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## **Bad Masters, Unhappy Pupils**

**Marginal Forms, Foundational Influences: The Picaresque  
and the Emergence of the Novel in England**

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Hans Baldung Grien's woodcut from 1515 edition, reproduced on title page of Oppenheimer, Paul. *A Pleasant Vintage of Till Eulenspiegel, Born in the Country of Brunswick: How He Spent His Life, 95 of His Tales*. Translated from the Edition of 1515, with Introd. and Critical Appendix, by Paul Oppenheimer. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1972. Print.



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## INTRODUCTION

*Nullus est liber tam malus ut non aliqua parte prosit*<sup>1</sup>

– Pliny the Younger, *Letters*

The ensuing brief introduction is meant to acquaint the reader with the themes which will be further discussed and expanded in the core chapters of the present research. Therefore, the reader shall expect to find in the following paragraphs neither extraordinary answers nor grand theories, but rather a few suggestions and an arduous attempt to draw attention to a kind of literature whose importance more often than not has been considered peripheral in the context of the rise of the English novel.

That is why this study is aimed at discovering the overlooked ties that the novel has with previous literary and non-literary minor works – mostly stemming from the late Middle Ages – from its origins in sixteenth-century Spain to the Neopicaresque in Europe. We will see why the “sordid and vicious disposition of the world”<sup>2</sup> had so much to do with English literary tradition and with many of its most prominent authors. The texts mentioned and discussed in the following paper, were not selected with the preposterous aim of exhausting the whole matter at issue, but rather as examples or personal suggestions of works worth reading when dealing with the theme of the picaresque in western literature.

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<sup>1</sup> “No book was so bad but some good might be got out of it”.

<sup>2</sup> Smollett, Tobias. *Roderick Random*, (1748), Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1995, pp. 4 -5

## 1. *Pícaro*: a Definition

One of the founding forms of the modern novel, the picaresque remains a controversial literary category, and its definition is still much contested. In a famous essay on the subject, Claudio Guillén asserts: “No work embodies completely the picaresque genre. The genre is not, of course, a novel any more than the equine species is a horse” (Guillén, 2015).

Rogue, knave, scoundrel, beggar, rascal, foundling, sharper.

Elusive to clear definitions, the term *pícaro* resists easy classification. Even the Oxford English Dictionary struggles to provide a satisfactory account of its meaning. Of doubtful etymology, perhaps related to the Spanish *picar* which in turn derives from the Italian verb *piccare*, to prick<sup>3</sup>, to peck, to nibble at<sup>4</sup>.

Drawing on a range of academic definitions<sup>5</sup> and literary sources, one may argue that the *pícaro* is typically a low-born young protagonist, born in Spain during the XVI century, whose primary aim is survival within a hostile and hypocritical society, often achieved through wit and amoral behaviour. Pavel, 2013: “amoral picaros are too busy surviving to realise how lonely they are”<sup>6</sup>. While initially seeking an honourable and honest life, the *pícaro* is soon embittered by the vile world which he is doomed to dwell in and is led to adopt a roguish lifestyle.

Not only did these ill-fated characters manage to survive in their adverse societies, but they even lived through the centuries – a relatively recent

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<sup>3</sup> Oxford English Dictionary Second Ed. “*pícaro* (n.),” 1989

<sup>4</sup> *Pablo de Segovia. The Spanish Sharper*. Translated by Daniel Vierge, London, 1892. p. XXX

<sup>5</sup> Real Academia Española: *Diccionario de la lengua española*, 23.<sup>a</sup> ed.

Oxford English Dictionary, “*pícaro* (n.),” 2023

<sup>6</sup> Pavel, Thomas. *The Lives of the Novel: A History*, 2013, p. 91

example of such literary character is *The Tin Drum*, 1959 by Günter Grass – thus inevitably becoming part of that evolutionary process known as *The Rise of the Novel*. These roguish *anti*-heroes gave birth to a new literary genre which emerged in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain, as we will see in more detail below. However, a few remarks must be made regarding where the rise of the picaresque satirical novella took place. In the present study I will take into analysis both Spanish and English texts, considering the latter group not a mere consequence of the former, as it has often been the case with literary critics, but as a quasi-simultaneous evolutionary process which came to be in response to a reading public whose needs and interests were rapidly changing.

## 2. Lazarillo de Tormes

Scholars agree that<sup>7</sup> that the first text to establish the style of the picaresque satirical novel is *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes and of His Fortunes and Adversities*, published anonymously in Spain in 1554.

Due to its anticlerical content, the author's identity has never been revealed notwithstanding the immediate and widespread success it achieved upon its first publication, as can be inferred from the multiple reprintings of that same year and the series of early translations in French (1560-1) and English (1576). *Lazarillo de Tormes* deals with the story of Lázaro, whose toponymic surname derives directly from the river in which the hapless protagonist of

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<sup>7</sup> An endless list of authors could be provided; these will suffice Rico, F. *Lazarillo de Tormes* 34<sup>th</sup> ed. 2021 pp. 31-45; Bakhtin, M. M., et al. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. University of Texas Press, 1986 pp. 10-11

the eponymous novella was born, the river *Tormes* indeed. His parents are both low-class people working in a mill alongside the shore of the river just mentioned. His father dies at a very early stage of Lázaro's life, leaving his poor wife alone with two sons to feed. One day, when a blind man stops at the house where Antona Pérez – the wife – started working after the death of her husband, Lázaro decides to follow the blind man and work for him as his assistant in exchange for food and a roof over his head. This will be the beginning of a long series of *bad* masters and painful misadventures for the unhappy Lázaro who will soon learn not to trust people by their name or appearances.

### 3. Guzmán de Alfarache

Almost half a century after the publishing of the anonymous novella, another picaresque novel appears in the Spanish literary scene: *Guzmán de Alfarache* by Mateo Alemán, published in two volumes, 1599 and 1604. If *Lazarillo* is considered the milestone for the picaresque genre in European Literature, Alemán's work goes so far as to be considered by critics one of the possible progenitors of the European modern novel<sup>8</sup>. Notably influenced by the Catholic Counter-Reformation, the *Guzmán* shows a realistic representation of a declining 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spain where spiritual redemption is possible through worldly punishment (Resina, 2002).

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<sup>8</sup> Edward H. Friedman, among others, believes that the origins of the genre must be sought in the *Lazarillo*, in Alemán's work and - obviously – in Cervante's masterpiece and *Novelas Ejemplares*. For further readings, see: *Insincere Flattery: Imitation and the Growth of the novel in Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America*, Volume XX, Number 1, Spring 2000

Both texts share similarities in narrative structure and plot scheme, only the latter being about ten times as long as *Lazarillo* which implies a “type of elliptical complexity to the text” while the *Guzmán* “operates in precisely the opposite fashion”<sup>9</sup>.

A great difference that Mateo Alemán introduces in his satirical novel is the lack of anonymity. He dares to write his full name beside a story which goes under the title of *Vida del pícaro Guzmán de Alfarache*.

Historians and literary critics have not given us a clear reason why Alemán chose to place his name on the frontispiece of his work, without fearing censure, inquisition or simply humiliation from the reading public; but we do read in the dedicatory to Don Francisco de Rojas that he [Alemán] was “sure of the generous disposition of His Lordship, whom, widening the wings of his customary mercy, will keep my book free of charges from those who could defame it”<sup>10</sup>. At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, indeed, writing a story featuring low-class characters as protagonists of the events was still considered shameful and trivial by most of the contemporary literary criticism<sup>11</sup>. One answer to this question could be tied to the before-mentioned immediate success the *Lazarillo* received upon its first volume, but another highly plausible hypothesis for the choice of authorship of the *Guzmán* is linked to the *status quo* which Mateo Alemán enjoyed. His work is signed: *Compuesta [la vida del pícaro] por Matheo Alemán criado del Rey Don Felipe III* which denotes a certain proximity with the Spanish aristocracy of the time, hence a privileged social position, a matter not trivial at all when it comes to censorship during the *Siglo de Oro*. It is not by chance,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *Guzmán de Alfarache*, ed. Samuel Gili y Gaya, Madrid, I (1926), p. 28. My trans.

<sup>11</sup> Steele, Jonathan. in *The Guardian*, N. 60, 1713

after all, if the implied author of the story claims to have serendipitously found a volume in which no threat to the Catholic Church could be seen. And decides to write an ‘approval’ where he stresses the orthodoxy of the text. Shockingly enough, both Lázaro and Guzmán, as we have seen, are both protagonists and authors of their narratives. We are, indeed, dealing with two apocryphal pseudo-autobiographies intended not only as a defence from the accusations they had to endure during their roguish lives, but also as a denouncement of the social apparatus in which they grew up. Both works state this in their prologue:

Lazarillo de Tormes:

*Suplico a Vuestra Merced reciba el pobre servicio de mano de quien lo hiciera más rico si su poder y deseo se conformaran. Y pues Vuestra Merced escribe se le escriba y relate el caso muy por extenso, parecióme no tomarle por el medio, sino del principio, porque se tenga entera noticia de mi persona [...]*<sup>12</sup>.

Guzmán de Alfarache:

*El deseo que tenía, curioso lector, de contarte mi vida me daba tanta priesa para engolfarte en ella sin prevenir algunas cosas que, como primer principio, es bien dejarlas entendidas [...]*<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> English translation by Clements Markham, London, Adams and Charles Black, 1908: *I beseech your Honour that you will accept the poor service of one who would be richer if his power was equal to his desire. Well, your Honour! This author writes what he writes, and relates his story very fully. It seemed to him that he should not begin in the middle, but quite at the beginning, so that there might be a full notice of his personality [...]*.

<sup>13</sup> English trans. from French Ed. of *Mons Le Sage* by John Henry Brady, London, Longman et al., 1823: *I was so desirous, curious reader, to relate to you my own adventures, that I had almost commenced speaking of myself without making any mention of my family [...]*

#### 4. Narrative Voice

Both narrators make clear from the beginning that they would not have related their stories were it not for '*Vuestra Merced*' or the '*curioso lector*'<sup>14</sup>. This strategy, just like the literary trope of the found manuscript, legitimates the two texts belonging to what was known as 'low literature': any piece of literature which did not fall under the category of Epic Poem, Chivalric Romance or Poetry. They are exemplars of unprecedented storytellers. Lázaro and Guzmán make us readers almost forget their humble origins while they are busy recounting their lives, but when we do realize it, we suddenly feel wrong-footed by the narrator/picaro. We suddenly realize that we have been reading and believing a story told by conmen who have made their way through adversities swindling people, because that is the lesson they had learnt from their hypocritical masters and that is what they intrinsically are. Moreover, our 'suspension of disbelief' (Coleridge, 1817) is even greater since in real life – I believe there is no more deceiving word than *real* when we think about fiction – these grown-up rascals would have been illiterate and incapable of designing such complex narrative structure. In *Literature as System: Essays Toward the Theory of Literary History*, Claudio Guillén rightfully defines the picaresque as “the fictional confession of a liar”<sup>15</sup>.

So far, we have been juxtaposing with almost no distinction the figure of the *pícaro* (character in the story) with that of the narrator. It must be pointed out though that they are two separate entities which can, at times such as

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<sup>14</sup> Respectively “Your Kindness” and “the curious reader”.

<sup>15</sup> Guillén, Claudio, *From Literature as System: Essays toward the Theory of Literary History*, in: Michael McKeon (ed.), *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, Baltimore-London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, 41

these ones, be in a dialogic relationship with each other while nonetheless maintaining their ontological distance. In the two texts mentioned earlier, three main layers of authorship are presented.

1) The *Implied author*<sup>16</sup>. Strictly linked to the former, the Implied author is an ideal entity whom the reader constructs in his or her mind as the story disentangles. Notwithstanding the temptation – highly comprehensible – of identifying the latter with the real/physical writer of the novella, the reader should insist on keeping the two figures separate. In our case, both *Lazarillo* and *Guzmán* are examples of texts where the implied author is with all probability a highly educated, ironic, critical and witty humanist who occasionally intervenes in Lázaro and Guzmán's life accounts thus sharing with the reader cynical, pungent commentaries on 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish society. 2) The *super partes* author or authorial narrator. Borrowing Genette's nomenclature, this sort of authorial figure would go under the name of *extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator*<sup>17</sup>, none other than an omniscient narrator who benefits from the privilege of knowing both the whole plot and the inner thoughts of the characters in the story. He is the closest example to God that humans can ever achieve. 3) The *1<sup>st</sup> person narrator*, or *intradiegetic homodiegetic narrator* (Genette, 1972). It is the central narrative voice for both novellas. One unspecified day of their adulthood, the two *pícaros* finally resolve to write down as meticulously as possible the accounts of their lives through a process of analepsis, which results in constructing the very body of the two stories.

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<sup>16</sup> Booth, Wayne. C. *The rhetoric of fiction*. University of Chicago Press, 1961

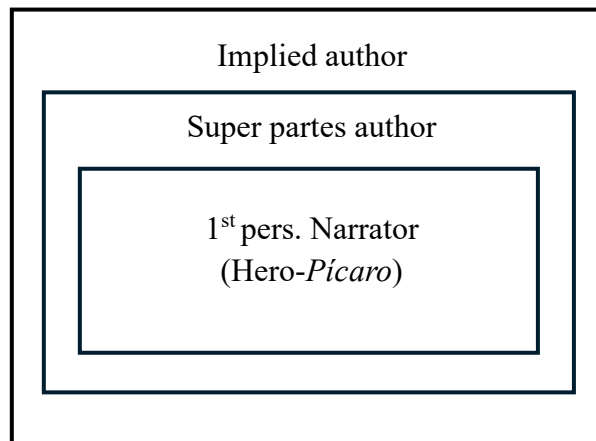
<sup>17</sup> Genette, Gérard. *Figures III*. Paris: Le Seuil, 1972

Claudio Guillén and Carlos Aguinaga help us understand this characteristic of self-saturation peculiar to the picaresque style condensing their thoughts in the following, concise passages:

“Both the hero and the principal point of view are picaresque. Life is at the same time revived and judged, presented and remembered. Hence the particular consistency of self-saturation of the style. Life is at the same time revived and judged, presented and remembered” (Guillén, 2015).

“No cabe duda de que la forma autobiográfica es esencial a la picaresca: ello permite que la vida narrada, naturalmente *a posteriori*, esté concebida *a priori*, como ejemplo de desengaño” (Aguinaga, 1957).

The following scheme is a graphic intent to explicate the concepts discussed so far:



## 5. Rogue Literature

Literature needs conflict to exist. At the least *modern* literature, to be precise, needs conflict to legitimise itself, and with *modern* I mean, as Lukács would term it, a literary world deserted by Gods where men feel abandoned and look for something they fail to grasp<sup>18</sup>. In *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* Moretti writes that in modern novels the hero feels lonely in a society which does not respond to his imagination: “to accept the idea that the world is not ‘made for us’ can be truly disheartening”.<sup>19</sup> Modern heroes are individuals looking for a “comfort [in] civilisation” (Moretti, 2000) whose original harmony – comfort – is deliberately put in danger – conflict – by the super partes author. This key concept is intrinsic to western literature since its very primordial works. Ulysses’ example is blatant in this regard, considered by many the original modern hero whose vibrant, defying essence determines the course of Homer’s epic poem.

Dante’s verses are self-explanatory in this regard:

*Considerate la vostra semenza:  
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,  
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.*

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<sup>18</sup> Lukács, György: “*Der Roman ist die Epopöe der gottverlassenen Welt*”, in *The Theory of the Novel*, 1916, vol. I, ch. 5

<sup>19</sup> Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. Translated by Albert Sbragia, Verso, 2000.

Consider ye the seed from which ye sprang;  
Ye were not made to live like unto brutes,  
But for pursuit of virtue and of knowledge.<sup>20</sup>

This is Ulysses talking to Virgil and Dante after being addressed by the former. The Greek hero willingly resolves to leave his comfortable hearth, where all his beloved ones live (Telemachus, Penelope, Eumaeus, Laertes) to set his sails to an unknown destination in search of new adventures. In truth, Ulysses exceeds the trope of the hero in search of a peaceful solution after a life of adventures. He sets the tone for what will be – almost 26 centuries later – the essence of the romantic hero of modern novels, one of all Captain Ahab, in Melville’s 1851 masterpiece.

*Nolens volens*, the Odyssey gave shape to the future of Western Literature, instilling that drop of adventure in the minds of later authors which resulted in the rise of the novel as the major literary genre in modern times.

Rogue literature in England began establishing roots almost half a century later than the Spanish picaresque novellas mentioned earlier.

Of uncertain origin, the OED vaguely connects it with the cant word *roger* – most probably pronounced with a plosive /g/ rather than the affricate /dʒ/ - which can instead be related to the Latin *rogāre*, to pray, to beg.

Although the OED declares that the earliest written evidence of the word ‘rogue’ is from 1489<sup>21</sup>, its use began being noteworthy only from the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century onward. We find that Shakespeare himself uses the word ‘rogue’ manifold times in his plays: “Oh what a rogue and peasant slave

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<sup>20</sup> Tercet taken from *Inferno Canto XXVI vv. 119-121* in *The Divine Comedy*. Translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. It. version Sapegno N. a cura di, *La Divina Commedia – Inferno*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia Editrice 1972

<sup>21</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, “rogue (n.), sense 3,” June 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1921205963>.

am I!” (*Hamlet*, II, 2, 577); “Rogue, rogue, rogue/I am sick of this false world” (*Timon of Athens*, IV, 3, 418-19); a broader use of the term appears in *Henry the IV* (part I and II), *Henry V* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in relation to Sir John Falstaff, Shakespeare’s debauched knight and ill-advisor of Prince Hal and buffoonish suitor of Mistress Ford and Mistress Page. I will not spend too much time describing this deeply interesting character, only because it will be thoroughly discussed later. For the time being, suffice it to say that it has been, and continues nowadays to be a reason for constant debate among literary critics and scholars. During an interview, film director Orson Welles states: “[...] as I said, Falstaff is a role that demands an enormous amount of work. It is a very difficult role.”<sup>22</sup>

Certainly, Shakespeare was not the first nor the only one to make a large use of the term (his direct rival Robert Greene for instance, published a series of pamphlets on ‘cony-catching’, slang term for deceiving innocent people) but he surely set the tone for the connotations that the word ‘rogue’ was going to acquire in the centuries to come.

The definition of *rogue* given by the OED as of what its sense was in 1593 already denotes a change in meaning of the term:

“A mischievous person, *esp.* a child; a person whose behaviour one disapproves of, but who is nonetheless likeable or attractive. Frequently as a playful term of reproof or reproach or as a term of endearment”<sup>13</sup>.

Along with the development and the increasing use of the word *rogue*, towards mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, a new type of prose fiction focused on lives of the criminal underworld of the late Elizabethan Era, began gaining prominence in England. Nineteenth-century scholars coined the term *Rogue Literature* to

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<sup>22</sup> Juan Cobos and Miguel Rubio interview Orson Welles on Falstaff, in *Cahiers du Cinema*, N. 11 September 1967

regroup those adventurous stories having common characteristics, published from late 16<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, under the same super-genre. Rogue Literature, indeed, can include various forms of fiction such as pamphlets, novels, novellas, plays and poetry as long as they showcase an intriguing, anti-heroic – most of the times young – protagonist who narrates his or her miserable and adventurous life using first-person confessions to reveal a corrupt society in which the rogue lives. Examples of authors who contributed to enriching this rising genre are countless: first and foremost, Robert Greene again, who wrote cautionary tales for the English reading public; Thomas Dekker, Elizabethan dramatist active in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century; Thomas Nashe, together with Greene, published various pamphlets and novels which all fall under the rogue genre and, last but certainly not least, Shakespeare.<sup>23</sup>

While the Picaresque Novel originates from the Spanish literary tradition, Rogue Literature stems from a series of earlier works that circulated in Europe – both in their original versions and as translations.

As Charles H. Herford highlights in his *Studies in the literary relations of England and Germany*<sup>24</sup>, Fool Literature, comprising jestbooks, folktales, anecdotes and so on, played a remarkable part in shaping the future of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century English Literature. Examples of such literature were popular, e.g., Robert Copland's *Hye Way to the Spyttel House* (1535); Robert Greene's *Black Book Messenger* (1565); Thomas Harmon's *A Caveat or Warning for Common Cursitors Vulgarely called Vagabonds* (1566); *Till Eulenspiegel* (1510 Strassburg, whereas the English version came out around

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<sup>23</sup> For further references, see: R. Greene's *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage* (1591) and *The Second Part of Cony-Catching* (1591); T. Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveler* (1594); or T. Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1600) and *The Honest Whore* (1604);

<sup>24</sup>H. Herford, Charles, *Studies in the literary relations of England and Germany*, Cambridge, 1886

40 years later under the title of *Howleglass*<sup>25</sup>); Thomas Nashe's 1594 *The Unfortunate Traveller; or, the Life of Jack Wilton* (generally defined, erroneously, picaresque and likened to *Lazarillo*<sup>26</sup>) and the medieval ballad of *Robin Hood*.

Especially the latter, during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, saw a curious distortion in the character of the heroic Yorkshire archer. Robin Hood ballads have existed since the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a time when the theme of the free but persecuted, rebellious and witty criminal outsmarting authorities to give the gains to the poor, had a great sociopolitical impact on the contemporary population. Postmedieval ballads, on the contrary, turned Robin Hood into a fallen nobleman with a much greater romantic appeal than what he was known to enjoy earlier. He is given a companion, Maid Marian, his loyalty to the 'just' King Richard I is introduced and the theme of 'taking from the rich (mostly corrupt churchmen) to give to the poor' is taken to its extreme. This late version of the famous English folktale was going to be further developed in the following centuries and continued to intrigue and fascinate readers from all over the world up to the present day.

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<sup>25</sup> *Here beginneth a merye jest of a man called Howleglass, and of many marvelous thinges and jesses that he did in his lyffe* Ed. by William Copland, ~ 1550-60

<sup>26</sup> For further clarification as to why the inclusion of Nashe's work among picaresque novels is, in my view, misguided, it suffices to note that Jack Wilton and Lázaro are intrinsically opposite: the former is a page and a member of the English court who deliberately chooses to enlist in the military and travel across Europe, engaging in various 'picaresqueries'; the latter is a destitute orphan compelled by necessity to adopt a life of crime and adventure in order to survive. The topic will be further discussed in Chapter III 1.



# CHAPTER I

## WHY CRIMINALS?

*Better a witty fool, than a foolish wit*

– *Twelfth Night*, Act I, Scene IV

### 1. The Origins of the Rogue – Robin Hood

Up until the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, outlaws in English literature had only enjoyed a marginalized role.

English medieval romances portrayed, of course, antagonists and villains in their stories but the evil side remained always circumscribed to a limited space, most of the times these characters were meant as foils but to test the hero's integrity and adherence to the chivalric code. Examples of this literary expedient can be found already in *Beowulf* (8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century) – although, technically, this is not a Medieval Romance but an epic-heroic poem – with the monstrous figure of Grandel, the first of the three antagonists which the poem's hero will have to defeat. Grandel's main *raison d'être* is to highlight Beowulf's immense physical strength and prowess. Other examples are the antagonists of King Arthur and his knights, such as the Green Knight and the Lady of Hautdesert, both conceived as foils to Sir Gawain, who repeatedly and subtly test the hero's quasi-perfect virtue.

I have mentioned these exemplary writings because they must be kept in mind when it comes to identifying a literary source for the emerging interest of the Early-Modern English reading public for criminal literature. The link between criminality and the rise of the novel has been widely discussed and nowadays it is almost taken for granted by various experts, one of all University of York professor James A. Sharpe, whose works on Crime in Early Modern England extensively develop the concept.

In the previous texts, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, the opponents to the main characters do not participate in the story as fully developed characters worthy of even only being considered important enough to compete with the hero. This marginal role given to villains, with all probability must be ascribed to the idea that these malefactors appeared in those fictional works as personifications of Vice and Devil remaining mere idealizations of such entities.

Roguish characters will be considered worthy of deserving a central space in a fictional writing only when the ‘father of English Poetry’ (Blake, 1808) - or rather, ‘father of English prose’<sup>27</sup> - Geoffrey Chaucer, will introduce them in his *magnum opus* of late 15<sup>th</sup> century, *The Canterbury Tales* (1477). If the antagonists that we have seen before corresponded to the idealization of the Devil in literature - trying to seduce and mislead our heroes - rogues instead, could be more adequately ascribed to Vice.

In morality plays of the time (14<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries) in England, personifications of Vice and Devil were common to be seen on stage. Characters such as *Mischief* or *Nowadays* in a play like *Mankind* are immediate examples of personages acting as Vices in a play. While the Devil,

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<sup>27</sup> Fruoco, Johnathan. *Chaucer's Polyphony: The Modern in Medieval Poetry*, Medieval Institute Publications, Kalamazoo, 2020

embodying hell and utter damnation, was depicted as a fearful figure opposite to the protagonist and detached from the audience, characters representing Vices were much more inclined to metaphorically ‘break the fourth wall’ and empathically engage with the spectators.

Whilst they were evil characters – most of the times tricksters, tempters, helpers to the Devil himself – they had within their essence a tinge of sympathy and wit that in the long run would lead the audience to establish an unusual attitude towards them, “a *pícaro* [...] never totally loses sympathetic connection to the audience”<sup>28</sup>. Vices overtly addressed the crowd during their speeches with sharp remarks and antics just like the narrators of the soon-to-be-born picaresque novellas in a few centuries would have done. We can safely say, therefore, that these medieval characters extant in the morality plays are the predecessors of our witty, at times buffoonish, rogues and *pícaros*.

As we have seen, Chaucer was the first author in English Literature to choose low-class outlaws as main characters for many of his short stories. Blake: “As Newton numbered the stars, as Linnaeus numbered the plants, so Chaucer numbered the classes of men”<sup>29</sup>. It suffices to think about the third tale of the book, *The Reeve’s Tale*, which tells the story of a miller, Symkyn, who acts as a knave stealing corn from his customers. He will later be outsmarted and made publicly fun of by two students, clerks from a nearby village.

What is crucial here is that it is given primal importance to a figure that up until that time had never been placed in a position of such narrative centrality,

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<sup>28</sup> Washbourne, Kelly. *Translators in the Underworld: Picaresqueries in Four Centuries of El Buscón in English*, in *Revista de historia de la traducción 1611*, Modern and Classical Language Studies, Kent State University, 2024, N. 18

<sup>29</sup>Blake, William. *Blake's Chaucer: An Original Engraving*, 1810, Bentley 11A, page 3

“this narrator shows a surprising interest in villains, thieves, and rogues” (Fruoco, 2018).

Furthermore, *The Canterbury Tales* were printed in a period that spanned from 1380 to 1400, a time when low literature was not even taken into consideration by the cultured public.

It is the beginning of that literary process which will lead, around two centuries later, the English playwright of the Restoration period William Congreve to state in the preface of his *Incognita: Or Love and Duty Reconcil'd. A Novel* (mark the clarification by the author that it is a *Novel* that we are talking about):

Novels are of a more familiar nature; Come near us, and represent to us Intrigues in practice, delight us with Accidents and odd Events, but not such as are wholly unusual or unrepresented [sic.], such which not being so distant from our belief bring also the pleasure nearer us. Romances give more of Wonder, Novels more Delight” (1922, 5-6)<sup>30</sup>.

I am trying here to retrace the evolutionary moments of the modern novel, deliberately placing my stance in contrast with the idea conducted by Ian Watt in his 1957 seminal work. He identifies as the first authors of the English Modern novel Defoe, Fielding and Richardson, without taking into consideration former non-literary or marginal written works from the Early Modern Period. From Watt’s point of view, the novel is the aftermath of a series of societal, political and historical situations whose various consequences influence one another. In my (most humble!) opinion, it is belittling to claim that such a multifaceted, complex genre is restricted to a

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<sup>30</sup>Congreve, William, *Incognita: Or Love and Duty Reconcil'd. A Novel*. H. F. B. Brett-Smith, ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1922

specific historical and geographical context. That is why the present research is aimed at discovering the overlooked ties that the novel has with previous literary and non-literary works, mostly stemming from the late Middle Ages. This is where Robin Hood enters the picture, a medieval personage of ballads and folktales, his origins are not clearly definable. Some early oral testimonies date as far back as the 12<sup>th</sup> century a.d., while the very first written ballad that has reached our days is from around 1495: *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode*, printed by Wynken de Worde. A compilation of stories that must have circulated among the Early Modern English society for almost two centuries, all having Hood as their main character.

Aside from any kind of theoretical stance, Robin Hood's central role in English literature is hardly questionable. Chaucer's picaresque characters were deeply influenced by European literary tradition, like Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, written around half a century earlier than Chaucer's *Tales*. Robin Hood, in turn, is a British medieval ballad, first exemplar of written literary work portraying a low-born character, all in all an anti-hero, which common people could identify themselves with. I would argue that this world-famous medieval archer is the perfect bond between the modern novel hero and its predecessors. It is a vivid testimony that the criminal world has had a major influence on the development of this modern genre throughout the centuries. Robin Hood, indeed, encapsulates features pertaining both to Epic and Modern literature: on the one hand he is an epic hero for what regards his Ulyssean bravery and prowess in action, on the other, he is a sly, witty bandit who despite being of probable noble origins<sup>31</sup>,

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<sup>31</sup> In *The Noble Birth and Gallant Achievements of that Remarkable Out-Law Robin Hood*, printed in 1662, the 'Ingenuous Antiquary' (i.e. the unknown author) states that Robin Hood was heir to the Earl of Huntingdon's estate, that is he was of noble birth.

had been “Outlaw’d by Henry the Eight for many extravagances and outrages he committed”<sup>32</sup>.

We are therefore in front of a criminal. A character which, according to the literary tradition prior to that moment, would have been an archetype for the antagonists’ category, becomes here the main hero of the ballad. He is the ultimate realization of the process of becoming from anti-hero to central hero.

Robin Hood proves how deeply rooted in the history of the novel the relationship between criminality and fiction is. What is most curious to note is the success among the audience of the time that this kind of literature enjoyed in the immediate future. It is unequivocal proof that the reading public was already swiftly evolving, from a restricted, refined and cultured one to a broader, less educated and poorer one which sought fictional works capable of distracting common people from their tedious lives but that at the same time could relate with them.

Robin Hood tricks and steals from the rich to give to the poor. It is not surprising therefore to notice that the broad low-class audience truly enjoyed reading these stories where rich people were made fun of. To refer to Moretti’s quote previously mentioned about the alienating world in which we dishearteningly live, I borrow Pilar de Los Angeles’ words: “[to accept] the idea of an antihero that could level their world to that of the powerful”<sup>33</sup> can be truly encouraging.

Readers embraced this new form of literature as the one that best captured the spirit of their time, in a way no earlier genre could. It is no surprise, then, that amid such profound change and an ever-shifting reality, the novel was

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> de Los Angeles, Pilar, *Criminal Literature and the Rise of the Novel*, Universidad de Sevilla, p. 63, 2015

received as an answer to many of the era's anxieties and lingering uncertainties. More insight into this will be provided in chapters three and four of this research study.

Another detail that must not go unnoticed is the literary device used by the author of the written ballad to make the story plausible. Referring once again to the 1662 edition, it shows "Together with a *true account* of the many merry and extravagant exploits he play'd in twelve several stories"<sup>34</sup> written on the title page. This marks the beginning of a long tradition of fictional texts – which in a few centuries time will be known as novels – that will nevertheless exhibit on their frontispieces, prefaces or prologues, attempts to persuade readers of the veracity of the stories narrated. It does not really matter to us now whether Robin Hood existed or not during an unspecified time in Medieval England. What really matters is the undeniable debt that modern novels continue nowadays to owe to Rogue Literature.

## 2. Tyll Howleglass

The name *Howleglass* derives from the German *Eulenspiegel*, which is composed of the words "owl" (*Eule*) and "mirror" (*Spiegel*). In most graphic representations, Tyll is depicted holding an owl in his right hand and a mirror in his left. The allegorical significance of these attributes recalls a proverb well known at the time: "Man sees his own faults as little as a monkey or an owl recognizes its ugliness when looking into a mirror." Beyond this proverbial meaning, the mirror also suggests that Tyll functions as a medium

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<sup>34</sup> Italics mine.

through which society is forced to see itself reflected and exposed in all its foolishness and vices. In this sense, the figure of Tyll embodies the moral dimension of the work.

The earliest extant known version of the folktale dates to 1515 and was written in Low German (*Plattdeutsch*), published in the Dutch city of Antwerp under the title of *Ein kurtzweilig Lesen von Dyl Vlenspiegel* (An Amusing Book About Tyll Eulenspiegel). Translations of the original text appeared very quickly, often within a few decades from the Low German edition: Dutch translations began to circulate around five years after the original, French adaptations came out around the 1530s, 1532 to be exact, while the first complete English version dates 1548-60, printed by William Copland in London. As the preface to the 1860 English edition displays:

Among the folkbooks of the German nation, not one has obtained so general a circulation as that now presented in an English form. It has been deemed worthy, as by the Appendix may be perceived, of being translated into French, Dutch, Danish, Polish, nay, even Hebrew, and honoured by being reprinted on every kind of paper, good and bad <sup>35</sup>.

If we look at the popular success it achieved among the Dutch and German reading public from early XVI until late XVII century, Tyll might be the equivalent of the folklore figure of Robin Hood in Britain (Dicks, 2023)<sup>36</sup>. It goes without saying that the medieval English archer and the German folklore hero do not have anything in common but their illicit actions. Tyll Eulenspiegel, however, falls under the category of the court jester and as it

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<sup>35</sup> Mackenzie, Kenneth R. H. *The Marvellous Adventures and Rare Conceits of Master Tyll Owlglass* Trans., Trübner & Co, London, 1860

<sup>36</sup> Dicks, Katharine, *The Eulenspiegel through the ages in Languages across Borders*, an online blog of the University of Cambridge, November 7, 2023

is well known, fools are always given a special attention and a kind of freedom, with regard to the consequences of their behaviour.

The character of the fool was very common in Roman and English Medieval Literature to the point that Shakespeare himself portrays this character in almost all of his plays. The *wise fool* is usually a witty peasant or commoner who outdoes and cheats the upper class and it is the evolution in literature of the medieval court jester who used to amuse aristocratic households by playing music, singing, storytelling and making use of their pungent wit to narrate medieval satirical novellas. The dramatic character of the *wise fool* as we know it from Shakespearean plays, goes even further than simply entertaining his audience: he is the figurative bridge between the fictional word and the reader/playgoer. Examples of such figures in Early Modern English literature include King Lear's Fool, the Gravediggers in *Hamlet*, Feste in *Twelfth Night*, and Falstaff, who appears in four different plays and whom we will examine more closely in the next chapter.

Shakespeare gave these characters a key importance in his plays by allowing them to speak the truth about certain characters (as in *King Lear*) or societal flaws (*Twelfth Night*) through the guise of laughter, simple-mindedness and foolishness, which allowed them to bypass social hierarchies or forms of deference that would have otherwise prevented others from voicing uncomfortable commentaries.

This type of fool is the literary outcome of real court jesters who lived among aristocrats in 16<sup>th</sup>-century England who were accepted and even praised by the society of the time. The best-known example of these medieval buffoons is Will Sommers, court jokester during the reign of King Henry III (1509 – 1547) considered one of the few intimate friends and confidants of the King

as can be inferred by the numerous paintings and drawings in which Sommers appears next to the King's closest kin<sup>37</sup>.

In addition to Sommers, the 16<sup>th</sup> century saw the coronation of the King who went down in history as “the wisest fool in Christendom”<sup>38</sup>, King James VI and I.

If such was the socio-political fervour of the time, a century therefore in which irony, satire and wit were everyday issues, the impact this climate had on the evolution of contemporary literary works, must not go unnoticed.

Returning to the subject of the present chapter, the widespread success of *Tyll Howleglass* in Germany and England perfectly reflects the importance given to such figures.

### 3. Falstaff

Considered by one of the major contemporary literary critics, Harold Bloom, “the grandest personality in all Shakespeare”<sup>39</sup>, Falstaff is a character that is worth mentioning in our *excursus* on criminal – or legally liminal – figures appearing in Early Modern English Literature.

As we have previously seen, Falstaff is a complex, at times mysterious, Shakespearean character who shuns theoretical categorization, thus increasing scholars' interest in him.

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<sup>37</sup>*The Family of Henry VIII*, c. 1545, unknown, Haunted Gallery, Hampton Court Palace.

*The Psalter of Henry VIII*, 1540, Jean Mallard, British Library.

*Henry VIII, his daughter Queen Mary and Will Somers*, painted posthumously (16<sup>th</sup> Century), unknown, The Audrey Jones Beck Building.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, David L., *Politics in Early Stuart Britain*, in Coward, Barry (ed.), *A Companion to Stuart Britain*, Blackwell Publishing, p. 238, 2003

<sup>39</sup> Bloom, Harold, *FALSTAFF: Give Me Life*, Scribner, 2017

At once disreputable and beloved, deceitful yet a loyal companion, Sir John Falstaff embodies the very essence of the *wise fool* previously mentioned.

From his very first appearance in *Henry IV, part 1*, we are provided with all the necessary information to create a rounded idea of the character at issue: he enters the scene in a tavern, half-drunk, addressing Prince Hal – only son of King Henry IV – as a life-long relationship with informal tones ( Falstaff repeatedly calls the Prince by name, or “lad”, or again “sweet wag”). Like other Fools in Shakesperean plays, this disreputable knight speaks in prose which gives him ‘permission’ to address personages of a much higher social status than him in an informal, oftentimes brutish, language.

This linguistic licence given to Falstaff will be our first attempt to untangle this complex character, starting with the hypothetical etymologies of the name.

Falstaff. False – Staff, suggesting a corresponding pun with the name of the playwright himself; Shake – spear (RSC<sup>40</sup>). According to some sources Shakespeare himself might have initially interpreted the part of Sir John in *Henry IV*, as can be inferred by reading an old manuscript of *Henry IV, part 2*, in which we find written aside by a stage actor Will Kemp, who left The King’s Men in 1599, arguably leading to the disappearance of the character of Falstaff from later plays. Other theories for the etymology of the name are perhaps more historically based and plausible. One of these relates our tragicomic personage to the ‘real’ Sir John Fastolf, a medieval knight under the rule of Henry VI, famous for having fought against Joan of Arc in 1429 – a battle which the English lost. Fastolf is believed to have fled from the battlefield, thus becoming a figure of public mockery at the time of

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<sup>40</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, link to the webpage: <https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-merry-wives-of-windsor/about-the-play/the-history-of-falstaff>

Shakespeare was writing. In *Henry VI Part 1*, a character who is clearly modelled after the medieval coward cavalier appears under the very same name of Sir John Fastolf. It so happens that in the First Folio of the said play, the name Fastolf is misspelled as *Falstaffe*, which could plausibly be the reason for the choice of ‘The Lord of Misrule’, epithet used by Antony Sher (Falstaff’s interpreter in 2014) in a 2015 interview for the Royal Shakespearian Company<sup>41</sup>. Confusingly, Shakespeare’s first choice for the name of his ‘fat-kidneyed rascal’<sup>42</sup> was Sir John Oldcastle as one could easily guess from Act 1, Scene 2, verse 44, where Prince Hal ironically calls him “[...] my old lad of the castle”. In real life, John Oldcastle was a 15<sup>th</sup>-century knight, executed by Henry V in 1417 for heresy – he had declared himself protestant under a Catholic king. However, when in 1534 Henry VIII declared himself Head of the Church of England as an independent authority from Rome, the figure of Oldcastle ceased to appear that of a heretic, on the contrary, he turned into a martyr. Consequently, Shakespeare saw himself forced to change the original name for his medieval knight, erasing any possible relationship with the English Protestant martyr – hence Falstaff. Returning to the matter at hand, Falstaff is, among many other professions, a conman. A thief, a braggart, a highwayman – in short, a *rogue*. Curiously enough, around a century after Chaucer’s *Tales*, Shakespeare reintroduces a character who would traditionally occupy a marginal role in a tragedy, if anything, that of a mere court jester. What happens with Sir John Falstaff, instead, is something extraordinary: it seems as if Falstaff himself has usurped the usual hierarchical throne belonging to monarchs and princes. Using wit and irony as his secret weapons, he makes his way through

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<sup>41</sup>YouTube link to the interview: [https://youtu.be/RLmv\\_PecJKc?si=hEbePGIz-65fR9X5](https://youtu.be/RLmv_PecJKc?si=hEbePGIz-65fR9X5)

<sup>42</sup> Henry IV, Part 1: Act 2, Scene 2, v. 5

aristocracy reaching such a central position that he was demanded by Queen Elizabeth I herself to reappear in a later play, this time as the protagonist. The play to which we are hinting is *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1602), published a few years after *Henry IV* was completed.

#### 4. The Newgate Calendar

If we could sneak in an 18<sup>th</sup>-century English house library, we would find, with all probability, in one of its bookshelves a copy of the *Newgate Calendar* lying there amongst the Bible and Bunyan's 1678 *Pilgrim's Progress* (Ó Danachair, 2009)<sup>43</sup>. The book was indeed very popular among the reading public of the time; even the illiterate could become acquainted with the stories told in the *Calendar* by watching them performed on stage. Authors such as Dickens, Lytton and Fielding, among others, took direct inspiration from it for their novels.

The first printed edition came out at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, 1705, published by G. Swindell under the title of *The Tyburn Calendar, or Malefactors Bloody Register*. It was not until 1774, after 6 different reprintings, that the term *Newgate* began being used in the title. It is of great importance to keep in mind that, when we talk about the Newgate Calendar, we are referring to a wide range of crimes and misdemeanours dating from the early seventeenth century up to the period in which it was published (late

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<sup>43</sup> Ó Danachair writes in the bibliographical note to his online version which I allude to in the text: "[...] few literate homes would have been without one; often the only book apart from the Bible". For further reference, see also: Schechter, Harold. "[Our Long-standing Obsession with True Crime](#)". 2012, *Creative Nonfiction* (45): 6–8.

eighteenth to the first half of the nineteenth century), which were regrouped and written down by different editors over time. There is no single author to whom all the stories can be ascribed; in fact, throughout a period which spanned almost a century and a half, many versions appeared with extensions, retellings and new anecdotes, all under different names. Andrew Knapp and William Baldwin's 1826 version is probably considered the most complete of all the other editions: the collaboration between the two attorneys-at-law (Knapp was also a journalist) resulted in a 4-volume work whose final aim was to deter readers from emulating the numerous vices and faults shown in the extensive *Criminal Chronology*. In the preface to Knapp and Baldwin's edition, the editors write about the importance of the "record of such examples [crimes and misdemeanours], in order that such as are unhappily moved with the sordid passion of acquiring wealth by violence, or stimulated by the heinous sin of revenge to shed the blood of a fellow-creature, may have before them a picture of the torment of mind and bodily sufferings of such offenders" (Ó Danachair, 2009).

However, what I would like to draw attention to, is the indisputable growing interest of all ranks and conditions of men in a rising genre that nowadays – 3<sup>rd</sup> decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – is more current than ever. I am referring specifically to the *True Crime* narrative, whose roots can be traced to the period in which England experienced a sharp increase in the production and circulation of crime-related pamphlets, leaflets, booklets, and broadsheets. These materials, often presenting ostensibly factual crime anecdotes, would later be compiled into book-length narratives, a development made possible by the tangible effects of eighteenth-century printing and publishing

technologies. This is a key aspect for the present research and merits some closer attention.

In a span of just under 150 years—136 years, to be exact—fourteen editions of the *Newgate Calendar* were published, from Swindell’s (c. 1705) to Camdem Pelham’s (1841), averaging nearly one edition per decade. This numerical detail alone, when considered alongside Harold Schechter’s 2012 article, gives us reason to believe that the eighteenth-century reading public’s interest in factual and contemporary crime was perceived as both substantial and sustained.

To provide further evidence for this point, it suffices to mention the 1780 edition dedicated to John Fielding whose title presents “[The Calendar o]ffered not only as an Object of *Curiosity and Entertainment*, but as a Work of real and substantial Use”<sup>44</sup> as well as Jackson’s 1818 printing, “Comprising INTERESTING MEMOIRS of the MOST NOTORIOUS CHARACTERS who have been convicted of outrages on the LAWS OF ENGLAND.”

This suggests that what William James called “the aboriginal capacity for murderous excitement”<sup>45</sup> – a concept that would invite an interesting digression on negative empathy in literature, which unfortunately lies beyond the scope of the present discussion<sup>46</sup> – has remained a constant for centuries among Western literary audiences. Accordingly, this study seeks to identify a *fil rouge* running through Early Modern and Modern English

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<sup>44</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>45</sup> James, William. *The Moral Equivalent of War, and Other Essays: And Selections from Some Problems of Philosophy*. Edited by John K. Roth, Harper & Row, 1971, p. 272

<sup>46</sup> For a deeper reading on Negative Empathy see Stefano Ercolino & Massimo Fusillo’s *Negative Empathy in Literature and the Arts*, Routledge 2026; Italian ed. Bompiani 2022

literature by examining the extent to which criminal aspects of society have influenced the contemporary literary production.

## CHAPTER II

### PICAROS COME OF AGE:

### ALEMÁN, QUEVEDO, FIELDING

*Todos vivimos en assechança, los unos  
de los otros, como el gato para el ratón, o  
la araña para la culebra*<sup>47</sup>.

– Mateo Alemán, *Guzmán de Alfarache*

#### 1. Guzmán de Alfarache

Translated into English in 1622 by James Mabbe (1572-1642), twenty-three years after the publication of the first part of the Spanish edition written by Matheo Alemán (1547-1614), *The Rogue: or the Life of Guzmán de Alfarache* soon became very popular among the English reading public. It suffices to think that Shakespeare's plays, whose first Folio version appeared in 1623, did not reach a third Folio until 1663, while Alemán's work, duly translated by Mabbe, saw its fourth edition already in 1653. The English success followed the positive public reception that occurred in Spain right after the publication of the first part of the book, around twenty years earlier: a total of twenty-four editions in only six years spanning from 1599 and 1605. Altogether, first and second part were published five more times during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The success among the reading public of the time is even

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<sup>47</sup> "We all live in ambush, lying in wait one for another, as the cat for the mouse, or the spider for the fly", James Mabbe trans. 1634

more astounding if we think that the post-Arthurian chivalric romance *Amadís de Gaula* (XII – XIV cent.), arguably the most influential romance of chivalry in Spain and Europe during the Baroque and Renaissance, only saw nineteen editions throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The reason why I chose to begin our journey through Early Modern English Literature from the *Guzmán* is to be sought in the kaleidoscopic gamut of adventures and social upshifts that the central character undergoes. As Alemán announces in the expository forward to his 1599 edition, the *pícaro* passes through three main phases<sup>48</sup> during his apprenticeship: early life, adolescence, adulthood. Respectively, (1) he leaves home with great expectations, (2) becomes acquainted with other rogues thus becoming one of them and finally (3) experiences deception given by a world which he had imagined less mean. These three moments of Guzmán’s life contain all the elements of the modern socio-psychological novel, turning it into a prototypical work that many great authors of the centuries to come would admire.

If we take a closer look at the third phase, the ‘disillusionment phase’, we inevitably notice the striking similarities between Alemán’s personal life and that of his protagonist. Icaza: “[the novel] is but a long conversation between the moralist and the rogue that Alemán carries within himself”<sup>49</sup>. Mateo Alemán himself had to face manifold misadventures during his lifetime which mirror in multiple ways the hardships Guzmán had to suffer as well. Above all, their shared Jewish origins; they were both *conversos* living in a country which disowned them. In March 1492, with the Alhambra decree,

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<sup>48</sup> *Guzmán de Alfarache*, ed. Samuel Gili y Gaya, Madrid, I (1926), p. 36

<sup>49</sup> Icaza, Francisco A. de. *Sucesos reales que parecen imaginados de Gutierre de Cetina, Juan de la Cueva y Mateo Alemán*, Ed. Libertad, Madrid, 1919, p. 167. My trans.

the Catholic Monarchs of Spain ordered the expulsion of all Jews from the country, thus formally forcing around three hundred thousand believers to convert to Catholicism. The result was that in the following centuries, Jews were seen with distrust and scepticism leading many to leave the country for a better life elsewhere; Mateo Alemán was one of these. Around 1608, he exiled himself to Mexico after being released by the Royal Prison of Seville for the second time, where he had ended up imprisoned for debt. Similarly, in the final chapter Guzmán spends time in the same Royal Prison for a crime concerning debts. As Icaza repeatedly points out, the economic hardships that both the flesh-and-blood author and the young protagonist of his story had to endure will lead them to develop an ironic, at times sadly disillusioned, view towards the society in which they lived.

Taking into consideration the lesson taught by Moretti in his seminal 1987 study on the Bildungsroman in European Culture, we know that the key feature of the novel as a modern genre is what we will from now on call the *I – World* dialectic. That is, the protagonists (*I*), in modern novels are put in a situation where they must deal on their own within a society (*World*) which most of the time they feel does not belong to them. Another characteristic of (anti)heroes of the modern novel is that they are young and they are commoners. They must be young, since only the inexperienced will have that necessary bravery – or rather, naivety – of undertaking perilous journeys full of risks and adventures. They must be ordinary people, in order for readers to feel that sympathetic drive which Edmund Burke discusses in his 1757 essay on the origins of the Sublime and the Beautiful. Among many issues, Burke points out that to feel *delight* for an aesthetic experience (a painting, a book, a song or a play) we need a certain *distance* from the subject

displayed. Distance keeps us safe. It enhances our critical sensibility without being distracted by the rhythm of the events which would otherwise involve us too greatly. Only then will we be able to truly appreciate the artwork, objectively.

*Guzmán de Alfarache*, and the later Rogue Literature in general, launched that approach to the ordinary man without which we would have no novel nowadays.

## 2. El Buscón

Although it was published in Saragoza in 1626, Quevedo's picaresque novel had circulated for around two decades before its publication. In England it came out in 1657, printed by J.M. for Henry Herringman in London under the full title of: *The life and adventures of Buscon the witty Spaniard: Put into English by a person of honour*.

Similar to the picaresque novels previously seen, Quevedo's *El Buscón* deals with the adventurous life of a young roguish character of humble birth whose aim is to climb the social ladder at all costs seeking (the name Buscón might stem from the root *buscar*, Spanish for to seek, to search, to look for<sup>50</sup>) a noble title. Needless to say, the title never arrived. At last, disillusioned and poor, Buscón resolves to set forth for the Indies (Latin America) with great, false, expectations. The last chapter of the second book, 1626 edition, ends thus:

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<sup>50</sup> H. E. Watts suggests: *Buscon* is from *buscar*, to seek, and means a pursuer of fortune, a searcher after the means of life, a *cadger*.

*Determiné [...] de pasarme a Indias con ella y ver si mudando mundo y tierra mejoraría mi suerte. Y fueme peor, como V. Md. verá en la segunda parte, pues nunca mejora su estado quien muda solamente de lugar y no de vida y costumbres.*<sup>51</sup>

What is most curious about the fate of this picaresque novel in Europe is that with time, its translations altered the original moralising, pessimistic ending. Paul Scarron (1610 – 1660), under the pseudonym of La Geneste, made *El Buscón* the most popular example of picaresque literature in France, publishing a translation which added and modified some details about the plot and its protagonist's characterization<sup>52</sup>. Pablos turned into a noble, sentimental hero, far from Quevedo's anti-heroic middleman. The ending itself was manipulated to the exact opposite: the French sharper finds joy in life by falling in love with the daughter of a rich merchant and staying on to serve in her house. With this narrative choice, Geneste undermines the satirical effect originally built around a character who, in vain, strives for a rise in his social station. The 1657 English translation by John Davies, follows Geneste's version:

“Every thing is in the hand of Providence, we cannot foresee what shall be after us; yet for the present I think I may safely say, there are few men in the world, who for happiness may compare with my self”<sup>53</sup>.

The original Spanish novel is known for its moral force, attained through a sharp satire and a complex wordplay which Quevedo had inherited through a thoughtful reading of his predecessors (D.H. de Mendoza, M. Alemán, L.

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<sup>51</sup> I [...] resolved to go to the Indies, taking her along with me, to try whether I could meet with better fortune in another country. But it proved worse, for they never mend their condition who only change places without mending life and manners. *Pablo de Segovia. The Spanish Sharper*. Translated by Daniel Vierge, London, 1892, p. 236

<sup>52</sup> Geneste, Sieur de la. (pseud. Scarron, Paul) *L'Aventurier Buscon, historie facétieuse*, Paris, 1633

<sup>53</sup> *The life and adventures of Buscon the witty Spaniard: Put into English by a person of honour. To which is added, the provident knight. By Don Francisco de Quevedo, a Spanish cavalier*. London, 1657. In the digital collection Early English Books Online 2. <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A91603.0001.001>. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed January 13, 2026.

de Úbeda, among others). Unlike the Spanish author, Geneste and J.D, besides fabricating an imaginary ‘happy ending’, they also largely reduced the moralising aspect of the story.

Don Pablo de Segovia differs from Lazarillo, Guzmán or Justina because he does not ever pretend to be something else than what he is. A rogue. He knows his mother was a prostitute and his father a drunkard, he knows his place in the world and deals with it all-round. Pablo is the perfect synthesis of the picaresque character of early 17<sup>th</sup> century: in a Spain which does not recognise itself anymore – immediately after the *Siglo de Oro*, Spain fell into a spiral of socio-political crisis which caused – leading to the rise of a narrative genre which could stay true to nature and at the same time, converse with the readers. These latter needed fictional characters that were not too fictional, too distant from their own reality. Cavalry had made room for infantry. The old medieval knightly code of conduct was perceived anachronic by Quevedo’s contemporaries and Spanish nobility was beginning to lose its power. *Paul the Sharper* perfectly reflects the climate of late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century, an overarching, apparent grandeur was accompanied by a cruel reality made of diseases and hunger among much of the population.

Spain during its Golden Age managed to produce a genre that seems to display all the characteristics that later European modern novels will further develop. Stories in prose showing the *bildung* – although no real formation occurs in the end<sup>54</sup> – of a single character and built around his adventures in the world. At this juncture, we could safely name works such as the ones we

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<sup>54</sup> Bjornson, Richard: “Franción, Buscón, and Destin are all *static* characters who express their âmes généreuses in a series of contacts with that world” (1977, 139-140). Italics mine.

have seen so far *proto-novels*. What really draws closer the picaresque works to the novel genre as we know it today, is their new narratological approach: the protagonist becomes contextually author and interlocutor of the reader, he soars through the ethereal fictional space reserved for the narrator and, from there, peeps in among the narrative cracks to question his audience (*Vuestra Merced, El 'vulgo', el lector*) under the guise of a confessionalist. Early on, I have mentioned Carlos Aguinaga's assertion that I will propose again here for convenience's sake: "*no cabe duda de que la forma autobiográfica es esencial a la picaresca: ello permite que la vida narrada, naturalmente a posteriori, esté concebida a priori como ejemplo de desengaño*". The theme of the disillusion (*desengaño*) introduces another key element of picaresque literature that future novels will absorb with almost no exceptions. I am referring to the wide theme of irony, of course, and parody in particular when it comes to *pícaros* recounting their lives. *El Buscón* is maybe the best example in this regard: right from the beginning, in the dedicatory note to the reader, the picaro-narrator explains that the reason why he writes his autobiography first handedly is because he wants to avoid that others may publish a wrong version of his life accounts.<sup>55</sup> Puzzling enough, the actual reader knows very well that the real author is Quevedo and that the whole dedicatory is merely a literary *topos* in order to add credibility to the story, hence it is as if the story which the reader is about to begin was already a lie, even before having started. Quevedo's works are known among Spanish literature scholars to be copiously dense with 'conceptism', that is a literary style developed during the Baroque period

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<sup>55</sup> This introductory letter is only to be found in Córdoba and Santander MSS, while 1965 Lázaro's edition does not mention it. Part of the original text is copied here for convenience: "*Habiendo sabido el deseo que v. m. tiene de entender los varios discursos de mi vida, por no dar lugar a que otro (como en ajenos casos) mienta, he querido enviarle esta relación...*"

(17<sup>th</sup> century Spain) which focuses on witty and concise wordplay, rapid rhythm and complex vocabulary, overabundant in puns and double entendres. Suffice it to think about the first lines of the book: “*dicen que era de muy Buena **cepa**, y según el bebía es cosa para creer*”<sup>56</sup>. *Cepa* here stands for class, family, bloodline, lineage, but it creates a pun with the other literal meaning of the word which is grapevine or vine stock and that would hint to the fact that Don Pablos’ father was a drunkard. Unfortunately, translations of this text lose much of the original meanings that the signifier had in Spanish, in this regard, the countless theoretical writings about the difficulties in translating Quevedo’s style, are self-explanatory; for as much a translator may try hard to reproduce the initial message into the target text, the result will always resemble those “Flemish tapestries on the wrong side” that the vexed Alonso Quejano mentions while responding to an Italo-Spanish translator<sup>57</sup> in the print shop scene.

However intriguing the idea might be, this prolific wave of proto-novels that had all the good intentions of becoming the leading genre in Europe for the centuries to come, remained stall and inert. The novel reached its full development in central Europe, particularly in France, Germany, and England, approximately a century later, with authors such as Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Austen, as Ian Watt famously argued in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957). The picaresque tradition, which emerged in Spain towards the end of the sixteenth century, would complete its trajectory nearly two centuries later, thereby inaugurating a new era in modern literature and marking the coming of age of a new genre.

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<sup>56</sup> Bold mine.

<sup>57</sup> Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, *The History of Don Quixote*, trans. by John Ormsby, 1997, Book 2, ch. LXII

### 3. Tom Jones

Irony, in most cases turned into satire, in Henry Fielding (1707 – 1754) is predominant. *Tom Jones* (1749) opens with a metaphor of the narrative act itself, one that extends throughout the whole novel and serves to keep the reader ‘hooked’ to the text, eager to continue reading (2024, 3). Fielding likens the author to a cook, the novel to a meal and readers, consequently, to diners – or ‘honest victuallers’ as he calls them – hungry for stories and adventures.

Curiously enough, always at the beginning of the novel, the author states that “a cook will have sooner gone through all the several species of animal and vegetable food in the world than an author will be to exhaust so extensive a subject”<sup>58</sup>. Fielding’s keen interest in what we may call the ‘realism issue’ shines through the cook metaphor as he goes on to wittily tease other contemporaries who, in his opinion, have tried to portray true nature in their fictional narratives, with scarce results. Fielding believes literary mimesis – formal realism, as Watt termed it – to be possible only by way of an active narrative authority who intervenes throughout the plot and morally directs the characters’ judgments on the occurring fictional events. This kind of realism has much to do with the Spanish picaresque tradition, whose satirical focus, social critique and journeying heroes, became the building blocks of many later works in English literature. Daniel Defoe (1660 – 1731), Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett (1721 – 1771) are generally considered the pioneers of the picaresque genre in England (OED, 1822); however, among

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<sup>58</sup> All citations in this chapter, unless otherwise specified, refer to the 2024 Alma Classics edition.

the three, Fielding seems to outstand in terms of the influence played on English literature and the development of the ‘bourgeois epic’, viz., the modern English novel. According to Walter Scott (1771 – 1832), “Fielding [is] the first of British novelists”, but unlike previously stated, he held the picaresque tradition little responsible to the satire present in the works of the author of *Tom Jones*. Contrarily, Scott believed Fielding’s satire to be more indebted to Scarron’s *Roman Comique*<sup>59</sup>, whose mock-heroic narrative style – juxtaposing base, ludicrous events with classical epic conventions – was much admired by Fielding. Departing from the Scottish novelist’s stance, I am more inclined to adopt John Saintsbury’s position with regard to Fielding’s literary sources, as it allows a broader, and more plausible view of the issue: “That there are resemblances to Scarron, to Le Sage, and to other practitioners of the Picaresque novel is certain; and it was inevitable that there should be. Of directer and more immediate models or starting-points one [Scarron] is undoubted; the other, though less generally admitted, not much less indubitable to my mind”<sup>60</sup>.

*Tom Jones* recounts the story of a poor foundling who, compelled by adverse circumstances, undergoes a series of moral and social trials while journeying through English society, before ultimately discovering his true parentage and marrying Sophia Western. Thus far, the text seems to align with the conventions of the picaresque novel; nevertheless, few elements of difference distinguish Fielding’s novel from earlier texts belonging to the picaresque tradition.

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<sup>59</sup> Scott, Walter Sir. *Henry Fielding* in Ioan M. Williams (editor) *On Novelists and Fiction*, London, Routledge & K. Paul, 1968

<sup>60</sup> Saintsbury, John. In *The works of Henry Fielding edited by Sir John Saintsbury in twelve volumes*, Vol 1, *Joseph Andrews*, General Introduction

Unlike the Spanish picaresque novels discussed so far, the narrator in Fielding's work is omniscient and less concerned with episodic description than with the moral individuality of his characters. 'Realism of assessment' is how Ian Watt terms it:

[Fielding's] work serves as a perpetual reminder that if the new genre [the novel] was to challenge older literary forms it had to find a way of conveying not only a convincing impression but a *wise assessment of life*, an assessment that could only come from taking a much *wider view* than Defoe or Richardson of the affairs of mankind.<sup>61</sup>

Such type of narrator is a novelty that Fielding introduces, I believe most probably modelled from the picaresque autobiographical narrative style which overtly and comically criticises society highlighting its follies, vices and hypocrisies. Another key distinction between *Tom Jones* as a proto-bildungsroman and its picaresque predecessors is the process of maturation that Mr. Jones undergoes throughout the narrative. Characters such as Lazarillo, Guzmán, Tyll, Justina, Rinconete and Cortadillo, do not evolve over the course of their stories. They show minimal psychological depth and clearly recognizable, predictable traits; what Forster would have termed 'flat characters'<sup>62</sup> – viz., types. By contrast, Fielding's *pícaros* – Tom Jones, and his predecessor Joseph Andrews (1742) – begin as immature, impulsive, and prone to misjudgement, yet over the course of the narrative their inner proto-individualized selves gradually emerge, allowing them to develop into fully realized, 'round characters'<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> Watt, Ian. *The Rise of The Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1957, pp. 288. Italics mine.

<sup>62</sup> Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*, 1927

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

As argued at the beginning of this section, Fielding's narrative style was undeniably innovative. In the preface to the 1742 princeps edition of *Joseph Andrews*, the author himself stresses the originality of his kind of writing. He calls it 'comic epic in prose' and distinguishes it from earlier productions of romance writers, on the one hand, and burlesque writers, on the other. The tonal novelty found in Fielding's works is indebted to his meticulous observation of human nature and to his capacity to infuse his narratives with an Aristotelian serio-comic language, in a manner hitherto untried – at least in England. With *Joseph Andrews*, and *Tom Jones* in particular, Fielding introduces a greater variety of characters to the protean world of the novel, most of whom are of low-born origins and possess inferior manners. Moreover, with regard to diction, his prose "preserve[s] the ludicrous instead of the sublime"<sup>64</sup>. Needless to say, this innovative approach would pave the way for later novelists of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, thus enabling the novel to fully blossom and thrive as a literary genre.

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<sup>64</sup> Fielding, Henry. In *The works of Henry Fielding edited by Sir John Saintsbury in twelve volumes*, Vol 1, *Joseph Andrews*, Preface

## CHAPTER III

### WHY SPAIN?

*I want a hero, an uncommon want*

– Lord Byron, *Don Juan*

#### 1. Socio-political Reasons

Although I am aware that at least two eminent literary critics would disagree with the position I am about to advance, the reasoning and the evidence brought forth in this study, compel me to pursue the path established from its outset. The scholars I am referring to are Ian Watt and Paul-Gabriel Boucé, the latter particularly known for his extensive work on the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish writer Tobias Smollett. Both Watt and Boucé argue that the English novel owes little to Spanish influence, considering the development of this new genre as largely a domestic English affair or, if anything, indebted to French (and French alone!) prose fiction<sup>65</sup>.

On the contrary, as has been shown above, the Spanish picaresque played a crucial role in the development of the English novel. Even if Watt and Boucé argue that English prose fiction drew more immediate inspiration from Scarron's *Roman comique* or Lesage's *Gil Blas*, it is difficult to deny that Cervantes' *Don Quixote* exerted a significant influence on late 17<sup>th</sup>-century English novelists. Ardila, who wrote extensively on the subject, asserts: “no

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<sup>65</sup> For further reference to authors agreeing with Boucé's stance on French influence, see also Cohen, M. & Dever, C. (editors) *The Literary Channel: The Inter-National Invention of the Novel*, Princeton University Press, 2001

French text was ever as well-received and influential as were each of *Don Quixote*, *Guzmán* and *Lazarillo*”<sup>66</sup>. The latter showing traces of its influence in various accounts of seventeenth-century English literature. We find characters named after the Spanish *pícaro* in Middleton’s *Blurt, Master Constable* (1602) and in Fletcher & Beaumont’s *The Woman Hater* (1607), among others and even Shakespeare alludes to the Spanish picaresque novella in *Much ado about Nothing* (II, 1, 196-98) and, according to some critics, even in his *Taming of the Shrew* (1596)<sup>67</sup>.

Having thus shown the reasons for acknowledging that Spanish literature had a consistent influence on the development of the English novel – I would also venture to say it laid the basis for European, not merely English, later fictional works – it seems necessary to examine the historical circumstances that contributed to the assimilation of Spanish picaresque models in Early Modern England. Multiple socio-historical factors contributed to the adaption of the model dictated by the picaresque tradition, above all the similarity between 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Spain (Spanish Golden Age, the time of authors like Cervantes, Quevedo, Calderón, Alemán and San Juan de la Cruz, to name but a few) and 18<sup>th</sup>-century England. Spain, during its Golden Age was prolific in literature, as we have seen, and extremely powerful in terms of geopolitical control in the European context. However, paradoxically as it may seem, the socio-economic circumstances of the country during those centuries, were extremely dire. Under the reign of Felipe II (1556 – 1598) Spain was burdened with a debt of over thirty million

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<sup>66</sup> Ardila, J. A. Garrido. “The Picaresque Novel and the Rise of the English Novel.” *The Picaresque Novel in Western Literature*, edited by J. A. Garrido Ardila, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 113–139.

<sup>67</sup> I am referring to Texas Tech University professor Hugh Wilson who in his article *Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew and Traces of Spanish Influence: or Exemplary Tales and Picaresque Fictions*, Sederi, 9 (1998) , 233-55

ducats inherited by his father, Charles V. Felipe II's imperialistic policy impoverished the Country, which was already slowly approaching its decline. In this climate, England's relationship with Spain was controversial. In 1554, Felipe II married Mary I Tudor, Queen of England at the time and daughter of Katharine de Aragón and King of England Henry VIII (r. 1491 – 1547). From the political side, then, England and Spain were siblings, and the fascination for Spanish literature was arguably due to the marriage ties that bonded together the two European powers. The success brought by works such as *El Lazarillo*, *El Guzmán* or *El Buscón*, was astonishing; they were widely known and read among the people in England, especially thanks to Mabbe's translations. Nonetheless, with Elizabeth I on the throne in 1558, Spanish long-standing Catholicism came into conflict with English Protestantism. England entered the Eighty Years War (1568 – 1648) as an ally to the Habsburg Netherlands (Dutch Republic from 1588), exacerbating England's tensions with Spain. These latter became even worse when, in 1702, England declared war against France and Spain, marking the start of the War of Spanish Succession which ended with the Treatises of Utrecht in 1713.

As seismographs record telluric movements, thus picaresque novels managed to translate the social and cultural climate of the time into stories portraying low life adventures.

Similarly, 18<sup>th</sup>-century England's population resulted in geographical mobility within and outside the Peninsula, leading people to move from the countryside to developing urban centres, which produced an increase in delinquency leading more and more authors to write about marginalised characters such as *pícaros* and rogues.

To return to the initial question - why Spain in particular? – we can arguably say that Spanish picaresque novels reflected the socio-political conditions of early modern Europe. With the sole addition that, in relation to Europe, the attempt to reflect proletarian, roguish life was done by Spanish authors around a hundred years earlier.

Non bisogna dunque stupirsi se nel Settecento il romanzo sembrasse non aver nulla a che fare con la Spagna. È come se il romanzo spagnolo fosse una pianta sbocciata troppo presto, che non riuscì a mettere radici. Ma è proprio vero che quella pianta appassì dall'oggi al domani? La vita del romanzo in Spagna fu davvero così breve?<sup>68</sup>

However, some distinctions must be made. European rogues, especially English ones, are not normally regarded as *pícaros* in the strictest sense of the word. Jack Wilton, the protagonist of Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), provides a telling example: he looks and acts like a proper Spanish *pícaro*, he *is* young and adventurous, he encounters a woman (Diamante) towards the end of the story, with whom he falls in love and will live a (probable) merry life with, the story *is* replete with satire and sharp humour; however, and this is crucially relevant, Jack is a page from the royal court of Henry VIII. His origins are neither humble nor proletarian, moreover, he deliberately chooses to set forth for a journey through Europe to seek better fortune. Instead of being forced onto the road by necessity, Jack, by contrast, begins within a powerful institutional system – the English royal court – and plays with it. His roguery is elective rather than imposed by unhappy circumstances. In Nashe's work, determinism is thus put to the test. This is

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<sup>68</sup> Resina, Juan Ramon. *Breve vita felice del romanzo in Spagna* in Moretti, Franco. (editor), Cristiana Mennella (trans.) *Il Romanzo. Storia e Geografia*, Torino: Einaudi, 2002, p. 169. My trans. *By the eighteenth century, the realist novel, despite its headstart in Spain, had come to seem extraterritorial there. It is as if the Spanish novel was a plant which blossomed too soon and could not take root. But had its early bloom really withered overnight? Was its lifespan really that short?*

perhaps the biggest deviation from the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish picaresque novellas: the *pícaro* is evolving towards a rogue-humanist individual whose self-awareness arrogantly stands out demanding attention. Individual desire acquires literary importance. The gap between this kind of fiction and the novel is beginning to narrow.

Jack Wilton is only one of a long line of roguish characters who share many traits with the Spanish *pícaro* while diverging from the model in several important respects<sup>69</sup>. This divergence will be further discussed and analysed in the course of the following chapter, where the close relationship between the picaresque tradition and the modern novel will become even clearer.

## 2. Ties that Bind: The Picaresque and the Bildungsroman

It is not surprising that at a time with so many historical and social changes, the novel was welcomed as the answer to many anxieties and unsolved questions. The readership embraced this new form of literature as representative of their time as no other genre in the past could do anymore. At least since Ian Watt's case study on the rise of the novel, it is universally acknowledged that the novel as a new literary genre of the modern period – at least in western Europe – is intrinsically tied to the birth of the middle-class man, especially if we look at the English context. So brilliantly described by Crusoe's father, the “upper station of low life”, viz. the rising English bourgeoisie, has its origins in the pre-novel genres that circulated at the time. Ardila:

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<sup>69</sup> Simon Eyre, in Deloney's *The Gentle Craft* (1597-8), Camilo and Hippolito in Middleton's *Blurt, Master Constable* (1602), Merton Latroon in Head's *The English Rogue* (1665) are but two examples of characters who cannot be considered proper *pícaros* because they *chose* to become rogues.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, three somewhat similar traditions of prose fiction co-existed in England: the domestic literature of roguery, criminal biographies, and picaresque narratives. They all shared the same themes but differed in their respective treatment of historical facts and fiction<sup>70</sup>.

Compared to other European powers in the early modern period, England was a country where a certain degree of social mobility was both conceivable and, to some extent, socially encouraged. This relative elasticity of social hierarchies has often been associated with the influence of Erasmian thought, particularly its emphasis on moral reform, freedom of criticism, individual responsibility, and the legacy of *Devotio moderna*.

Erasmus's Christian humanism can thus be seen as contributing to the cultural conditions that favoured the emergence of the novel in England, whereas in Spain its reception and subsequent rejection coincided with a very different literary trajectory. There, Catholic orthodoxy, especially in the context of the Counter-Reformation, became increasingly rigid and institutionalised, most notably through the founding of the Society of Jesus in 1540 by Ignatius of Loyola. This shift toward doctrinal consolidation significantly constrained the intellectual climate in which earlier narrative experimentation had flourished. It was almost as if the Jesuits sought to intrude upon the dialogue between God and the soul leaving no space for individual growth and critical sense. Paradoxically, this surveillance system of the individual brought interesting literary consequences. Self-consideration began to be omnipresent in literary work, thus legitimizing autobiographies to be written and published. Let us not forget that the first

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<sup>70</sup> Ardila, J. A. Garrido. "The Picaresque Novel and the Rise of the English Novel." *The Picaresque Novel in Western Literature*, edited by J. A. Garrido Ardila, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 123

picaresque novels were, indeed, autobiographies under the guise of a confession to an unknown virtuous master. *Lazarillo de Tormes* is probably the first example that we have of this new kind of narrative, where the subject turns into a reflective conscience who gives an account about his personal life. György Lukács writes:

In the novel the subject, as observer and creator, is compelled by irony to apply its recognition of the world to itself and to treat itself, like its own creatures, as a free object of free irony: it must transform itself into a purely receptive subject, as is normatively required for great epic literature.<sup>71</sup>

The subject is simultaneously ‘observer and creator’. The picaro-narrator and the picaro-character are thus able to conceive a satirical tale leaning towards low life, while maintaining that confessional tone required by strict Spanish Catholicism of the time. According to Michael McKeon, *Pícaros* tell their lives and ‘cynically demonstrat[e] that rogues can get ahead’<sup>72</sup>.

The statement could perhaps work for English picaresque stories, such as *The Unfortunate Traveller*; Deloney’s *Jack of Newbury* (1597) and *The Gentle Craft* (1597) or French narratives like Lesage’s *Gil Blas* or Scarron’s 1633 translation of Quevedo’s *El Buscón*. All these latter differ from the original Spanish genre for either their excessive mirth<sup>73</sup>, as Smollett suggests in his preface to his *Roderick Random* (1748) commenting on Lesage’s work, or – most importantly – for the different cultural contexts in which they were conceived. The story of Lázaro or the story of Guzmán show how resistant early-modern Spanish society was to the social mobility of the *conversos*. While England rewarded virtue and personal achievement, Spain rewarded

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<sup>71</sup> Lukács, G. *Theory of the Novel*, Anna Bostock (trans.), 1988, p. 32

<sup>72</sup> McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel*, p. 99

<sup>73</sup> Smollett, Tobias. *Roderick Random*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1995, p. 4

birth and social stagnation. It is no wonder, then, if the ‘bourgeois epic’, borrowing Lukács’ terminology, was to rise in England rather than Spain, despite the latter possessing many of the best premises to do so. The novel found its fertile land in England where the rising bourgeoisie enabled the formation of a genre built around individual and socially unexceptional figures. Within this framework, these soon-to-be-humanist heroes – with all their complications and blunders – assumed a central role in narrative development and were granted psychological depth and narrative agency. Suddenly, what was previously considered a mistake for a character to be avoided and pitied by the author becomes motive for adventure and formation for this innovative and protean form of literature which was about to be born.

### **3. A Dress Fit to Be Seen – *Moll Flanders* (1722)**

In Continuity with what we have just said about the central divergence between the original Spanish model and the English one, Defoe’s famous heroine stands out as its perfect representative. Moll follows the canonical orphan tradition like any other picaresque narrative worthy of its name. She was born in Newgate Prison to a convicted mother, left alone until her eighteenth month and passed from hand to hand until she was three. She will have to endure all kinds of misfortunes – as suggested by the full title: *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* – with the sole aim at becoming a gentlewoman and securing herself in both the financial and social sphere, before eventually repenting.

Over the centuries, critics have debated the legitimacy of her ultimate repentance, questioning whether she genuinely sits in judgment on herself for having lived a depraved, immoral life or she simply adapts to the situation and acts consequently to seek a way out. An “ironic object rather than a work of irony” is how Ian Watt famously defined Defoe’s work (Watt 130). According to Larry L. Langford, California State University professor, the editor’s preface to *Moll Flanders* is of fundamental importance for understanding the narrative of the novel itself and the discrepancy between character - young Moll - and narrator – penitent grown-up Moll.

In the preface indeed, we read that the editor has intruded into the narrative of Moll’s autobiography, altering her own language and expressions which, at times, may have appeared too lewd to be left in the hand of the general reading public of 18th-century England. Not only does the editor of Moll’s history – for it is the real account of her life that we are made to believe we are reading – alter the author’s words, but also, he omits some of the most vicious parts of her life that, according to him, could not have been modestly told:

The pen employed in finishing her story, and making it what you now see it to be, has had no little difficulty to put it into a dress fit to be seen, and to make it speak language fit to be read. [...] All possible care [...] has been taken to *give no lewd ideas*, no immodest turns in the new dressing up of this story; no, not to the worst parts of her expressions. To this purpose some of the *vicious part* of her life, which could not be modestly told, is quite *left out*, and several other parts are very much *shortened*.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> From the preface to *Moll Flanders* taken from: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/370/370-h/370-h.htm> Italics mine.

Compared to previous works belonging to the picaresque tradition, to insert the editor's preface and to allow the latter such a heavy presence throughout the narrative, it is a literary novelty which Defoe decided to introduce in his 1722 work. According to some critics he may not even have been fully conscious of the implications that this innovative narratological aspect could have brought. Iann Watt's point of view on the subject, so clearly expressed in his 1957 seminal study, is undeniably the most renowned critique of Defoe's narrative. The Stanford professor argues that much of Defoe's credit must be sought in the lack of awareness of the innovative aspects that his works implied for modernity: "In his somewhat monocular concentration on making his matter seem absolutely convincing, there was much he did not see" (Watt 134). Together with Watt, Denis Donoghue shares the idea that much of Moll Flanders' popularity in more recent years is due to her author's decision of denying her a 'morally full' character, rich of individuality and interior life. As Watt fittingly points out in his 1967 *The Recent Critical Fortunes of Moll Flanders*, Donoghue believes Defoe's main contribution to English fiction is having built an historically unprecedented, coherent narrative structure containing a "single, unified world" around a character whose sole aim seems to be economic and social growth<sup>75</sup>. Both Defoe and Donoghue, together with various other 20<sup>th</sup>-century critics which would sound pedantic and unnecessary to cite all here<sup>76</sup>, think of Moll Flanders as a non-typical *pícaro* but rather as a by-product of the rising modern western capitalism. When Moll takes a step forward from the position of the traditional *pícaro*, she does not act out of a mere spirit of survival; unhappy

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<sup>75</sup> Denis Donoghue, "The Values of Moll Flanders," *Sewanee Review*, LXXI, 1963

<sup>76</sup> See for instance, Mark Schorer's "introduction", *Moll Flanders*, Modern Library College Editions, New York, 1950; or Robert Alter's *Rogue's Progress: Studies in the Picaresque Novel*

with her social situation until the very end of the novel, she is constantly seeking a profit which may help her achieve her goal – becoming a gentlewoman. “What would you be—a gentlewoman?” “Yes,” says I, and cried heartily till I roared out again” (Defoe 9).

What lies at the core of most of the discussions on *Moll Flanders* is its use of irony in the text and whether we as readers should believe Moll’s confession and repentance or take it as another one of her attempts at escaping from her accusations. In short, whether we should believe that “at last [she] grew Rich, liv’d Honest, and dies a Penitent”, as the title of the novel itself implies. It is what Howard L. Koonce calls “Moll Muddle”<sup>77</sup>. The task is even greater since she achieves her ultimate situation – that of being rich and honest (debatable) living in the state of Virginia – through criminal actions. Criminality seems, in the text, to be the highway for economic success and gentility. Moreover, Moll’s actions overtly clash with her moral claims, while she retrospectively narrates her story: she rationalises her depraved behaviour by finding legitimacy in her wrongdoing, by portraying herself as victim of circumstances rather than a premeditated amoral criminal. In the famous passage on Moll stealing a necklace from a lonely child in the street, we can clearly see this self-adulation from Moll-Narrator’s part, whom naturally endorses the theft to the little girl justifying it by diverging the topic to the negligent parents who should have been more careful “in leaving the poor lamb to come home by itself, and it would teach them to take more care another time” (Defoe 169).

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<sup>77</sup> Howard L. Koonce, *Moll's Muddle: Defoe's Use of Irony in Moll Flanders*, *English Literary History*, XXX, 1963, cited in Watt, Ian. “The Recent Critical Fortunes of Moll Flanders.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1967, pp. 109–26. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3031669>. Accessed 23 Feb. 2026.

According to Koonce – and I find myself sharing his opinion – the simple fact that Moll-narrator decides to add this passage in her memorandum is quite telling of Moll’s interior, psychological life. It betrays Defoe’s typical objective formal realism of presentation (Watt 112, 117, 130) and seems to suggest that “Moll is not only not ‘blind to the beam in her own eye,’ but that she is actually berating herself for it” (Koonce 378). This last mode of viewing Moll Flanders as a psychological complex character who does not simply ‘act as per necessity’, but rather for a deeper tragic nature intrinsic to herself. Defoe’s heroine has prematurely set the grounds for what will, around a century later, become the modern problematic hero.

## CHAPTER IV

### MODERN HEROES, MODERN PICAROS

*Do we feel at home in this world?*

– **Thomas Pavel**, *The Lives of the novel*

*Philosophy is really homesickness, an urge to be at home everywhere.*

*Where, then, are we going? Always to our home.*

—**Novalis**, *Fragments*

#### 1. **Rebellious Outsiders, Afflicted Loners: The Problematic Hero**

Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths—ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars [...].<sup>78</sup>

Everything...is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. Nothing could be more distant from the world of the modern hero: Modernity is the birthplace of confusion, the land where heroes cannot find their way home anymore even though the world in which they live is known and illuminated by scientific knowledge. In such a world, no novelty exists and no sense of family either. The picaresque anti-heroes all share the same characteristic of being outcast from society, mainly because of their dubious

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<sup>78</sup> Lukács, G. *Theory of the Novel*, Anna Bostock (trans.), The Merlin Press, 1988, p. 29

origins or parentage. Their world, hence, is not “wide and yet [...] like a home”, it rather *wants* a home and feels heterogeneously contingent to its inhabitants who strive for a union and an integration with the whole that surrounds them.

If we think for a moment about most of the picaresque works studied so far, we cannot avoid noticing that the marginalised characters of these stories mirrored their inventors’ ‘real’ lives. Quevedo; Alemán; De Mendoza (Lazarillo’s presumed author), to name but a few, they all had to suffer social ostracism based on their religious (Alemán) or political (Quevedo) beliefs. If we consider what Faysal Darraj wrote about the writer of modern epic, viz. the novel: “the problematic consciousness unites, in an unequal way, the ‘problematic hero’ and the creative who has been marginalized by life due to his problematic consciousness”<sup>79</sup>. This dubious consciousness that the modern hero/author bears is the key to understand why we hold that the problematic hero is deeply indebted to the picaresque tradition: problematic, because these new protagonists live in a degenerate society where the essence they seek is absent. The ways are many, but none leads home.

For the Hungarian Marxist philosopher, ancient epics meant homogeneity, totality of sense, perfection: “The Greek knew only answers but no questions, only solutions [...] but no riddles”<sup>80</sup>, he writes in the first pages of his *Theory*; however, the condition of the modern hero – heir apparent of the Spanish *pícaro* – is being so overwhelmed by questions that inaction seems to be his only option. The multiplicity of possibilities renders the path

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<sup>79</sup> Darraj, F., *The Theory of the Novel and the Arabic Novel*, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, Morocco, 1999, p. 44

<sup>80</sup> Lukács, G. *Theory of the Novel*, Anna Bostock (trans.), The Merlin Press, 1988, p. 31

uncertain and condemns the hero's destiny to failure. No teleologic theory seems to hold in such a world. *Hamlet*, published in 1623, only one year after Mabbe's English translation of *Guzmán de Alfarache*, compellingly exemplifies this defining feature of early modern fiction. Despite their numerous adventures and *peripeteiai*, just like Shakespeare's most famous hero, Spanish *pícaros* do not evolve throughout the narration – as Moretti prominently points out in his *The Way of the World*. They 'fall around', indeed (peripeteia: *peri-* "around" and *piptein*, "to fall"), they wander horizontally among various classes of people and different *loci* without ever being able to develop vertically.

The result of this fictional world emptied of its quintessential sense, is a mass of rebellious heroes looking for a *telos* they cannot find. They are rebellious for two reasons: first, because the world in which they live is cruel towards them and has disowned them. Second, their desired 'promised land' turns into a Waste Land which nothing does but enrage their afflicted, lonely hearts. We cannot avoid thinking about the modern hero *par excellence*: the Knight of La Mancha, of course. Especially in the second book, published ten years after the first part, we find a Don Quixote who slowly shifts towards a more reflective, self-aware individual whose existential quest inevitably leads him to a tragic end. The Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance dies, indeed, disillusioned as Alonso Quijano.

Given these premises, the most obvious consequence for us readers would be to feel pity for these wretched individuals. The least we could do is to feel sympathetically for them and yet, we cannot. Guzmán, Don Quixote,

Hamlet, Tom Jones; all problematic characters whose social or ideological conditions are too exceptionally distant from the reader to establish a connection with them. In order to do so, we will have to wait another two centuries, when characters such as Lucien de Rubempré, David Copperfield, Heathcliff or Jane Eyre will further reduce that ‘exceptional’ gap between character and reader, thus making it finally possible for the Bildungsroman to thrive.

## **2. Lost Illusions - The Neopicaresque**

In a fragmented, inhuman, modern world shaped by competing interests and the logic of personal profit, no better character than that of the *pícaro* seem to be fit to adhere to the mimetic task of literature. Modernity, marked by the erosion of faith in secular knowledge and scientific progress, generates a pervasive sense of disillusionment. Within this context, the picaresque mode undergoes a significant transformation. While retaining the structural position of the social outcast, the modern *pícaro* adapts to new historical conditions, shifting from a struggle for material survival to an existential quest for meaning. This quest occurs in the streets, natural theatre of all kinds of encounters. The road in this sense turns into the lowest common denominator which unifies the picaresque tradition with the novelties that modern genres were to bring with them. Mikail Bakhtin calls it “The chronotope of the road”: far from being a mere geographic space where characters meet and intertwine, the road assumes psychological, existential and ideological meaning (Bakhtin 1937-8).

From the late nineteenth century onward, the neopicaresque emerges as a genre reflecting the disenchanting consciousness of individuals in Western societies. The decisive difference between the classical picaresque tradition and its modern reconfiguration lies in the object of desire that motivates the protagonist. Whereas the early modern *pícaro* seeks sustenance and social mobility within rigid hierarchies, the neopicaresque anti-hero pursues a sense of purpose and belonging within an alienating and systematized modern order. Gissing's 1891 *New Grub Street*, exemplifies this shift of perspective.

*New Grub Street* is a realist novel set in late Victorian London that revolves around the lives of Edwin Reardon and Jasper Milvain, two writers who have decided to go separate ways in their literary career: the first, blind to the tastes of the reading public, stubbornly resolves not to acquiesce to the public's demands and to preserve his artistic integrity intact; the second one is an ambitious, pragmatic journalist, prone to cater the contemporary popular tastes through his writings. In the wake of the almost half-a-century-earlier Balzacian *Lost Illusions*, the novel analyses the bleak realities of the increasingly commercialised English literary market – symbolised by the telling title “Grub Street”, an historical term for impoverished hack writers. The “pitched battle” that Etienne Lousteau mentions in the French novel while introducing Lucien to the Parisian press, is here represented by the difference between the two writers' choices of life. Although not a proper neopicaresque work, Gissing replaces the *pícaro*'s adaptability to a hostile environment with psychological strain and quiet despair, thus bridging 19<sup>th</sup>-

century realism with later neopicaresque. The episodic failures accumulate not toward ironic redemption but toward psychological exhaustion. Reardon's case is blatant in this regard: his inability to adapt to society's needs will lead him to both professional and marital failure, whereas his journalistic counterpart represented by Milvain succeeds in life through a complete abnegation to the marketing system of late-Victorian print. Pseudo-picaros struggling to navigate through a hostile *milieu* are a constant which recurs in other later works by the prolific English author such as *The Paying Guest* (1895), *Town Traveller* (1898) or *Our Friend the Charlatan* (1901). Though frequently lacking the comic vitality of the classical *picaro*, Gissing's naturalistic fiction mirrors, indeed, the social tensions of late Victorian modernity in a manner that recalls the English picaresque tradition, anticipating the neopicaresque through its depiction of marginal figures grappling with the commodified culture of the literary marketplace.

Works such as *New Grub Street* inevitably laid the groundwork for later, North-American masterpieces that were to become foundational works for the rising genre of the neopicaresque<sup>81</sup>. Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) is one of these latter novels, which follows the story of young Augie March, a poor Jewish boy who struggles to survive in a post-Great Depression Chicago, through a series of mentors, apprenticeships and various misadventures. Just like classical *picaros*, Augie does not evolve. His restlessness at finding the right place to settle down in and his never-ending search for meaning, freedom and identity makes him the perfect son

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<sup>81</sup> For additional readings on the topic, see J. D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) or Don DeLillo's *White House* (1985). All three dealing with post-modernist existential issues, where the protagonists wander around lost in an alienating society which they fail to call home.

of his time. Augie is the quintessence of the modern hero, or the neo-*pícaro*. His quest, as we have seen, is not for food and mere survival, rather for a personal existential growth of his inner identity which, however, never really comes to an end. Towards the end of the novel, Augie will eventually seek sense in his life applying for the Merchant Marine during World War II leading him to wander through the Old Continent in search for a utopian direction. No circular ending nor ultimate solution is given the right to exist in a world where hope is inexorably dying out and illusions seem to be completely lost.

## AFTERWORD

The idea for this thesis first emerged three years ago, while I was reading Charles Sorel's *Histoire comique de Francion* (1623, 1626, 1633) in preparation for an examination in comparative studies between French and Spanish literatures but I was already working on a BA research project at the time<sup>82</sup> and I begrudgingly had to leave the research unresolved. The sentence which sparked my interest was uttered by *Seigneur Bourguignon*, one character of Sorel's work, and reads thus:

*Ignorez vous que ces actions basses sont infiniment agreables, et que nous prenons mesme du contentement a oïr celles des gueux et des faquins, comment n'en recevray je point a ouïr celles d'un Gentil-homme escolier, qui fait paroistre la subtilité de son esprit et la grandeur de son courage des sajeunesse ?*<sup>83</sup>

“People in general take a great deal of pleasure in reading the adventures of vagabonds and rogues like Lazarillo and Guzman”. The assertion so struck my attention as intrinsically true and almost impossible to deny, that three years later, I resolved to expand on the topic of the picaresque and I began wondering whether it could be linked with the English literary tradition.

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<sup>82</sup> The research was on a relatively little-known contemporary American writer Kent Haruf, whose works privilege the quiet dignity of ordinary life over the heroic exploits typically associated with more conventional narrative models. In retrospect, I assume the grounds for the present research were already taking shape at that stage.

<sup>83</sup>Sorel, Charles. *Histoire Comique de Francion*, Librairie Hachette, 1924, p. 192.

“Do you ignore that these low adventures are infinitely more pleasing than those of a scholarly gentleman making a show of his refined spirit and great knowledge? Can you not understand that we are equally satisfied at hearing the stories of rogues and knaves?” - Translation mine.

Wandering through corrupt masters, displaced *pícaros*, and shattered illusions, this study has sought to situate the polymorphic genre of the picaresque within a critical framework capable of identifying recurring patterns that illuminate the emergence of the novel in England. I have traced the origins of the picaresque tradition in Spain and examined how it later developed distinctive features across various European contexts, focusing on the English territory.

Although the scope of this research has remained primarily within the boundaries of English literature, it has necessarily engaged with transnational influences other than merely Spain. From the late Renaissance – considering figures such as Greene, Nashe, Shakespeare, and the Robin Hood tradition, to name but a few – to modern and contemporary developments, the study has followed the evolution of marginal narrative forms and their lasting impact on prose fiction. Even when extending briefly to American authors towards its ending chapter, the intention has been to demonstrate the continued vitality of a structural and thematic inheritance rooted in earlier models.

The central argument of this thesis rests on the proposition that the rise of the English novel cannot be explained solely through social, economic, or historical conditions internal to England, as many a critics would argue following Watt's too-well known 1957 seminal study. Rather, its foundational impulse may also be traced to the formal and ideological legacy of the Spanish picaresque. Grounding in renown and less-known theories by literary scholars whose interest had, like mine, pushed them to go beyond the national sphere of the genre, this work outlines a comparative framework which attempts to identify structural affinities between Spanish and English

literary traditions – traditions shaped by distinct historical contexts yet united by shared narrative concerns. In doing so, it suggests that marginal forms, far from peripheral, played a constitutive role in shaping the foundations of the modern novel.



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