

“That cursed itch of play”: Prudence, Finance, and Gambling in Henry Fielding

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The question of prudence has long been considered central to the study of Henry Fielding and this paper builds on the tradition of criticism that sees Fielding as entering into an existing conversation about prudence’s problematical ethical status. As Glen Hatfield has illustrated, by the time Fielding was writing, prudence had been so contaminated through satirical (mis)appropriation that it barely registered as a virtue, being associated more with selfish cunning and wily duplicity than worldly wisdom or practical knowledge. Rather than resolve Fielding’s sentiments on the value of prudence, I ask what we are to make of Fielding’s apparent uncertainty, his unwillingness to determine the value of prudence fully or firmly. Beginning a study of Fielding with the recognition that an unequivocal endorsement of prudence was never fully possible, and allowing his ethical uncertainty full room for play, yields a rather different set of implications for Fielding’s work than if we begin by assuming that Fielding was somehow interested in reconciling the contradictions that the ethical discourse of prudence entailed in his time and place.

Fielding’s uncertainties about prudence are mirrored by a similar ambivalence with respect to the practice of gambling, widely regarded as the quintessentially *imprudent* use of money and time. Hogarth’s *Industry and Idleness* and *A Rake’s Progress* make this point graphically, but moralists like William de Britain had been making similar claims about the tension between prudence and gambling since the seventeenth century. Gambling stands as the polar opposite of prudence in moral tracts, and yet a closer reading of those tracts suggests that what is truly abominable about gambling is not its negation of prudence—for writers seem to understand that games of chance often lend themselves to such prudential practices as calculation and caution—but rather the selfish desire for gain that often characterizes gamblers. In other words, gambling is rejected in pro-prudence tracts on the grounds that it *conforms* to the logic of prudent acquisition; this, then, calls into question the initial opposition between gambling and prudence. It seems that what moralistic advocates of prudence reject when they reject gambling is not gambling per se, but an outcast prudence trace that only accidentally attends the practice of gambling.

I argue that Fielding’s ambivalence concerning gambling and prudence are part of a single ethical quandary and that they must be considered in tandem. Through a reading of Henry Fielding’s *The Modern Husband*, a play that brings us to the scene of gambling on multiple occasions (only to have the actual gambling occur off-stage), a play that structurally celebrates the wild and chaotic results of sacrificial acts (gambling in its purest form) only to condemn the play’s gambling addicts, I argue that Fielding allows us to both think and feel the way that modern “anticipatory” subjectivity requires combining “bourgeois” prudential sensibility with a reprobate gambling desire or fixation. Fielding’s irresolution on the matters of prudence and gambling exemplifies the bifurcated nature of financial subjectivity, capturing both the self-loathing that accompanies financial decision-making as well as the affective thrill that such decisions often produce.

In his pointed commentary on my paper, Professor Fritz Breithaupt aided me in clarifying the upshot of this argument when he asked about the difference between the subjectivity I theorize and the figure of *homo economicus*, the term often used to describe the modern financial or economic individual. Traditionally, I replied, *homo economicus* is understood as emergent at the

point at which such pre-modern, irrational, or risky practices as gambling are excluded or exorcised. I offer the “anticipatory subject” as a different model for understanding financial subjectivity since it captures the two senses of anticipate: “to *plan* for” or “to encompass in advance,” and “to *wait* for.” *Homo economicus* places exclusive value—and imagines as historically necessary—merely the prudential dimension of economic practice; the “anticipatory subject” I outline reveals a more fundamental and comprehensive set of ethical, aesthetic, and affective requirements. While modern financial capitalism ostensibly privileges prudence, it trades on the satisfactions and desires that come from unplanned, unexpected, and often unwarranted boons that allow us retroactively to imagine that a transcendent stamp of approval has been placed upon an economic choice.