

Critical Introduction to *The History of Will Ramble, A Libertine*

The anonymously authored *The History of Will Ramble, A Libertine* appeared in 1754 following a wave of popular libertine fiction.¹ Narrating the adventures of young, orphaned gentleman Will Ramble, the novel has distinct similarities with earlier successes by Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett. It consists of the story of Will Ramble, a reformed libertine, related by an omniscient third person narrator. Will's mother dies soon after his birth and his father fritters away his fortune in pursuit of pleasure, dying when Will is sixteen and his elder sister Amelia is seventeen. They are then placed in the care of their father's friend Mr Merit and go to live with his family. Following a fight with Mr Merit's son Harry, Will runs away and during his time away from home falls into bad company, laying the foundations for his later behaviour.

Upon his return, Will develops a passionate love for Mr Merit's daughter Louisa. As he despairs of being able to marry her, however, he pursues a series of other women at home, at university and in his subsequent travels. Will also develops a love for gambling, losing significant sums of money. Meanwhile, his sister Amelia falls in love with Mr Merit's eldest son, a military Captain, and they make several thwarted attempts at marriage. Will is eventually persuaded to mend his ways after being afflicted by remorse at the sight of a girl he seduced in his youth working in a brothel. He is also sent a letter from Louisa begging him to reform and enclosing money to help him repay his gambling debts. Will then returns to Mr Merit's house where eventually, after several more mishaps, he is married to Louisa and Amelia weds Captain Merit.

¹ Anonymous, *The History of Will Ramble, a Libertine. Compiled from Genuine Materials, and the Several Incidents taken from Real Life*, 2 vols (Charing-Cross, London: printed and sold by G. Woodfall, 1755 [1754]). See Appendix for further details of the edition.

The concerns of the novel, as well as the popular theme of the reformed libertine, include social questions about the growing culture of luxury and consumerism in the eighteenth century. While perhaps not a unique example of libertine fiction, being largely derivative of the many other texts written in this style in the mid-eighteenth century, there is much that we can glean from this novel about both the world in which the author was writing and about literary trends at this time that are significant in building a picture of the literary marketplace and the development of the novel.

Publication, Reception and Readership

Will Ramble was printed in Charing-Cross by prolific London printer George Woodfall, part of a prominent printing and bookselling family. His father Henry Woodfall was a printer in Paternoster Row and the discovery of records believed to be his have revealed that he was a successful printer with a large business, suggesting that this was a lucrative industry.² Advertisements from 1755 certainly show that George Woodfall was doing good business printing numerous books, among them religious texts, manuals, conduct books and novels.³ Although the title page of *Will Ramble* states that it was published in 1755, evidence from newspaper advertisements shows that it in fact appeared at the end of 1754 and was post-dated, a common convention used by booksellers to 'maintain the impression of freshness', as James Raven tells us.⁴ Another edition of the novel was published in Dublin the following year by printer and bookseller Henry Saunders, but no subsequent editions are recorded.⁵

² There are records of two Henry Woodfalls printing around this time who may have been father and son and there is some debate as to which of them these records belonged. H. R. Plomer, G. H. Bushnell & E. R. McC. Dix, *A Dictionary of the Printers and Booksellers Who Were at Work in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1726 to 1775* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), pp.269 – 270.

³ Various advertisements from newspapers in 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection <<http://www.galegroup.com>> [accessed 15 November 2010].

⁴ *Will Ramble*, title page; Advertisements in *Whitehall Evening Post* and *London Evening Post* December 1754 in 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection <<http://www.galegroup.com>> [accessed 15 November 2010]; James

While details of the novel's publication are fairly straightforward, its reception and readership are more problematic to gauge. The fact that it did not sell sufficiently to warrant a second edition suggests that it was not particularly popular. There is evidence, however, to show that *Will Ramble* continued to be read throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as it is listed in circulating library catalogues from 1784 and 1844 and even appears in a New York library in 1804.⁶ Evidence of the book's circulation so many years after first being published prompts speculation about the possibility of later editions, perhaps pirated, but there is no firm evidence to support such conjecture. Furthermore, although these records imply that *Will Ramble* continued to be read for several decades, presence in a circulating library does not equate to popularity and it is impossible to ascertain how many people actually read it. Another way of assessing the text's reception is by reading contemporary reviews, of which there is only one, appearing in the *Monthly Review*. The reviewer, although dismissing the novel as of merely 'moderate' quality, does praise it as 'better worth reading than some of the late productions of the kind'.⁷ This does not necessarily mean that it was favourably received by the public, limiting conclusions we can draw about readership, but the reviewer's comments usefully imply that there was an abundance of similar literature in the marketplace at this time.

Raven, 'The Anonymous Novel in Britain and Ireland 1750 – 1830', in *The Faces of Anonymity: Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publication from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp.141 – 166, p.142.

⁵ English Short Title Catalogue <<http://www.estc.bl.uk>> [accessed 26 November 2010].

⁶ James Lackington, *Lackington's catalogue for 1784; consisting of about thirty thousand volumes ... The whole selling ... by J. Lackington, ...* <<http://www.galegroup.com/ecco>> [accessed 23 November 2010]; *The Bradford Observer; and Halifax, Huddersfield and Keighley Reporter*, 8 February 1844 in 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection <<http://www.galegroup.com>> [accessed 15 November 2010]; George Gates Raddin, *An Early New York Library of Fiction: with a checklist of H. Caritat's circulating library, no.1 City Hotel, Broadway, New York, 1804* (California: Wilson, 1940), p.69.

⁷ *The Monthly Review*, Issue 11, December 1754 <<http://britishperiodicals.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 15 November 2010], p.466.

Although it appears that such literature was popular, the composition of the readership of novels like *Will Ramble* is uncertain. Just who exactly read libertine fiction? Its often scandalous content and male focus would suggest that it had a predominantly male audience, but we may be too eager in making such assumptions. Simon Dickie asserts that novels like *Will Ramble* 'seem to have appealed to women as well as men' and there is evidence within the text to support this; the author addresses 'our fair and Chaste readers', for example, suggesting an awareness of a female audience.⁸ Furthermore, women such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu certainly read such novels and *Will Ramble* is included in the heroine's library catalogue in George Colman's *Polly Honeycombe*, reinforcing claims that the novel had a significant female readership.⁹ As for the social and economic circumstances of readers, Dickie's claim that these novels had a mainly 'educated urban audience' is probable.¹⁰ Although the book's price of six shillings is not particularly expensive, this would be a significant portion of the average worker's wage and is therefore likely to have been purchased by those with a larger disposable income. The intended audience was also supposedly an educated one, as the author makes frequent references to the Classics. Moreover, evidence from the copy at Chawton House Library reinforces such conclusions, with an armorial bookplate telling us that this book was once owned by a wealthy man and was most likely part of a private library.¹¹ The evidence of one copy is not necessarily typical, but the compiled evidence would suggest that the majority of readers

⁸ Simon Dickie, 'Joseph Andrews and the Great Laughter Debate', in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, ed. Catherine Ingrassia, vol. 34 (JHU Press, 2005), pp.271 - 332, p.285; *Will Ramble*, v.1, pp.333 – 334.

⁹ Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters reveal that she read an extraordinary quantity of libertine literature throughout her lifetime and although there is no record of her reading *Will Ramble* she read many similar novels at this time. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. Robert Halsband (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1965-67); George Colman, *Polly Honeycombe, a dramatic novel of one act. As it is acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane* (The Exchange, Corke: printed by Eugene Swiney, 1761) <<http://www.galegroup.com/ecco>> [accessed 23 November 2010], p.ix.

¹⁰ Dickie, 'Joseph Andrews and the Great Laughter Debate', p.285.

¹¹ See Appendix.

were reasonably wealthy, although such claims could arguably be applied to the reading public in general at this time.

This evidence all contributes towards a picture of an emerging mass print culture. Barbara M. Benedict states that at this time 'the entire thrust of literary publishing moved [...] towards the discovery or creation of works for a wide readership', a claim supported by the existence of texts such as *Will Ramble*.¹² In contrast to the large, ornate books previously only available to the elite, *Will Ramble* was printed in two simply bound and easily portable octavo volumes, implying that literature was becoming a more widely available commodity.¹³ The production of books in this simple form also heralded the age of disposable literature, with novels such as *Will Ramble* likely to be read only once rather than being treasured possessions. The book at Chawton bears little sign of being particularly prized by its owner, with no inscriptions, marginalia or evidence of it being thoroughly read. However, there is a danger of overestimating these changes. Although there was undoubtedly an expansion of the literary marketplace and a growth in rates of literacy, with 40 per cent of women and 60 per cent of men able to read and write by the middle of the century according to Benedict, that does not necessarily translate to readers of novels like *Will Ramble*.¹⁴ Literacy rates are not a reliable guide to readership, as levels of literacy varied greatly and books were still somewhat of a luxury for the average person. Therefore any attempts at assembling an idea of the readership for a novel such as *Will Ramble* are highly speculative.

¹² Barbara M. Benedict, 'Readers, writers, reviewers, and the professionalization of literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1740 – 1830*, eds. Thomas Keymer & Jon Mee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.3 – 23, p.10.

¹³ See Appendix.

¹⁴ Benedict, p.4.

Authorship, Authority and Anonymity

If the readership of *Will Ramble* is problematic to establish, then the identity of the author is no less so. Anonymity was common at this time, with Raven providing the staggering statistic that 80 per cent of novels that appeared between 1750 and 1790 were published anonymously.¹⁵ There is scant evidence about the identity of *Will Ramble's* author, but one assumption that has some grounding is the author's implied gender, which for the purposes of this study I will assume is male, an assumption also made by the *Monthly Review*.¹⁶ This is based on the text itself, which concentrates on a male perspective and contains details that a woman would be unlikely to have access to. Many of the conversations, for example, are conducted exclusively between male characters and several of the settings, such as the gambling houses, are public spaces from which women were excluded. Moreover, the author makes frequent Classical allusions, suggesting a level of education which, at this time, was simply not available to the vast majority of women. Of course such gender assumptions are far from foolproof, as later women such as Charlotte Smith wrote from a male perspective, but this was once there was already an established literature from which to build.

Despite remaining anonymous, the writer's authorial voice is self-assured and playful throughout, taking on a Fielding-esque tone. Contrary to Dickie's assertion that this sort of 'ramble' fiction was 'hastily thrown together by hacks in need of a few guineas', the author of *Will Ramble* is highly aware of his craft as a writer.¹⁷ The first chapter of the novel serves as an introduction, illustrating the author's consciousness of expected conventions, his aim

¹⁵ Raven, p.143.

¹⁶ *The Monthly Review*, pp.466 – 467.

¹⁷ Simon Dickie, 'The Forgotten Best-Sellers of Early English Fiction', in *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2011), pp.311 – 367, p.335.

of fulfilling these and a certain playfulness with such conventions that follows in the Fielding tradition. He bemoans his inability to know the 'Complexion, Genius and Taste of our Reader' and endeavours to mix 'the pleasant and profitable together', echoing the prescription of Horace's *Ars Poetica*.¹⁸ This reference to the Classical imperative of blending instruction and entertainment implies an author well versed in the requirements of literature and conscious of where his novel may sit alongside other texts.

In a style after Fielding, the author provides chapter summaries in a contents page, stating that they 'will, like the Play-House Bills, give him an Account of what he is to expect in the representation'.¹⁹ This recalls Fielding's discussion of chapters in *Joseph Andrews* in which he employs a range of metaphors, comparing them to inns or resting stops and likening the craft of the author to that of the tailor.²⁰ Also similarly to Fielding, the author embeds several self-contained narratives within the main events of the novel, having a series of characters relate their life stories. However, Fielding is not the only influence upon *Will Ramble* and the author is aware of other conventions to which he feels the need to submit, most notably the need for a moral message. Dickie recognises that the addition of a moral message to libertine fictions was not uncommon, stating that 'didacticism is there for those who needed it' but that the 'moralizing is unconvincing'.²¹ In the wake of writers such as Samuel Richardson, didactic fiction was increasingly prevalent and the author of *Will Ramble* clearly feels social pressure to moralize.

¹⁸ *Will Ramble*, v.1, pp1 – 2; 'the man who combines pleasure with usefulness wins every suffrage, delighting the reader and also giving him advice', Horace, *Ars Poetica*, in Vincent B. Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurie Finke, Barbara Johnson, John McGowan & Jeffrey J. Williams, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (London: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2001), pp.124 – 135, p.132.

¹⁹ *Will Ramble*, v.1, p.6.

²⁰ Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p99.

²¹ Dickie, 'The Forgotten Best-Sellers of Early English Fiction', pp.337 – 338.

The moral warnings of *Will Ramble* usually appear as afterthoughts and the punishments inflicted upon erring characters are often disproportionate to their crimes. A young woman who forms an infatuation for Will, for example, is driven mad by her passion and sent to an asylum, which the author calls 'a melancholy Warning to young Persons', yet the womanising protagonist receives little or no reprimand for his series of transgressions.²² Furthermore, the conclusion of the novel follows the established format of reform, with Will repenting his past behaviour and seeing every day 'more and more into the Errors and Follies of his past Life'.²³ From the artificial insertion of such morals it may be assumed that didacticism was an integral element of the eighteenth-century novel, if only as a respectable outer garb in which to clothe scandal and debauchery. The moral satisfied the critic of the *Monthly Review* at the very least, who favoured the novel because Will is presented as 'a libertine of sense, and [...] of principle'.²⁴

Throughout *Will Ramble* the author feels the need to assert his own authority, to playfully defend his creation and stake a claim for its place within contemporary ideas of the novel. Another example is his defence of the characters, of which some are portrayed as virtuous and others as immoral; the former may be considered as 'so many shining Lights' to guide readers to exemplary behaviour, while the latter serve as 'Buoys, to keep him off those Rocks and Quick-Sands that lie concealed'.²⁵ Such a defence could be in response to Samuel Johnson's complaint that novelists feel compelled to portray evil characteristics combined with good ones and 'so mingle good and bad qualities in their principle

²² *Will Ramble*, v.2, p.109.

²³ *Ibid*, v.2, p.316

²⁴ *The Monthly Review*, pp.446 – 447.

²⁵ *Will Ramble*, v.1, p.3.

personages, that they are both equally conspicuous'.²⁶ The author of *Will Ramble* therefore appears to be aware of and responding to contemporary discourse on the novel. However, this was not necessarily distinctive at the time, as Thomas Keymer argues that 'self-referential gestures [...] had become just another part of the convention'.²⁷ In his bid for authority, the author writes *Will Ramble* within the accepted guidelines, but he is also self-aware about toeing the line of established conventions.

Libertine and Picaresque Literature

By appending the words 'A Libertine' to the title, the author of *Will Ramble* explicitly places his novel firmly within the popular tradition of libertine fiction, which was born partly out of the Spanish literary tradition of the picaresque. Usually characterised vaguely as fiction that narrates the adventures of a roguish hero, the search for an accurate definition of the picaresque is strewn with difficulties. Stuart Miller, at the outset of his attempt to create a comprehensive study of the picaresque, admits that 'one would be hard pressed to find a really persuasive definition of the genre'.²⁸ This, however, has not prevented scores of scholars from attempting to define the picaresque and the result has been academic discord. Consequently, it is difficult to establish where *Will Ramble* stands in relation to the picaresque tradition and whether we can consider it picaresque at all.

Historically, picaresque literature originated in Spain in the sixteenth century with works such as *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554). However, when this genre of literature migrated outside the borders of its motherland its characteristics were altered to suit the literary

²⁶ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, No. 4, Saturday 31 March 1750 <<http://britishperiodicals.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 15 November 2010], p.18.

²⁷ Thomas Keymer, 'Novels, Print, and Meaning', in *Sterne, the Moderns and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.49 – 82, p.58.

²⁸ Stuart Miller, *The Picaresque Novel* (Cleveland & London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1967), p.4.

tastes of other nations and it became more difficult to determine exactly what the picaresque was. Richard Bjornson argues that it was in England 'that a widespread curiosity about low-life and criminal behaviour coalesced with an impulse toward longer, more coherent structures', thus producing the first picaresque literature outside of Spain.²⁹ Dickie, on the other hand, asserts that ramble novels 'differ from the classical picaresque in that they include a romance plot',³⁰ while Parker goes as far as to claim that 'the eighteenth century *could not* present a significant literary treatment of delinquency', which he sees as the defining feature of the picaresque.³¹

There are elements of the picaresque genre to be found in *Will Ramble*. Firstly the plot can be seen as embodying features of the picaresque, with a chaotic structure and a series of events that the hero has little control over, conforming with Miller's characterisation of the picaresque plot as recording 'fragmented happening after fragmented happening'.³² Similarly to the fiction of Fielding, plot takes precedence over character, a feature that Ian Watt notes in *Tom Jones*, arguing that 'although different qualities come to the fore' of Tom's character at different points, 'they have all been present from the beginning'.³³ The same might be said of Will, as despite his reform there is no true character development discernable in the novel. This lack of development is characteristic of the picaresque hero and what Miller calls his 'inner chaos', yet the libertine

²⁹ Richard Bjornson, 'The Picaresque Novel in France, England, and Germany', *Comparative Literature*, 29.2, 124 – 147 (p.128).

³⁰ Dickie, 'The Forgotten Best-Sellers of Early English Fiction', p.321.

³¹ Alexander A. Parker, *Literature and the Delinquent: The Picaresque Novel in Spain and Europe 1599 – 1753* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967), p.133.

³² Miller, p.12.

³³ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p.274.

differs from the picaresque as he reforms at the conclusion of the novel.³⁴ In this sense, *Will Ramble* may be seen to follow the narrative arc of romance rather than the picaresque.

It is worth considering in more detail the character of Will Ramble and where he fits in, in relation to models of the libertine and picaresque. In this analysis it is useful to compare Will with Tom Jones, a fictional figure with whom he shares several characteristics. Like Tom Jones, the young rogue who was 'born to be hanged' but is nonetheless good hearted and appealing to readers, Will resists Johnson's prescription for wholly moral characters.³⁵ In early descriptions of the two characters one phrase in particular regarding their 'propensity [...] to vices' appears in both texts and the delineation of Will's characteristics could well be a description of Tom.³⁶ Furthermore, the narrator in each case does not blame the protagonist for his slips from virtue, with women often portrayed as being responsible, as with Mrs Waters' seduction of Tom. Unlike the more determinedly wayward picaresque, Tom and Will are merely presented as slightly hapless heroes, victim to the 'Frailty of Mankind' as the author of *Will Ramble* puts it, and therefore fit the English model of the essentially well-meaning libertine who is reformed by the love of a good woman.³⁷

Perhaps, instead of attempting to assign certain English texts to the picaresque genre, we might do better to consider the literature emerging in this country under the influence of the picaresque as a new genre of its own. Novels such as *Will Ramble* display elements of the picaresque, such as the episodic and convoluted plot and the central figure of the rogue, but in England there was a noticeable blending of the picaresque with characteristics of romance. We might dub the result of this as simply the libertine novel, or perhaps more accurately the reformed libertine novel, as this is almost invariably the end

³⁴ Miller, p.47.

³⁵ Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones* 2 vols (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1962), v.1, p.73.

³⁶ Fielding, *Tom Jones*, v.1, p.73; *Will Ramble*, v.1, p.108.

³⁷ *Will Ramble*, v.2, p.3.

result of such literature. Although these novels were the fodder of the mass print market, mostly disposable novels that have not entered the canon – ‘true ephemera’ as Raven puts it – they have value in informing our conceptions of the rise of the novel.³⁸ The novel format could even arguably be seen as the outcome of combining the picaresque tradition with that of the romance, together with a new emphasis on realism, as Parker suggests.³⁹ There is not room here to discuss models of the rise of the novel, but libertine fiction doubtless claims a central role in the composition of the eighteenth century literary marketplace.

The Culture of Luxury

One of the principal concerns throughout *Will Ramble* is the emerging eighteenth-century culture of luxury and its potentially corrupting effects. It was during this century that for the first time a significant proportion of the population indulged in pleasure for pleasure’s sake without being morally condemned. The shift in attitudes towards luxury was two pronged, originating from both economic and philosophical changes. On the one hand, the expansion of trade encouraged a consumer culture, whilst at the same time new theoretical standpoints legitimised such consumerism. As Roy Porter tells us, Thomas Hobbes’ hedonistic vision and Bernard Mandeville’s suggestion that ‘human nature was utterly, nakedly and selfishly drive-directed’ placed a new emphasis on the fulfilment of earthly desires.⁴⁰ As a result society as a whole, and particularly the elites, devoted an increasing amount of their time to pleasure seeking. Maura A. Henry writes that in the eighteenth

³⁸ Raven, p.160.

³⁹ Parker claims that the realism of the novel form ‘is ushered in with the Spanish *picaro*, who relates his life-story’, pp.5 – 6.

⁴⁰ Roy Porter, ‘Enlightenment and Pleasure’, in *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Roy Porter & Marie Mulvey Roberts (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996), pp.1 – 18, p.7.

century the upper classes 'spent the overwhelming majority of their adult lives engaged in a dizzying array of continuous sociability: they danced, dined, promenaded, hunted, gambled'.⁴¹ Such activities are criticised throughout *Will Ramble*; pursuits such as hunting are shown to cause the deterioration of Mr Ramble's fortune, while a large section of the novel serves as a damning indictment of the gambling culture of eighteenth-century England.

In contrast to the author's disapproval of sexual licentiousness, which appears perfunctory and somewhat insincere, his condemnation of gambling is far more forceful. Gambling is the source of woes for both Will and his friend Mr Hughes and the author is scathing about its prominence in fashionable society. He writes that:

the Practice of it is esteemed so necessary to making an Appearance in the World, that it is generally the first Thing Youth are taught even in their Infancy; and increases in their growing up to such a strong Habit, as is then Impossible to be cast off. By this Means Gaming is become such a universal Fashion.⁴²

The tone here is biting and satirical, his use of the word 'Fashion' filled with scorn. Gambling is the particular target of criticism, but luxury and the pursuit of pleasure are presented in a generally negative light, even seen as the cause of Will's libertinism; he had 'too early an indulgence in the Taste of Pleasure'.⁴³ It is worth pausing to consider, however, that despite its criticisms *Will Ramble* is itself a form of pleasure and entertainment, raising the possibility that the author's disapproval is satirizing the concerns of contemporary commentators.

Concerns about the leisured lives of the upper classes were not confined to this novel, with Henry noting that 'the increasingly urban life of the landed elite prompted

⁴¹ Maura A. Henry, 'The Making of Elite Culture', in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. H. T. Dickinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002), pp311 – 328, p.320.

⁴² *Will Ramble*, v.2, pp.19 – 20.

⁴³ *Ibid*, v.1, p.107

concern among contemporary observers, who feared that the landed elite were abandoning the countryside'.⁴⁴ Perhaps significantly, at the end of *Will Ramble* all the main players retire to the countryside, relinquishing the temptations of the town in favour of responsibility for their estates. Luxury is seen as a threat to women in particular and is linked to a loss of virtue. Polly Wright, for example, is a voracious consumer of luxury goods and a promiscuous 'fallen' woman, eventually becoming a commodity in the consumer culture herself as Will purchases her as a mistress from Mr Hughes. The author goes on to suggest that many women 'for the Sake of a Title or Estate can bear with any Defects in the Person of a Husband', making up for such defects by taking lovers; their desire for money and material goods once again causes the sacrifice of their virtue.⁴⁵

In contrast to the pleasure seeking mistress or mercenary wife, the ideal woman in the shape of Louisa shows no interest in luxury or money and surrenders her fortune to Will in order to help him reform. This treatment of women in *Will Ramble* supports the view of E. J. Clery that commentators at the time 'could not see beyond the rhetoric that associated the acquisitive passions with the corrupting influence of women'.⁴⁶ Women must fall into one of two camps: they either tempt men into luxury or they give up all claims to material desires and reform their male acquaintances. Clery also suggests that the ideal woman sanctions the consumer culture 'by ornamenting the world of commerce and luxury without tasting its vices or sharing its passion', but Louisa seems to go even further than this, leading Will out of the realm of luxury entirely.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Henry, p.324.

⁴⁵ *Will Ramble*, v.2, pp.249 – 250.

⁴⁶ E. J. Clery, *The Feminization Debate in Eighteenth-Century England, Literature, Commerce and Luxury* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.97.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.133.

The evidence so far would appear to corroborate Dickie's claim that 'ramble novels do little or nothing to challenge inherited social hierarchies'.⁴⁸ There are, however, some intriguing inconsistencies, such as the surprisingly progressive view of slavery expressed in the narrative of Elizabeth, a young woman who is taken in by Mr Merit's household. Elizabeth provocatively declares that slavery is 'contrary to the Laws of God', a radical statement appearing several years before the abolitionist movements.⁴⁹ This is linked to criticisms of the consumer culture, as it was the slave trade which to a certain extent facilitated this environment of luxury. Therefore I would challenge Dickie's dismissal of the social concerns of *Will Ramble*, as the novel has some surprisingly forward-looking views and its criticism of England's luxury obsession, although arguably a conservative standpoint, is still seeking to alter the social and cultural climate.

Will Ramble and the Development of the Novel

In the literary marketplace of the mid-eighteenth century, *Will Ramble* was by no means extraordinary. Highly formulaic and derivative, the novel owes much to picaresque literature, the popular 'ramble' fictions of the day and more sophisticated and successful texts such as *Tom Jones* and *Roderick Random*. However, texts like *Will Ramble* are helpful in contextualising the novels that have entered the canon and gaining a wider view of the literary environment in which the novel form emerged; as Dickie writes, 'trash can help us to situate texts more firmly in their time – in the literary field in which they were originally produced'.⁵⁰ Yet *Will Ramble* is more complex than the usual 'trash' produced at this time and I do not necessarily agree with Dickie that it should be consigned to this category.

⁴⁸ Dickie, 'The Forgotten Best-Sellers of Early English Fiction', p.334.

⁴⁹ *Will Ramble*, v.1, p.150.

⁵⁰ Dickie, 'The Forgotten Best-Sellers of Early English Fiction', p.367.

From the evidence studied it would appear that *Will Ramble*, despite apparently appearing in only one edition in England and another in Ireland, made more of a lasting impression and had more social impact than many other similar novels. Such was its impact that Dickie tells us that ‘a “Will Ramble” became something of a byword for daring young libertines’.⁵¹ Although its principal aim is to entertain, it is also engaged with social questions of its time and while the plot is unwieldy and meandering, much of the writing displays wit and fluency. *Will Ramble* is unlikely to become a canonical text and will perhaps continue to languish in obscurity, but as part of the libertine fiction that forms a vital stepping stone in the history of the novel and as an imitation of and comparison with the writing of Fielding, there is a value in studying this text that may have been somewhat underestimated.

⁵¹ Dickie, ‘The Forgotten Best-Sellers of Early English Fiction’, p.336.

Appendix: Bibliographical Description

<p>Author (and attribution as it appears on title page, or note of pseudonym or anonymity)</p>	<p>Anonymous</p>
<p>Title (as it appears on title page)</p>	<p>The History of Will Ramble, a Libertine. Compiled from Genuine Materials, and the Several Incidents taken from Real Life</p>
<p>Imprint (Place of publication: publisher, year of publication as they appear on title page)</p>	<p>London: Printed for the Author: And sold by G. Woodfall, at the King's Arms, Charing Cross MDCCLV 1755 (1754) Note: the novel was in fact published at the end of 1754 although the title page is dated 1755</p>
<p>Physical description (details relating to all copies, egg number of vols., number of pgs, size, price – sometimes shown on title page, quality of paper and printing, illustrations, etc.)</p>	<p>2 volumes: vol.1 336pgs, vol.2 316pgs Octavo, 6s</p>
<p>Physical description (details relating only to this specific copy, egg binding & decoration, binding anomalies, annotations etc.)</p>	<p>Brown leather binding with gold fillets on the spine Small, illegible scribble on first page</p>
<p>Provenance (egg bookplates, inscriptions)</p>	<p>Armorial bookplate of Rich Bull of Ongar in Essex Esq on inside page</p>
<p>Details of advertisements (you can summarise if there is a long list e.g. genre, price range, a few characteristic or notable titles)</p>	<p>None</p>
<p>Paratext (title page epigraph, subscription list, dedication, preface, introduction, etc. noted or summarised)</p>	<p>Detailed contents pages with content summaries</p>

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