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ELIZABETHAN ROGUE LITERATURE

Introduction – social setting

The unquestionable popularity of 'rogue literature' in Elizabethan England must be seen not only as a continuation of medieval tradition, but as a result of certain social and economic changes that took place during the course of the sixteenth century. Among others, Elizabethan times witnessed an enormous growth of criminal activity which followed directly from the sudden pauperisation of the society and growing social discrepancies between classes. In the first place poverty ensued from the phenomenon of enclosures, that is, swallowing up small estates belonging to lesser landowners. Those deprived of land either moved to unenclosed areas where they settled as squatters on the wastes, or they migrated to towns. The flocking numbers of the rapidly impoverished yeomen to the towns were most likely to turn into vagrants and criminals.

Another factor which largely contributed to the pauperisation of the society was the Dissolution of the Monasteries. At the accession of Henry VIII the clergy formed a very powerful social stratum in the then society. It is estimated that the clergy owned 1/3 of the total acreage (see Liljegren 1924:15). The Parliament which met in April 1539 passed an edict securing to the Crown all property that had come by the solution of the monasteries. Most of the early writers on the topic of dissolution were content to accept the fact that the dissolution brought about poverty of untold thousands of monks (Pound 1973:15–16). This formidable appraisement has been considerably modified by recent research. The old pictures of exiled monks wandering about the roads of England and dying in ditches were highly inaccurate because the disposed clergy received pensions or turned to secular life. The most significant effect of dissolution was that it deprived of work great numbers of people who had kept monasteries going from day to day: gardeners, cooks, butchers, launderers and such like.

To the factors mentioned above one may add inflation and rising prices especially of basic foodstuffs. As L. G. Salingar (1982:30) remarks: *Although a well-run estate was still basically self-providing, the quantity of purchased goods was mounting and their price roughly doubled during Elizabeth's reign.* Rising costs of living accompanied by harvest failures, especially those in 1530 and 1590, the plague and the steady growth of population[1] intensified and aggravated the problem of the poor, and as a result, witnessed increased criminal activity. The extent of the problem of vagrancy and vagabondage found its reflection in the literature of the period which this paper seeks to outline below.

Elizabethan rogue literature

The problem of roguery and vagabondage has always existed as an integral part of every human society. Consequently, roguery has had its place in various forms of the Arts. It follows that since the invention of writing and the beginning of letters, rogues and vagabonds have always appeared in various forms of writing. In addition to appearing in the official records of civic courts and in similar documents, they have always appeared in belles-lettres. Although rogues and vagabonds had appeared in literature earlier, it was the sixteenth century that furnished the "rascality boom" and that produced literature dealing specifically with those who infringe on the norms of collective life. Elizabethan epoch produced what has been called **rogue literature** by Ruoff (1975) or **literature of roguery** by some others (Ruoff 1975:360). Rogue literature was the result of tradition, validity of the problem of social outcasts in Elizabethan England and the "newly printed" prose. This literature is very interesting and should be studied under the angle of these three aspects. The concept of rogue literature includes the sixteenth century stories of rogues and ruffians. Although rogue literature is not a uniform concept as far as ways of presentation are concerned, whatever ways were employed on the part of Elizabethan social writers, there is one thing in common about them all. They all aimed at drawing in detail pictures from low life **to satisfy the ever-present desire for the sensational, but most of all to forewarn honest people against social parasites**.

Both laws and letters bear witness to the roguery of Saxon and Norman England. As early as in the seventh century robbers, fugitives, prostitutes and thieves were subject to legal restriction (Chandler 1907:44). The Normans retained most of the Saxon edicts against vagabondage and crime which Alfric and Bede had referred to as common. Rogues and vagabonds appear in the medieval literature in various forms: in early drama, as well as in poetry and in

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[1] Pound (1973) estimates that between 1500 and 1600 the population may have risen by as much as 40 percent.

prose. There are some forms, however, that come closest to the literature of roguery. This is the vast treasure of shorter tales current in the Middle Ages which aimed at capturing the pictures of contemporary life – among them characters of rogues and vagabonds in the form of anecdotes, jests, fables, legends and exempla. As noticed by Schlauch (1963:41) these forms came from a variety of sources such as folklore, local events, bits of classical tradition, biblical and historical materials and many plots whose origin may be traced in the East.

The close of the Middle Ages and especially the fifteenth century with its fits of Black Death[2], growing religious corruption[3] and industrial troubles, laid the foundations for the increased criminal activity which, in turn, was reflected in the literature of the period. The three great figures of medieval literature, Chaucer, Langland and Gower, though all presenting roguery, exemplified the diversity of ways of presenting, as well as purposes. Langland and Gower aimed at preaching repentance, Chaucer in contradistinction to them, depicted the vicious humorously (Chandler 1907:47–8). What was common to all of them was the motive to present vice in its different forms: ranging from the bribe taking jurors, described abundantly in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, to rogues in clerkly clothes exhibited realistically in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.[4]

The figures of rogues and vagabonds appeared in fables, legends, jests and exempla but it was the early form of drama that developed a conventional figure of the rogue. Conventional, because the roguish figures appearing in the early drama were usually associated with the doings of the Devil and the Vice.

The fact that roguery seems to centre chiefly in Vice is of primary importance. As the Devil corresponded to the villain of the later stage, so the vicious foreran modern fools and rogues (Chandler 1907:51). It should also be stressed that Vice very seldom becomes an individual character in an individual milieu. It follows that apart from mainly accidental reflection of aggravating social conditions, the literature of roguery achieved little before the middle of the sixteenth century (Chandler 1907:50). Although the examples of early drama included some pieces of roguery and rogues also appeared in fables, legends and exempla, this earlier, mainly accidental description of social non-conformists gave way to the ample, detailed studies only in the sixteenth century. It must be

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[2] Donaldson and David (1996:7) speak of the Black Death in 1348, which *[...] swept Europe, wiping out a quarter to a third of the population* and in England: *The presence of a disease that, at its height, meant the death of one out of every two people in London and, in the eastern counties, of two out of every three, led to a relaxation of the current laws of life and and to the Peasants' Revolt in 1381* (Ward 1967:371).

[3] The Church at that time was a source of resentment due to *[...] the wealth, worldliness and venality of many of the higher clergy* (Donaldson and David 1996:8).

[4] See especially *The General Prologue* and the descriptions of the Pardoner, the Monk, and the Friar.

pointed out that Elizabethan rogue literature was rooted in medieval times and consequently, to a certain extent, followed its antecedents. On the other hand, it employed new forms of presentation exhibiting different approaches, which in comparison to its antecedents meant something different to the public. Consequently, the Elizabethans witnessed the rise and development of what was to be named several centuries later, rogue literature.

Thus, sportively, wicked characters of Vice appearing in the medieval moralities, continued this tradition in form of interludes such as J. Heywood's portrayal of priestly roguery of the *Mery Play Between the Pardoner and the Frere, the Curate and Neybour Pratte* (printed 1533) (Chandler 1907:52). The best interlude roguery was derived from a famous Spanish source in the adaptation of the first four acts of the *Celestina* by John Rastell (printed c. 1530).

Rogue literature evident in the medieval legends and tales such as Wynkyn de Warde's *A Lyttel Geste of Robyn Hoode, The Historie of Frier Rush* constituted the background from which the Tudor jestbook emerged. However, apart from legends and popular tales, Elizabethan rogue literature had two more medieval tributaries. Thus, medieval fabliaux and exempla were the sixteenth century jestbook true progenitors (Schlauch 1963:45–46). The jester, like the anti-hero of a legend, emerged from folklore but unlike that of the legend, the career of the jestbook was longer and contributed more directly to the development of rogue literature. Similarly to the medieval exempla, jestbooks had usually morals attached to them but they soon broke away from the older tradition and became a self-sufficient form of literature (Schlauch 1963:84). However, the formal medieval moralising is apparent when at the very end the author adds a semi-humorous comment: *By this ye may see [...].* In spite of the popularity enjoyed by such jestbooks as Copland's *Hewleglass*, Skelton's *Mery Tales [...]*, or Edwards' *Conie Stories*, the first decade of the seventeenth century meant a decay of this form. Jestbooks of this period lost their originality drawing either on their predecessors, or upon more ambitious literature, instead of contributing to it.

Before discussing rogue literature itself an attempt can be made at indicating the factors which contributed to the emergence of the new form of writing. Some of the factors were characteristic of the Renaissance period in general, for example, the characteristic interest in man, his problems and his partial depravity – the heritage from Cain, who *[...] was condemned to be a fugitive and wanderer* (Orchard 1979:4).

To begin with, the Elizabethan reading public exhibited far greater literacy compared to that of the Middle Ages. This was partly due to Puritan attempts to fight illiteracy, as well as to the restoration of English educational system after the period of reformation and especially closing of monasteries. After the period of decline, the Elizabethan government supported with private funds, took seriously to restoring the educational system. Consequently, an Elizabethan

historian could note that *[...] there are only some self-governing towns in the England of Elizabeth that do not have at least one secondary school* (Harrison quoted after Rowse 1976:427). A clear indication of the relation between literature, education and public is the fact that the educational aims of the Humanists gave a considerable impetus to the development of English prose. The advance of English prose was, if anything, spectacular and its implications for the English culture are very important.

Incidentally, it was in the sixteenth century that the vernacular acquired the value of the literary language after the domination of Latin (Morpurgo 1950:130–1). This transformation seems to be even more spectacular when one remembers the great prestige of Latin in the Middle Ages. Even the early Humanists, on the whole, avoided English. In contradistinction to them, the sixteenth-century underworld explorers used the vernacular almost exclusively.

Another important factor which contributed to the emergence of rogue literature was the alarming prevalence of crime and the ever-existing interest in the sensational. The latter, however, should not be exaggerated since it was not so much that the Elizabethans wanted to read rogue literature in need of this kind of writing. Besides, taking into consideration the extent of crime and accepting the truth that appetite comes with eating (eating being increased criminal activity), one can say that the wish for the sensational was stronger in that age than in the preceding epoch. The most important fact is that the rogue literature furnished a detailed delineation of the *inutile au monde* who the early capitalists with their growing sense of possession could take heed of. Consequently, the writers delineating the Elizabethan demimonde played the role of advocates pleading a cause of which the society was the witness, the judge and the victim.

Rogue literature of the sixteenth century enjoyed great popularity. The great quantum of underworld studies and their frequent editions and re-editions prove its acceptance by the sixteenth-century reading public. Thus, for example, the great popularity of Greene's tracts led to certain speculations, as his tracts were often plagiarised. Samuel Rowlands, for example, attempted to publish what was a theft from Greene's conny-catching tracts (Chandler 1907:103).

The very core of what we know today as rogue literature of the sixteenth century consists of the pieces that came into being in that century. These forms have been called anatomies of roguery which may be defined as descriptions of the life, tricks and manners of professional criminal (Chandler 1907:87). Anatomies of roguery include such pieces as the beggar books, conny-catching tracts and prison tracts. The English anatomies of roguery transcended in number and interest those of the Continent. It is Germany that may claim the earliest attempt to describe underworld in the *Liber Vagatorum,* France the most artistic in the *La Vie Generese*, Italy the most succinct in the *Il Vagabondo* but the English surpass all other in graphic detail (Chandler 1907:87).

The earliest English beggar books seem to have appeared already in the first half of the sixteenth century. The first attempt to describe the picaresque manners and the speech of beggars was made by a printer Robert Copland (Chandler 1907:87). His *Hye Way to the Spyttel Hous,* first printed in 1535, aimed at describing the vagrants and impostors whose vicious life led to St. Bartholomew's Hospital. Of similar character but more precise in the description of rogues was *Fraternity,* published in 1561 by a printer of Little Britain, John Awdeley. Awdeley's *Fraternity of Vagabonds* inspired Thomas Harman, another beggar explorer, to write *A Caveat or Warening, for Common Cursetors Vulgarly Called Vagabondes* (printed 1566). Both Harman and Awdeley exerted a great influence on Robert Greene who modified and perpetuated the beggar book kind in the form of conny-catching pamphlets.

The rogue studies in the form of **pamphlet** constitute a very important part of rogue literature. The pamphlet is typically a creation of the sixteenth century. It appears to be a combination of the old and the new, that is, of the sermon, the chief vehicle for popular instruction during the Middle Ages, and the printing press which enabled the preacher to reach a large audience. (Hibbard 1951:28) The pamphlet was not only a form of literary expression but also the main instrument of controversy and propaganda in the age that was rapidly discovering the possibilities of printed word. Throughout the whole of the sixteenth century there was a steady widening of the uses to which the pamphlet was put: religion, witchcraft, and even pipe smoking were all subjects of controversy (Hibbard 1951:29). Many of the pamphleteers attempted to describe that Elizabethan demimonde with the underlying intention to teach, guide and forearm by informing Robert **Greene**, one of the most prolific pamphleteers of his times, who, with his collection of conny-catching tracts, together with Dekker and his *Belman of London* and *Lanthorne and Candlelight* furnished some of the most representative underworld explorations in the form of pamphlet.

A curious set of books, known as prison tracts, was inaugurated at the close of the sixteenth century by Luke Hutton with his *The Black Dogge of Newgate* (Chandler 1907:111–112). Early Tudor characters are regarded to be the immediate predecessors of prison tracts. At first, characters were chiefly concerned with setting the moral over the immoral as, for example, Nicholas Breton's *The Godde and the Badde.* Later, this form proceeded to anatomise places like taverns, fairs and, in particular, prisons. Consequently, prison tracts are simply specialised modifications of characters in which everything connected with prison, from the guards to the cells, is described in detail.

It should be pointed out that rogue literature, growing on the fruitful soil of the Renaissance shared most of the features with other kinds of writing of the epoch. There are, however, some aspects of that literature which are typical of it and consequently deserve special mention. What is virtually unique about the

sixteenth century tales of social non-conformists is the method of presentation. The method employed by the underworld explorers can be compared to that of civil servants executing national census. **Beggar books, conny-catching tracts** and **prison tracts** supplied their contemporaries with a superb classification and detailed description of *inutil au monde*. The zest with which they undertook the task and accurateness they attempted at prompt that this census was done not only for its own sake, but also was supposed to serve practical purposes.

Among others, the position of the anti-hero deserves attention since roguish figures were not introduced in order to complete the social panorama, or to contrast the vicious and the virtuous. Rogues, beggars and prisoners become the most important characters of the fictional world upon whom the author's central attention is focused. H. Dziechcińska (1967:67–68) enumerates three functions that a hero may play. First of all, a hero may be important because of his utterances, secondly, a hero may constitute the main element of narration, and finally, a hero may be someone whose activities serve as examples to support the author's main intention.

Taking into consideration these three functions, one can notice that the **anti-heroes** of the underworld studies combine them all. However disreputable their doings are, their utterances are very important and paid much attention to. Being the very important figures in the fictional world, the anti-heroes are indissolubly connected with action and both their disreputable doings and characteristic utterances are the part of the author's main intention.

It should also be remembered that style is one of the lasting literary achievements of the underworld explorers of the period, as well as one of the things which they developed for others.

The diction used by the Elizabethan underworld anatomists was particularly suitable for the exposition of the criminal world. On the whole, Elizabethan prose had many advantages over the abstract prose of modern times since it appealed to the whole man because it made use of the language really used by the man (Morpurgo 1950:145–146). Too general, as this remark may appear to be, it certainly holds true for the diction of the anatomies of roguery. Their diction was full of the idioms of the market place, prison and brothel. It was a skilled literary reconstruction of the underworld cant based on speech movement. Obviously the language of anatomies of roguery formed a striking contrast to the highly sophisticated style exercised by the Arcadia Literature. The sixteenth century pamphleteers and beggar book writers evolved a highly colloquial style, which is not unbearable to the twentieth century reader and, in this way, pointed the way to Swift and ultimately to Joyce (Morpurgo 1950:145).

Greene's style, for example, underwent quick transformation to being colloquial in 1590 when Greene started to show repentance for the crapulous life he had earlier led. From this time on he began drawing on the resources of the vernacular that had been seldom touched upon and obviously not by writers of

such background.[5] Elizabethan journals inform that *[...] it was objected by some that read the first book that Robert Greene used no eloquent phrases and he answereth that it were an odious thing to apply a fine style to so base a subject* (Harrison, 1955:84). It was loose syntax, idioms and cant which set an appropriate literary tone and contributed to the local colour and liveliness.

On the whole, local colour constitutes a very important aspect of anatomies of roguery. Although already medieval exempla and fabliaux exhibited certain tendencies for the concrete setting and homely detail, these were only the sixteenth century underworld explorers who developed and perfected the appliance of local colour. Chaucer, in his *Canterbury Tales,* seems to be an exception as he endeavoured to include only those fragments of colloquy which would be useful in completion of portraiture and would forward the action of his tales (Schlauch 1963:45–46). In this way, he habingered the sixteenth century Elizabethan underworld explorers. Similarly to Greene, for example, his force lay in the diligent observation of a journalistic kind. The diligent observation of low life led the underworld explorers to the intentionally realistic presentation of social parasites: their manners, laws, methods of cheating and spying, harbouring places and speech.

Jestbooks, one of the first forms of underworld exploration, exhibited little, if any, realism. The realism of these jesting anecdotes consisted usually in the incidental and sporadic relation of the milieu (Schlauch 1963:85–87). On the other hand, characters of the anatomies of roguery are specifically delineated against the background of precisely named streets, fairs, squares, theatres and taverns. Thus, for example, Greene's portrayal of viles of the Elizabethan London was so faithful that it nearly occasioned its author's assassination at the hands of thieves, graphically proving the realism employed there (Ruoff 1975:301). Beggar books exposed canting phrases, tricks of counterfeit beggars, and the poverty of genuine ones. Thus Awdeley's *Fraternity of Vagabonds* gives an account of nineteen kinds of rogues from the 'Abraham Man'[6] to pedlars and names twenty five orders of knaves (Chandler 1907:68). Harman's *A Caveat or Warening, for Common Cursetors Vulgarly Called Vagabondes*, a collection based on his own experience and rumour, presents a list of twenty three criminal orders. Harman's experiments inspired many imitators and picaresque fiction long felt his influence (Chandler 1907:92). Greene's *A Notable Discovery of Coosenage* presents tricks and jargon used by London thieves. Dekker's *Belman of London* provides a *[...] discourse of all the idle vagabonds of England, their condition, and laws among them, their decrees and their manner of living*

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[5] Craig (1950:260) informs that: Greene, educated at St. John's College, *[...] was well grounded in school learning [...] the trivium, the quadrivium, Neo platonism [...] became familiar to him.*

[6] The 'Abraham Man' feigns madness (Ruoff 1975:361).

(Chandler 1907:106). Similarly to other rogue explorations, his book includes a chapter of canting speech with a glossary.

The social function of these underworld explorations is unquestionable. Popular literature in general and popular social literature in particular had great influence on the fixing of laws, as it kept one of the most important social issues constantly before the eyes of the lawmakers. The portraits, that the Elizabethan underworld explorers supplied their public with, may be equated to the warning signs of the 'beware of [...]' kind. Once seen, the pictures of the villains and their tricks could be kept firmly in the minds of respectable citizens.

Because of the aspects that have been discussed, rogue literature of the sixteenth century represents a new value which is, on the one hand, a reflection of one of the most difficult problems of the period, and on the other, a reflection of the accelerated development of prose. Both the thematic and formal attributes of rogue literature laid the foundations for what was to become responsible for the prospective success of a novel.

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