

# 1. Moral Correction: The Refusal of Revision in Henry Fielding's *Amelia*

'I made the same observation,' cries Booth: 'sure some Misfortune hath befallen her.' 'A Misfortune indeed!' answered Amelia, 'sure Child, you forget what Mrs. Ellison told us, that she had lost a beloved Husband. A Misfortune which I have often wondered at any Woman's surviving, — at which Words, she cast a tender Look at Booth, and presently afterwards throwing herself upon his Neck, cried — 'O Heavens! What a happy Creature am I; when I consider the Dangers you have gone through, how I exult in my Bliss!' The good natured Reader will suppose that Booth was not deficient in returning such Tenderness, after which the conversation became too fond to be here related. (*Amelia* 204-205)<sup>1</sup>

Captain William Booth and his wife Amelia know that they cannot escape the constraints imposed on them by London's sinister justice system and its roving bands of mercenary bailiffs. Yet the hopelessness of the situation provides a special impetus for Amelia, 'the most worthy, generous, and noble of all Human Beings,' to reflect positively on her predicament (89). Nothing, it seems, might renew Amelia's affections for her husband more effectively than a sentimental reflection on another's misfortunes. Indeed, the psychological pressure that social injustice exerts in this novel makes it nearly impossible for Amelia to take action to improve her circumstances without first considering — and, at times, imaginatively reenacting — the stories told to her. For our instructive paragon, the qualities of life afforded by 'Fortune' or 'Providence' always demand an appreciation of another's suffering before they can be understood as bearing implications for understanding her own.<sup>2</sup> It is this emphasis on the moral function of imagined relationships that leads Fielding to mention the fond scene to his reader without proceeding to describe it.

In contrast, Amelia's 'jealous Rival,' Miss Mathews, encourages Booth to narrate his past, and thus reflect on his family's suffering, merely so she can perform the role of a sentimental listener whose emotional investment in others will improve herself (161, 164). When Mathews senses another's misfortune, the experience leads her to increase her own