



The Picaresque Novel in Western Literature

From the Sixteenth Century to the Neopicaresque

Edited by J. A. Garrido Ardila



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THE PICARESQUE NOVEL IN WESTERN LITERATURE

Since the sixteenth century, Western literature has produced picaresque novels penned by authors across Europe, from Alemán, Cervantes, Lesage and Defoe to Cela and Mann. Contemporary authors of neopicaresque have renewed this traditional form to express twenty-first-century concerns. Notwithstanding its major contribution to literary history, as one of the founding forms of the modern novel, the picaresque remains a controversial literary category, and its definition is still much contested. *The Picaresque Novel in Western Literature* examines the development of the picaresque, chronologically and geographically, from its origins in sixteenth-century Spain to the neopicaresque in Europe and the United States.

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Origins and definition of the picaresque genre

J. A. Garrido Ardila

Over the past century, the term *picaresque* has been fully incorporated into the metalanguage of Western national literatures: *picaresque novel* in English, *novela picaresca* in Spanish, *roman picaresque* in French, *Schelmenroman* or *pikarescher Roman* in German, *Плутыовско'й рома'н* in Russian, *romanzo picaresco* in Italian, *pikaresk-roman* in Danish and Norwegian, and *pikareskroman* in Swedish. Novels from different periods and from disparate nations have been designated as *picaresque*, from the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1550–2?) to Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and from Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) to Sokolov's *Palinsandriia* (1985). Those many novels labelled *picaresque* retain some of the quintessential features of the early examples of this sort of text published more than 400 years ago, and bear testimony to their great influence on and contribution to the history of Western literatures. In the 1960s and 70s, the picaresque genre enjoyed enhanced esteem among critics who examined the picaresque elements in the works of some of their nations' greatest writers. These included, for example, Fielding and Dickens in Britain, Twain and Bellow in the United States, Lesage and Voltaire in France, Hans Jakob Grimmelshausen, Mann and Grass in Germany, and Ilf and Petrov in Russia. Nowadays, the label *picaresque* is, generally speaking, deemed a prestigious one: when applied to any post-seventeenth-century novel it confers upon it a halo of critical appeal and relates it to one of the earliest traditions (perhaps the earliest) in the history of the novel. Yet so thin have some critics spread the term that it has often been loosely applied to novels that are, in the strictest sense, conspicuously non-picaresque, such as *Don Quixote* and *Tom Jones*.

The term 'picaresque' remains one of the most overused and contentious in literary criticism for three main reasons. Firstly, in languages without a picaresque narrative tradition of their own the term is used to refer to Spanish picaresque texts, whereas in countries where picaresque novels were written, it has become a key concept in the history of their

own national literatures, e.g., in Britain, the United States, Germany, France and Russia, in addition to Spain. In these countries, however, the term has sometimes been used arbitrarily. This is predominantly the result of the overwhelming lack of critical consensus regarding the understanding of *picaresque* as a literary category. The second reason, therefore, is that, because the word has come to mean different things in different languages, the lack of semantic precision has caused some degree of confusion. Thirdly, the definition of *picaresque* has triggered a heated debate amongst Hispanists and literary comparatists regarding, amongst other things, the validity of the term and even the actual existence of a current of literature or genre that could be called *picaresque*. Some have argued that there exists a clear literary tradition, originating with the publication of the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes*, and reinforced by Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (First Part 1599, Second Part 1604), that deserves to be recognised as a literary genre (or sub-genre of the novel); others have contended that the *picaresque novel* is merely a critical construction forged in the eighteenth century. Such disagreements complicate the study of the picaresque in Western literatures. Consequently, the picaresque remains today one of the most controversial entities in literary criticism, and yet one of the most intriguing and challenging fields for scholars to explore. Part of its appeal resides in its ambiguous nature and in the many challenges that it still presents to critics. The aim of this chapter is therefore to trace a concise history of the picaresque novel from its origins to the consolidation of the genre with *Lazarillo* and *Guzmán* in order to present a panoramic view of its development, also engaging with the issue of its contentious definition.

The anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* is universally regarded as the first picaresque novel. Although the four oldest extant editions appeared in 1554, the *editio princeps* was probably published between 1550 and 1552.¹ Not only is *Lazarillo* one of the most innovative and influential texts in the development of European literature, it is also one of the most intriguing and complex books of fiction published in the last five centuries. The first contention to be made regarding *Lazarillo* concerns its unquestionably premeditated conception, because it was clearly conceived as the culmination of a string of literary vogues and a long line of previous proto-picaresque fictions. Additionally, scholars have linked the picaresque to ancient texts and traditions. The most obvious forerunners are the Classic Latin narratives *Satyricon* (late first century) and *Metamorphoses* (late second century). Petronius' *Satyricon* is a Menippean satire in prose and verse, often related to the picaresque mostly because of its use of irony as a means of satirising the Roman gentry and of parodying Virgil, Homer,

Plato and others. *Satyricon* is narrated by its protagonist, Encolpius, a former gladiator who is travelling with his lover Ascyltos and his slave Giton. Petronius' first-person narrative satirises the patrician class and parodies idyllic literature from the viewpoint of plebeian characters, all of which are defining features of the picaresque.² Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* – also known as *The Golden Ass* – is a narration in the first person that tells the story of Lucius, a young patrician obsessed with magic, who accidentally turns himself into an ass. In his new condition, he is forced to survive amongst peasants. Before he recovers his human form, Lucius observes social iniquities. Like the Spanish picaresque novels, *The Golden Ass* is a satire written in autobiographical form.³

The Arabic *maqāma* has also been identified as one of the precursors of the picaresque.⁴ The *maqāmāt* were short narratives commonly collected in books of fifteen *maqāmāt*; this was a genre that became very popular in Islamic Spain during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Critics have failed to demonstrate that any authors of picaresque novels were acquainted with the *maqāma*,⁵ yet the analogies between these Arabic narratives and the picaresque novel are many: both are prose texts that recount the adventures of tricksters; both are parodies of other popular genres (the *maqāma* parodies, amongst other sorts of writing, the epic *sīra* and religious forms of literature like the *ḥadīth*; the picaresque parodies chivalric literature); both follow the adventures of outcasts who aspire to prosper in life; both satirise their societies for excluding individuals on the grounds of their low birth.⁶

A more recent relation to the picaresque is the German book *Till Eulenspiegel* (1510–11), a collection of tales relating the tricks that the eponymous protagonist plays on others. Till is a folkloric figure, a cunning trickster who comes into contact with and cons individuals from various social strata. The short episodes in *Till Eulenspiegel* are loosely connected, and although they lack the coherence and cohesion of *Lazarillo*, most of them too have their origin in folklore. It is impossible to determine whether the author of *Lazarillo* could have known *Till Eulenspiegel*. However, by the time of the composition and the publication of *Lazarillo*, Spain and Germany were the two strongest nations of the Spanish empire, under the rule of Charles V. The story closes when Till joins the army to fight against the Spanish rule of Germany and the Low Countries. Given the popularity of *Till Eulenspiegel* in the first half of the fifteenth century, it is not at all impossible that it was known in the Spanish court and, more generally, amongst the learned classes. Further to *Till Eulenspiegel*, the German *Liber Vagatorum* was published in 1509 containing a repertoire of the tricks used by vagrants and delinquents.

It is indisputable that the *Satyricon* and *The Golden Ass* were known to Spanish readers in the fifteenth century, and that many of them may have also been familiar with *Till Eulenspiegel*. And although critics have failed to identify any direct traces of the *maqāmāt* in the Spanish picaresque novel, it is worth noting that some were translated into Hebrew in Spain and exerted some influence on later Spanish literature.⁷ During the Middle Ages, Christian, Jewish and Arabic art thrived, often side by side, creating a multi-culture that persisted until the sixteenth century. This is particularly conspicuous in the field of architecture and art, but also in literature – well-known evidence of this is the impact of narratives such as *Kalila and Dimna* (translated into Spanish in 1251) on Spanish Medieval literature, e.g. on Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor* (1330?, Book of Good Love).⁸ The fact that Ruiz's book is regarded as one of the precedents of the picaresque,⁹ particularly in its use of the autobiographical form and lascivious escapades, suggests that Arabic literature such as the *maqāmāt* may have been an indirect influence on the picaresque.¹⁰ There is thus no doubt that most of the forefathers of the picaresque are to be found mainly in Spanish literature.

The *Libro de buen amor* has garnered well-deserved fame as a masterpiece in Spanish literature. Like most of the picaresque novels it is a verisimilar fictional autobiography. Written in verse, this text is rich in digressions and diverse influences, and comprises the fictional autobiographical account of Ruiz's own love adventures, aided by a go-between named Urraca, with women from different social spheres, from *serranas* (lusty shepherdesses and cow-girls from the mountains) to a noble lady, a nun, a baker and others. The impact of the *Libro de buen amor* on Spanish literature is paramount. Ruiz's fictional autobiography lends itself to exposing characters from a range of social classes, in picaresque fashion. By telling the licentious escapades of an archpriest, most often in low places, Ruiz diverged from the mainstream hero of the chivalric and amatory romances.

Some 170 years after Ruiz, Fernando de Rojas took a short play and expanded it. The resulting work, entitled *La tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* (The Tragic-Comedy of Calixto and Melibea), later known as *Celestina* – *Celestina* being the name of the old go-between who aids Calisto in his seduction of Melibea – was published in 1499. It is a parody of sentimental romances that recounts how Calixto becomes infatuated with Melibea, both young members of the upper class, and calls upon *Celestina* for help. *Celestina* exposes the underworld of merry prostitutes and evil rogues with vivid realism. When Rojas finished his work, the

resulting text differed considerably from the plays of the day; not only was it much longer and unfeasible to stage, but it achieved psychological sophistication unknown in late-Medieval theatre. For these reasons, many critics have regarded it as a 'dialogued novel'.¹¹ The exposition in *Celestina* of late-fifteenth-century low life, with its prostitutes, delinquents and criminals, conveys a strong sense of social verisimilitude that was replicated a century later in many picaresque novels. The extraordinarily positive reception that *Celestina* met from readers led to a proliferation of low-life literature in the form of imitations that critics have grouped together and called *Celestinesque literature*.¹² Although the popular fascination with *Celestina* extends through to the seventeenth century, for example in Pedro Calderón de la Barca's lost play *Celestina*, its influence during the first half of the sixteenth century was formidable, and Celestinesque literature was key to the popularisation of roguish characters.

Francisco Delicado's *El retrato de la Lozana andaluza* (1528, The Portrait of the Lusty Andalusian Woman) merits recognition as the best example of the Celestinesque school. *Lozana* relates the life of Aldonza, a prostitute in Rome; like *Celestina*, it is a long narrative written in dialogue. In the fashion of Rojas, *Lozana* exposes the unspeakable underworld inhabited by whores and ruffians. Aldonza's male companion, Rampín, can be regarded as a proto-picaro. *Lozana* is, without a doubt, one of the most radically innovatory texts in Spanish and European literature. The author appears in the text, talks with the characters, and even observes others and takes notes for his book. For the first time, perhaps, and eight decades before *Don Quixote*, fiction and the real world come together, and both the actual author and the verisimilar characters co-exist on the same level.¹³ In order to make this twist patent, Delicado wrote a prologue where he explained his authorial aims: because 'los hombres santos ... leían libros fabulosos' (saintly men read romances),¹⁴ he claims to have written *Lozana* 'por traer a la memoria muchas cosas que en nuestros tiempos pasan' (to bring to light the many things that happen in our age).¹⁵ He thus anticipates Cervantes in denouncing romances, but also predates Defoe by nearly 200 years in expressing his commitment to social realism. Delicado explains his perception of fiction in a second preface entitled 'Argumento en el cual se contienen todas las particularidades que ha de haber en la presente obra' (An Account of All the Features that Are to Be Found in This Book). In this Account, the author states with relation to the composition of his book: 'mi intención fue mezclar natura con bemol' (my intention was to mixture *natura* with story).¹⁶ Although the usage of the word 'bemol' has been the subject of much critical debate, in the

context of this sentence it seems to mean fiction or story. Delicado is effectively declaring that he has written a fictional story based on real life and, perhaps most importantly, as an alternative to and differing from chivalric romances.¹⁷

In addition to its claims to verisimilitude and to the veracity of its social descriptions, *Lozana* reveals a strong satirical vein. It is possible that Delicado sought to expose the vices of the depraved Romans in order to justify the *Sacco di Roma* on 6 May 1527, when the Spanish army plundered the city. Indeed, like many other Spaniards who resided there, Delicado left Rome in 1527 to flee anti-Spanish sentiment. In fact Delicado was probably descended from Spanish Jews who were forced by law to convert to Catholicism in 1492, and then *Lozana* might have been intended to satirise Spanish politics, as did *Celestina* and *Guzmán*, authored by Rojas and Alemán respectively, both of whom were also descended from *conversos*, or converts to Christianity.¹⁸ (As possibly was the anonymous author of *Lazarillo*, too.)

Lozana is, in sum, grounded solidly on the principle of verisimilitude; it was written with satirical aims, and set in the underclass of rogues and prostitutes. It is possible that as it was published in Venice, the book remained virtually unknown amongst readers in Spain and exerted no influence on Spanish prose at the time it appeared. Nonetheless, Delicado's book demonstrates that in the 1520s, Celestinesque fictions had already dismantled the conventions of idyllic and unrealistic literature to argue that fiction should reflect real life.

In 1517, the Italian Teofilo Folengo published *Baldus*, a parody in macaronic verse of the major icons of Italian literature, from the works of Dante to the chivalric romances and the heroic works of Luigi Pulci and Matteo Boiardo. A Spanish translation, entitled *Baldo*, appeared in 1542. The Spanish version dispensed with many blasphemous passages and expanded the story. The translator also took the liberty of turning the verse into prose. *Baldo* gave a voice to an antihero who scrutinised the miseries of society. Folengo's book was instrumental in the conception of *Lazarillo*, as it included two interpolated stories upon which the narrative structure of the first picaresque novel is based. Lázaro begins his book with a 'Prologue' in which he addresses an interlocutor who has asked him to explain *the case* – the case is that his wife is the long-standing lover of the archpriest of St Salvador, a legal case, as extramarital affairs involving a member of the clergy were unlawful. Lázaro complies, and declares that he will relate his entire life in order to explain fully the circumstances of the case. In *Baldo*, the protagonist asks someone called Falqueto to explain an episode of his life, and Falqueto replies: 'os ruego

que puesto que yo os quiero complacer, estéis atentos que desde ahora comienzo a contar toda mi vida' (as I wish to please you, I pray you pay heed because I will now start to tell you my whole life). He then goes on to do so in what constitutes an interpolated story in the text.¹⁹ Subsequently, on a sea journey, Cíngar asks Leonardo why he is staring at him. Leonardo replies that he is thinking about Cíngar's trickeries and requests him to relate them. Cíngar complies: 'Señor [...] por cumplir vuestro mandato como de señor y complaceros como a verdadero amigo, os las contaré desde mi niñez, no para que las aprobéis, sino para que las evitáis' (Sir [...] in order to obey your command as my lord, and to please you as a true friend, I will tell you about my tricks from my boyhood, not for your approval, but so that you may avoid them).²⁰ The life of the narrator – related by himself in order to recount his exploits and experiences and explain how he came to be in his current situation – parallels the life narrated in *Lazarillo*. Cíngar, like Lázaro, is a trickster and a rogue from a deprived family.²¹

In order to inform his work the author of *Lazarillo* had recourse to many other literary materials, such as folk tales, the *carte messagiere* (letters of messengers) and the *probanza de sangre* (proof of purity of blood) reports. It is widely alleged that more than three-quarters of the fictional materials in *Lazarillo* were borrowed from popular oral culture,²² including many stories, anecdotes and characters. Some critics, however, in search of a more precise understanding of folklore and its uses within *Lazarillo*, have concluded that the folk materials are scarcer within the work than previously thought.²³ The *carte messagiere* originated in Italy as fictions in epistolary form. They soon became very popular in Spain, e.g. with Hernando del Pulgar's *Letras* (1485 and 1494, Letters) and Antonio de Guevara's *Epístolas familiares* (1536 and 1541, Family Letters). *Lazarillo* is essentially written as a letter – a narratee, whom Lázaro addresses as 'Vuestra Merced' (Your Honour), has asked him to give a detailed account of the case, and *Lazarillo* replies accordingly. Francisco Rico has stressed that the author might have found inspiration in the *carte messagiere*.²⁴ It is also worth noting that in around 1550 Spanish readers were familiar with *cartas-coloquio* in epistolary form. Renaissance humanists wrote many dialogues and the *cartas-coloquio* were a variation of this format. These gave way to epistolary literature, e.g., in works like the anonymous *Abindarráez* (1561) and Alfonso Núñez de Reinoso's *Isea* (1552).

Lazarillo was also conceived as a parody of the *probanza de sangre* (proof of purity of blood) reports. Imposed by certain institutions in the sixteenth century, the *estatutos de limpieza de sangre* (statutes of purity of

blood) were codes whereby an institution automatically and lawfully refused membership applications from the descendants of Jews and Moors. In order to be admitted, individuals needed to request one of these reports to provide proof of their origin. Spanish society referred to persons of Christian origin as people of *sangre pura* or pure blood, also known as old Christians. Those of Jewish or Arabic parentage who had converted to Catholicism were known as new Christians. A report of pure blood was required to access a range of professions, to be admitted as a member of most religious orders and even to settle in the American colonies. Nonetheless, in the first half of the sixteenth century, many new Christians of Jewish extraction held posts of the highest repute in the royal house, in many religious orders and in the Inquisition. In 1545, Cardinal Silíceo as Archbishop of Toledo – the ecclesiastical epicentre of Spain – proposed that a statute of blood purity be enforced in his diocese. The proposal was put to the vote and passed by the cathedral council, causing a controversy that raged for more than ten years, until the matter was settled by the king, Philip II. The case was initially taken (when Philip was still the prince) before the Emperor, Charles V, who opposed the statute; representatives of both sides were subsequently summoned by the Pope to settle it. In the Vatican, the Archbishop's delegates quoted from the Holy Scriptures and won the argument. *Lazarillo* was written during this intense dispute that determined the position of new Christians in Spanish society. Silíceo was an old Christian of humble origins, whereas some of the high clergy in Toledo were new Christians. At that moment, the population of rural areas were generally of old Christian stock, whereas the new Christians populated urban society and were taking hold of political and religious offices. The imposition of the statute in Toledo was Silíceo's attempt to stop the wealthy new Christians from increasing their influence on and control of the dioceses.

Lazarillo is set in the town and involves an archpriest and a cuckolded new Christian. Reports of blood purity began with an account of the applicant's family and included declarations from witnesses. When the narratee requests that Lázaro explain his case,²⁵ Lázaro decides to recount his whole life story in order to prove his claim that anybody who rose from adversity to a respectable life deserves more social recognition than those born into affluence. He starts his narration by giving details of his parents – both of whom are conspicuously new Christians – and scolds members of the clergy, particularly the archpriest, who has encouraged him to marry his (the archpriest's) lover. In sum, when the interlocutor – who is an officer of the civil or ecclesiastical law – demands that Lázaro explain the