, including from Fielding. For those who sought to separate masculine and feminine behaviour into two distinctive types, the fop's love of fashion, 'feminine' vanity, and lack of serious behaviour represented a serious problem. Cibber's statement that Sandford's audience was too well acquainted with him as a villain to allow him recognition as a hero might well be applied to himself. The phenomenal success of Cibber's fops meant that his demands for acceptance in serious tragic hero roles could never be fully met.

It is perhaps too much to interpret the initial point of *Tom Thumb* as having been intended as a specific burlesque on Cibber's attempts at heroic tragedy; even the satire on Cibber's appointment to the position of Poet Laureate was added after its initial run, and possibly not by Fielding himself (Morrissey 5). Nevertheless, Cibber represents a well-known example of a man associated with the malfunctioning masculinity of the fop attempting to occupy the manly handsomeness of the tragic hero. Any regular theatre-goer watching a performance of *Tom Thumb* in 1730 would have been aware of cross-character performances such as these, and we can therefore say with confidence that the childish, feminine form of Tom Thumb responds to this idea.

If part of *Tom Thumb's* humour is founded upon the inherent absurdity of a hero lacking in traditional masculinity, Fielding poses an uncomfortable question: how incidental is virility, physical impressiveness, and good looks in the creation of the hero myth? Perhaps as a reminder of classical and Biblical figures such as

Achilles and Samson, there is an unconscious expectation that heroes should represent manliness as a physical ideal. The female child cast in the role of Thumb represents the diametric opposite: a figure of weakness, not male, not mature, not physically imposing, and lacking attractiveness and the capability to perform the male sex act.

We can explore the two narratives discussed above even further so as to understand Tom Thumb's size as a concept rather than mere pantomimic incongruity. In the first narrative, the play is understood as a serious heroic tragedy and Thumb's size is incidental. While it is mentioned in almost every scene, it is usually in an appreciative, unforced way, either likening him to earlier heroes or placing him as a physical ideal:

NOODLE: ...this mighty Hero
 (By Merlin's Art begot) has not a Bone
 Within his Skin, but is a Lump of Gristle.
DOODLE: Wou'd Arthur's Subjects were such
 Gristle, all! (I:I 17-20)

Such endorsements of Thumb's physical appearance are important to the audience's classification of him as a warrior: who would dare challenge a second Caesar to a fight? Yet, as such, Thumb's physical form takes on an odd middle-ground, where the implications it rouses through its very unconventionality become almost irrelevant to the characters of the play. It is not that they do not observe that the physical form of their hero defies heroic norms; rather, they do notice but they do not recognise the flagrant absurdity in this. Even Lord Grizzle, no great admirer of Thumb's deeds, recognises his diminutive form – early in the play, he deplores a court that can 'ripen the vilest Insect to an Eagle' (I:IV 3) – yet he does not seek to use it as an argument against the veracity of Thumb's deeds, as he might easily do. That he is disinclined to pursue this line of argument suggests that within the world of *Tom Thumb* there is no logical incongruity that prevents dwarfish men from defeating giants. When Thumb is finally involved in onstage combat, he is, true enough, an outstanding warrior. Following attempts to arrest his friend, Noodle, for failure to pay his tailor's bill, an outraged Thumb and the Bailiff have the following exchange:

THUMB: Ha! Dogs! Arrest my Friend before my Face!
Think you Tom Thumb will swallow this Disgrace!
But let vain Cowards threaten by their Word,
Tom Thumb shall show his Anger by his Sword.
[Kills the Bailiff]

BAILIFF: Oh, I am slain!

FOLLOWER: I'm murdered also,
And to the Shades, the dismal Shades below
My Bailiff's faithful Follower I go.

THUMB: Thus perish all the Bailiffs in the Land,
'Till Debtors at Noon-day shall walk the Street,
And no one fear a Bailiff, or his Writ. (II:II 30-40)

Thumb's heroics are clearly intended to both mirror and exaggerate those in serious drama; after all, he ends the scene declaring the righteousness of his violence. Even the language he uses reflects the bombastic speeches of the heroes of heroic tragedy. He uses imperatives and rhetorical statements to assert his position, unlike the passive declarations of the Bailiff and Follower. This is another example of Fielding's half-serious humour; the unpopularity of bailiffs made them ideal victims to be killed off in a spontaneous act of 'justice'. Who among Fielding's fashionable audience could truly condemn a man who promised that 'no one [would] fear a Bailiff, or his Writ'? Fielding himself, consistently in dire financial straits, would certainly have been amused by the idea. Indeed, Thumb's behaviour in this scene may be compared to the interpretation of 'virtue' as 'public duty' and 'patriotism' as demonstrated in *Cato* and other heroic tragedies. If Thumb is acting in the interest and for the benefit of society in his attack on the Bailiff, then this may in fact be interpreted as an act of paramount virtue.

In the second narrative, which serves to make fun of the first, Thumb's size is the point upon which the play's success hangs. For all the exaggerated dialogue, there is no greater joke than the fact that the hero so admired for his might in battle has the body of a female child, and although the appeal to popular hatred of bailiffs is apparent, the rest of the humour lies upon Thumb's behaviour as

incongruous with his physical form. His impassioned behaviour speaks to contemporary critics of male violence, who ‘emphasized duellists’ failure to rein in their passions, condemning them as “being full of rancour and wrath”, and characterizing them as men who “strike and thrust in passion and fury” (Shoemaker 542). Thumb’s behaviour functions partly as a satire on men who behave in this manner, his height and feminine form making his wrath and violence comical; like a true hero, he seems unaffected by contemporary condemnation of passionate behaviour. Here again the casting of Thumb is of significance, for placing a five-year-old girl in a heroic role suggests a connection between the violent posturing of heroes in serious tragedy and the tantrum of a young child; it is the emotional immaturity of heroes that comes under fire, rather than mere physical immaturity.

Beyond what it suggests about expressions of impassioned violence, the casting travesty of Thumb also has implications regarding the character’s desexualisation by the female characters. In spite of his battle exploits, he is described as a ‘lovely Creature’ (I:II 5) of ‘charming Form’ (I:III 26), and, less flatteringly, a ‘perfect Butterfly’ (I:III 16-7). Even though it is apparent from these statements that Princess Huncamunca admires Thumb for his bravery on the battlefield, she recognises that his physical form does not represent the stereotypical masculine physique. The emphasis on Thumb’s femininity recalls the heroes of serious drama; for example, in *Cato*, it is the ‘graceful tenderness’ of Portius (Addison, I:VI 46) that makes Lucia prefer him to his over-passionate brother. It also recalls once again those actors who, like Cibber, played both foppish and heroic parts. Again, Fielding is simply inflating an existing version of heroic masculinity. It is physical and emotional restraint, combined with tenderness, which make each character sexually appealing to the heroines in the play. *Tom Thumb* takes this to its logical extreme, however, and the hero is so gentle and lacking in passion that he is emasculated, commonly perceived among women as woman-like himself.

The lack of ‘proper’ genitalia for the protagonist’s role might be something of a running joke in burlesque theatre. The mock-hero of Carey’s *The Dragon of Wantley* was played in parody by Farinelli, the famous castrato (with the role of the villainous dragon correspondingly sung by a bass). There are no formal rules

that indicate that heroes might not be castrato: only the ability to wield a sword is required to slay dragons. Nevertheless, the deliberate comical 'wrongness' of this casting, and the casting of Miss Jones in *Tom Thumb*, reveals audience expectations of heroic mythology, to which we attach the belief that a convincing hero must also count the ability to perform in the male sexual role among his accomplishments.

The cross-gender casting of Tom Thumb suggests, for Campbell, an 'absence of phallic power' (78). Indeed, if we recall the reading of the play as making fun of Queen Caroline's attempt to rule through her husband, the idea of a woman playing the part of a hero suggests an attempt to seize masculine power figuratively, in her acquisition of a traditionally male role, as well as through her possession of the phallic sword. Yet these attempts only serve to highlight Thumb's failure as a hero: there is a clear discrepancy between his heroic reputation and his physical form. The audience in the second narrative must understand, as the audience of the first narrative does not, that simply picking up a sword and making bombastic threats cannot transform a female child into a fully-grown male hero.

The burlesque hero of the second narrative must appear to have the impotent violence of a child and a woman's perceived desire for phallic power, while retaining, for the audience of the first, a reputation for great sexual and military prowess. Placed side by side, the first and second narratives reveal a troubled picture of heroic identity in eighteenth-century tragedy. The duplicity and shortcomings of tragic heroes are subjected to burlesque; to accept them at face value is a sign of poor taste and foolishness.

By presenting a tragic hero who is at once both serious and farcical, Fielding questions what his audience values in its heroes. It is not enough that Tom Thumb's origins are in a base folktale and that he is the incorrect size; to the audience of the second narrative he must be totally emasculated when played by a female child. In this way he burlesques the contradictory appearances of serious tragic heroes who are both too passionate and too gentle; overtly masculine and excessively feminine; falsely sentimental and representing Whiggish heroic patriotism. Instead, Fielding demands a tragic hero who is subjected to greater scrutiny and is not in possession of absolutist behavioural authority.

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