

THE PICARESQUE SPIRIT IN ENGLISH FICTION

FROM NASHE TO THACKERAY

An Abstract of a Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English of

The University of Manitoba



In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Paul Henry Anderson

September, 1962

This thesis examines the progress in eight English prose works of a literary genre, the picaresque, the roots of which developed in Spain in the sixteenth century. The study indicates that the relationship between the picaro, the central character of picaresque fiction, and the society in which he acts, is the focal interest of picaresque works. This relationship varies from work to work, but a distinction is made between picaros who struggle with a social environment which, in part, determines their actions and picaros whose actions stem more from their own misconceived views of life.

As the roots of English picaresque fiction are Spanish roots, Spanish picaresque literature is examined in chapter I. The Spanish picaresque spirit is seen as a reaction to chivalric literature and as a medium for a realistic appraisal of society. The Celestina, an early Renaissance work, is examined because it presents a character, Sempronio, who is the first real suggestion of a picaro figure in Spanish literature. He observes the love his master, Calisto, has for a young woman, Melibea, and decides to take advantage of his master's infatuation. Sempronio's calculating mind is referred to as an "organ of computation". This term is used throughout the thesis to indicate the picaro's strong self-interest which, aided by a quick wit, prompts him to take advantage of circumstances. An interesting relationship exists between Sempronio and Celestina. This relationship is referred to as a picaresque bond, which is characterized chiefly by a shared recognition of the significance of material prosperity.

Three major aspects of Spanish picaresque fiction: realism, satire, and the picaro's odyssey from innocence to experience are examined in a

group of picaresque works. A distinction between picaresque works is noted in this general survey. In a work like Lazarillo de Tormes, a naïve picaro suffers from his lack of experience, but learns to sharpen his wits in his fight with society. In a work like The Life of the Great Knave, or as it is more commonly called, Don Pablos, the picaro is himself satirized because he misconceives experience and directs his life to gaining recognition in compensation for his early feeling of inferiority. Both of these works are satirical, but, while Lazarillo sympathizes with the "hidalgo," the dispossessed nobleman who represents a false code of honour, Don Pablos witnesses hidalgos who are only ridiculous and beyond sympathy.

The first English picaresque fiction is generally comic, and the picaro does not suffer in a struggle with society as does Lazarillo. Elizabethan picaros like Jack Wilton of Nashe's The Unfortunate Traveller, Piers Plainness of Chettle's Piers Plainness: Seven Years' Prenticeship, and Dorindo of Breton's A Mad World My Masters, are generally disengaged from society and act as observers of society. The keenness of their observations varies; Jack Wilton has a shrewd wit which passes from observation to observation and Dorindo is very adept at assuming roles, a significant characteristic of the picaro. Piers, on the other hand, is a weak observer since he lacks energy. Piers Plainness is closer in external similarities to Lazarillo de Tormes, but it lacks the spirit of its Spanish model.

Defoe's Moll Flanders does recall this spirit in its depiction of a picara's fight for security in a competitive society. Realism of observation, found in the Elizabethan picaresque works, blends with realism

of character and plot in Moll's efforts to become a gentlewoman. Her fear of the law compares to Lazarillo's fear of starvation. Her urge to ascend the social scale gives her adventures a vertical direction as seen in the Elizabethan picaro's movement rather than a simply horizontal one from place to place or from master to master. Her view of life is a product of the society in which she acts. This social determinism for the picaro's actions is seen also in Colonel Jack in which the picaro even though he becomes a thief, reveals a primitive goodness which he asserts against a corrupting social environment.

Fielding uses Jonathan Wild to embody a corrupt social principle, that of "greatness" which is opposed to "goodness". Unlike Lazarillo, his innocence is not emphasized; rather, he seems to bear an almost pre-determined evil. Picaresque qualities such as his role-playing ability and his empiricism only serve to make his criminality more pronounced, although Fielding uses some of these picaresque traits to aid his comic satire of Jonathan. As in Don Pablos the picaro is himself satirized, and this satire is partly directed to Jonathan Wild's misinterpretation of experience.

Smollett's Roderick Random considers the picaro sympathetically and sees him as an outsider who earnestly wishes to participate in society, but finds that society, represented especially by London society, does not want his honest efforts. He takes the sham role of a confidence man to further his ambition, but is ultimately revolted by the corruption of society, and, when he has a chance, withdraws to quieter existence on a country estate. Smollett uses Roderick's experience in London to reveal the sordidness of eighteenth century society. His descriptions of London society recall the

style of Spanish picaresque fiction.

Thackeray's Barry Lyndon recalls Jonathan Wild in its condemnation of the picaro. Thackeray uses his picaro to symbolize the false principle of "success" which Thackeray witnessed in his contemporary society. Barry Lyndon strives to claim the recognition that he felt was denied him as a boy, and so claims to be of the genteel class. In this way, his outlook compares to that of Don Pablos. Like Don Pablos, too, Barry Lyndon misconceives experience and does not recognize his own moral carelessness. His ambition is more aggressive than, for example, Moll Flanders' because it is based on a misconceived egotism rather than on a realistic appraisal of his position in society.

Although great variety exists in English picaresque fiction, this thesis follows one main line of development. The relationship between the picaro and society grows closer in the development of English picaresque fiction. In the three Elizabethan prose works he is seen primarily as an observer of society. In the two Defoe works he is a contender with society, and this struggle with society is again presented in Smollett's Roderick Random. The picaros of Fielding's Jonathan Wild and Thackeray's Barry Lyndon embody wrong social principles. Along this linear pattern of development, the significant contrast between the sympathetic consideration of the picaro and the condemnatory portrait of the picaro will be revealed.

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INTRODUCTION

Because the material in the chapter on Spanish picaresque fiction does not of itself present an adequate statement of intention, I am including this short introduction. In chapter I I examine representative Spanish picaresque works which prepare for the study of English picaresque fiction in succeeding chapters.

Study of a literature as varied and prolific as picaresque fiction demands a limiting of scope and a strict definition of terms. Throughout this thesis I attempt not to confuse picaresque literature with general rogue literature. F.W. Chandler in his book, The Literature of Roguery, traces the history of rogue fiction which includes the drama, romantic rogue tales, essays on criminal life, and picaresque fiction. My study is not nearly as extensive; it does not even attempt a history of picaresque fiction.

Misuse of the term "picaresque" has complicated study of this genre. Many apply the term to novels in which a wayward young man travels along roads full of adventurous episodes. Such novels as Henry Fielding's Joseph Andrews have been termed picaresque because they resemble Cervante's Don Quixote. While the episodic structure of picaresque narrative is a significant characteristic of it, the meaning of the term "picaresque" hinges upon the nature of the chief character, the picaro, rather than on the form of the narrative, even though the episodic nature of his experiences influences the picaro.

What I attempt is a study of the qualities of Spanish picaresque

fiction and a close examination of eight English picaresque prose works. Most of these are commonly known, and they show the great variety in attitude of the writers of picaresque fiction. They range from what I have called the comic picaresque works of the Elizabethans to the sympathetic treatment of the picaro in the novels of Defoe and Smollett and the condemnatory portraits of the picaro by Fielding and Thackeray.

The principal aim of this thesis is to show that common ground exists among these works in the relationship of the picaro himself to the society in which he acts and that this relationship takes many forms according to the particular balance of characteristics in each picaro. Therefore, a consequent additional aim is to observe closely each picaro as he functions in each of the selected works. A minor aim is to show the particular social and literary background from which the picaresque works arise where such revelation has bearing upon the treatment of the picaresque material.

Picaresque fiction has its roots in the relationship between society and the individual. In the present age this relationship has become more significant and more analyzed than ever before. The appearance of the totalitarian state has revealed dangerous implications in the growing contact between the individual and the state. Even in a democracy, the proper balance between the rights of the individual and those of the state is continually being scrutinized and reassessed by political theorists in the light of the advance of the welfare state. In literature, the significance of the problem of communication between individuals is paramount. Some writers, such as E.M. Forster, insist, indeed, that the problem of relations between societies is really a problem of relations between individuals. Franz Kafka, among others, however, stresses the unique problems inherent

in the individual's relation to society.

Since the picaro is an outlaw to society, his position provides a good vantage point from which to observe it. R.W.B. Lewis, in his book, The Picaresque Saint, reveals the kind of hero that is typical of twentieth century literature and shows that this hero embodies the nature of both the picaro and the saint. This hero sees the absurdity of life as it has become for him and is a rebel to contemporary social values. In this respect he is an outlaw to the accepted norms of society and recalls the position of the picaro. Yet this modern hero also yearns for some kind of meaning in his relations with his fellows and, hence, in a world that denies the significance of the individual, becomes a martyr, if not a saint. Such a study of the contemporary novel suggests the lasting value of picaresque literature.

The numerous modern novels that are even more generically picaresque than those studied by Lewis testify to the importance of the genre. A comic picaresque novel, The Adventures of Augie March, by Saul Bellow, is one of these. Young Augie March, the boy narrator, at one point indicates the control that society exerts upon him: "All the influences were lined up waiting for me. I was born, and there they were to form me, which is why I tell you more of them than of myself."¹ In his distinction between himself and society and in his clear realization of the force of society, he speaks as a picaro who is aware of his separation from society and also aware that he must come to terms with it. (From this point on the term "picaro" used in general reference will also pertain to the feminine term "picara".)

The procedure followed in this thesis will be first to indicate what literary and social factors bear upon each of the picaresque works. I shall then examine the character of each picaro and show how this character is developed in his contact with society. The place of each picaresque work in the context of the whole thesis will be emphasized at the end of each chapter. Each work is analyzed only in so far as it is picaresque. This means that certain aspects are ignored or receive minimal attention. For example, even though Roderick Random is considered by many to be the earliest successful portrait of sea life in the English novel, this aspect is not treated as thoroughly as it would be in a more general study of this novel. I feel justified in making such a distinction because the term "picaresque spirit" alludes to the character of the picaro rather than to the literary form of the works. Questions of picaresque form are subordinate to study of picaresque character in this thesis.

The terms "picaresque spirit" and "English fiction" in the title demand explanation. In studies of individual picaresque works, the word "spirit" will often be found and it may apply to any of a number of characteristics that the picaro exhibits. The dictionary meanings of the word that apply to the picaro's spirit are: "stimulated or high spirits, liveliness, energy, vivacity, ardor, enthusiasm, courage."² The picaro's "spirit" is shown in his ability to counter the force of society with energy and resilience and, even when the picaro is the least appealing, this energy may at least lend humour to his actions. His resilience is akin to Henri Bergson's "jack-in-the-box" theory of laughter. In Bergson's view, the stubborn ability of human nature to reassert itself after each set-back

is a principal inspiration to laughter.³ The energy of the picaro may be retarded for a moment just as the jack is compressed when the lid of the box is snapped upon him. But little prompting is needed before the picaro snaps back to action with the same vitality as the jack snaps out of his box when it is opened. This strength of the picaro is a prime source of his appeal. The picaro's episodic viewpoint, by which he sees experience as a series of episodes rather than as a closely integrated development, is based upon the same principle as the jack-in-the-box theory. The picaro's spirit is manifested in the energy with which he faces each new venture.

The second term "English fiction" needs less explanation. I do not wish to enter the classical argument as to when prose fiction becomes the novel in English literary history. I use the blanket term "English fiction" for the English works that I examine.

A third term that may be given tentative definition here is the word "picaro." Although the many facets of the picaro will be observed throughout the thesis and a true picture of him is not complete without a realization of his variety, a few basic suggestions of his character may prove useful before the full study is launched. A principal source of the picaro's energy comes from his firm faith in his own importance. He stands outside society to an extent because he knows that it poses a threat to him, but he also knows that he must come to terms with it, and his behaviour may even be a reflection of society because he is conditioned by it. His difficulty in making personal relationships is due to his constant task of facing society as a whole or, at least, his idea of what society is. A very interesting aspect of his nature, however, is that he does make bonds with other individuals when he is sure that he will not be harmed in such

relationships.

Although I apply the term "criminal" to certain of the picaro's acts, I use this term only in so far as society defines these acts as criminal. The picaro should not be confused with the criminal because of the differences in motive between the acts of the criminal and those of the picaro. I reserve a full revelation of the variety of the picaro's motives to the thesis itself except to indicate that the more the picaro seeks power or material gain in itself, the closer he comes to being a criminal. Henry Fielding's Jonathan Wild is, indeed, a criminal, but he also has a picaresque nature which influences his villainy. I have drawn upon the "humours" theory of characterization because each of the picaros manifests a particular quality of his own.

I believe that a study of picaresque fiction is rewarding and that the picaresque genre is one of the principal roots of the English novel.

NOTES

- 1 Saul Bellow, The Adventures of Augie March (New York: The Viking Press, 1953), p. 43.
- 2 William Allan Neilson, editor in chief, Webster's New International Dictionary, (2nd edition, Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1958), p. 2428.
- 3 Henri Bergson, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic (Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, translators, London: MacMillan and Company, 1911), p. 70.

CHAPTER I

SPANISH PICARESQUE FICTION

1. Social and Literary Background. Much against the reader's best intentions, he often experiences, when considering characters such as Milton's Satan or Comus, a sympathy with and interest in these figures in spite of their scurillous natures. He is tempted to suspend judgment upon evil-doers who are courageous, resourceful, and persevering. For the modern reader, this "moral holiday" is made easier because he has come to attribute, at least in part, a character's proclivity to immorality to the social atmosphere in which he acts. Sixteenth century Spain produced a literary genre, that of picaresque fiction, which encourages such a relaxation of judgment.

The strain of revering wholly virtuous characters, on the other hand, becomes too great for the reader. He knows that the altruistic knight's armour rusts from the "winter and rough weather" of actual conditions. When literature constantly asserts standards of morality beyond the reach of human nature, it petrifies; its heroes become puppets, and its heroines too good to be true. This departure of art from life is quite evident in chivalric literature, especially in the Spanish chivalric romances of the fifteenth century. Ever more ardent knights, more doomed and exquisite ladies, and more grotesque monsters crowd out truth and light from the pages of these works.

Yet the influence that chivalric literature had upon the aristocracy was great. There were Quixotes outside Cervantes' novel who