

'Masterless Men' and the Commonwealth: Class, Ideology and Representation in Early Modern Rogue Literature

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The texts that I am going to discuss in this article belong to the Renaissance genre of rogue literature, as it has been posthumously labelled, pamphlets which dealt with the representation of the life of vagrants, beggars and petty criminals. According to a modern account, this narrative tradition developed 'as a figurative act of settlement: exposing, dissecting, and classifying all that threatened to confuse social relations in Elizabethan England, tying the loose ends of commerce and crime back to the frayed fabric of society' (Agnew 65). In fact, it claimed to be doing even more than that: texts such as Gilbert Walkers's *A Manifest Detection of Diceplay* (1552), John Awdeley's *The Fraternity of Vagabonds* (1561), Thomas Harman's *A Caveat for Common Cursitors, Vulgarly Called Vagabonds* (1566), or Robert Greene's 'cony-catching' pamphlets, to take the best examples, introduce themselves with the claim to have been written and published to record and publicly denounce the unlawful practices of their protagonists, and help the state policing and punitive apparatuses to bring them to justice. Harman's *A Caveat for Common Cursitors*, for instance, begins by recalling the 'most wholesome statutes, ordinances, and necessary laws, made, set forth and published, for the extreme punishment of all vagrants and sturdy vagabonds, as passeth through and by all parts of this famous isle' (81), and even includes an appendix containing a list of names of the 'most notorious and wickedest walkers that are living now at this present' (140).

The crimes catalogued in these pamphlets include pretty much the whole inventory of what was likely to be taken by the Elizabethan middle and upper classes as representing a threat to the moral values gluing together and safeguarding the stability of the social structure: idleness and refusal of work, disrespect of any established authority, blasphemy, theft, dissembling of identity, pandering, prostitution and sexual promiscuity. According to Harman, the main threat that vagabonds and 'counterfeit cranks' posed to society, lay in the 'deep dissimulation', 'detestable dealings' and 'scelerous secrets' (82) with which they covered up their activities, beginning with disguising themselves as genuinely

poor and deserving of charity. Similarly, in another text belonging to this narrative tradition, *The Groundwork of Cony-catching* (1592), the vagrant is described as ‘sometimes a mariner, and a serving man, / Or else an artificer, as he would feign then. / Such shifts, he used, being well tried. / Abandoning labour, till he was espied’ (cited in Agnew 64). Still in the same vein, the rogues and petty criminals who appear in Robert Greene’s *A Notable Discovery of Cosenage* (1591) are portrayed as ‘preferring cozenage before labour, and choosing an idle practice before any honest form of good living’ (164), ‘in religion mere atheist’ and ‘loathsome in the sight of God’ (174), and, for good measure, as ‘all either wedded to whores, or so addicted to whores, that what they get from honest men, they spend in bawdy-houses among harlots’ (171).

Whether these colourful accounts are to be taken as faithful and reliable social reports is, of course, highly dubious, not in the least because the claim that they are based on first-hand knowledge of the world they represent is undercut by the fact that their authors systematically plagiarise each other’s stories. Most of Harman’s evidence, for instance, is lifted from Awdeley’s *Fraternity of Vagabonds*, while Greene draws heavily on Walker’s *A Manifest Detection of Diceplay* (see Woodbridge 3). What is factually accurate, however, is that the sixteenth century registered unprecedentedly high levels of unemployment and vagrancy, as is shown by the huge number of complaints and decrees issued against the ‘infynytt numbers of the wicked wandrynge Idell people of the land’ (Tawney and Power 2:341), or the ‘many vagabonds, rogues, idle persons, and masterless men having nothing to live on [who] daily resort to the cities of London and Westminster...and other villages and towns’ (Hughes and Larkin 2: 415-416; see also Walter and Wrightson, Sharpe, Beier, and Slack, ‘Vagrants and vagrancy’). Christopher Hill cites a government inquiry that calculated that in 1569 there were thirteen thousand ‘masterless men’ (‘servants to nobody’) roaming all over England, mostly in the North, and a document estimating that in 1602 there were thirty thousand of them in London alone. He also suggests that the outburst of the phenomenon of vagrancy was one of the key factors that contributed to dissolve the social bonds and allegiances inherited from the socioeconomic and political structure of feudalism: ‘The essence of feudal society was the bond of loyalty and dependence between lord and man...society was hierarchical in structure: some were lords, others were their servants’, Hill argues. The ‘assumptions were those of a relatively static agricultural society, with local loyalties and local control: no land and no man without a lord’ (39). Against this background, then, the figure of the ‘masterless man’ aroused deep fears and anxieties, which were related to the massive and seemingly incomprehensible social disruptions that were affecting contemporary England. As Linda Woodbridge observes:

The geographic mobility of vagrants came to stand in for social mobility, a new fluidity of social class, and for even larger instabilities of the age. The word 'place' meant both social rank and geographical location; in the synecdochic thinking of the age, those with no fixed place to live came to represent other cultural dislocations occasioned by the reformation, humanism, class realignments and proto-capitalism. (1)

Indeed, such was the perceived threat represented by mass displacement and vagrancy, that it caused a radical change of policies and attitudes towards the poor, which shifted from an emphasis on the local provision of relief and the Middle Ages discourse of 'holy poverty', to a predominantly punitive and disciplining legislation and set of discourses (Beier 73-76; Halpern 72-75). As a product of the massive social dislocations and uprooting that underscored the rise of commercial and agrarian capitalism (Brenner), the growing population of wandering migrants and vagabonds came to embody a menace, an ominous and alien 'other' to be forcibly reincorporated into the structure of power and subjection established by the newly centralised Tudor and Stuart state apparatus.

Perry Anderson explains that serfdom, on which feudal lordship relied, was 'a mechanism of surplus extraction', in which 'economic exploitation and politico-legal coercion were fused'. This system was based on 'organic unit[ies] of economics and polity' that constituted a 'chain of parcellized sovereignties'. According to Anderson, the solvent of this socioeconomic and political structure was the growth of the money economy and, in particular, the commodification of land. 'With the generalized commutation of dues into money rents', he maintains, 'the cellular unity of political and economic oppression of the peasantry was gravely weakened and threatened to become dissociated'. The response to this process by a feudal aristocracy attempting to maintain its hold on the rural labour force was a move towards the unification of political power, that is 'a *displacement* of politico-legal coercion upwards towards a centralized, militarized summit—the Absolutist State' (19).

In this new politico-legal structure, the change of policies and attitudes towards the poor found its formal expression in those notorious 'bloody' statutes and acts that constituted the core of the early modern state legislation aimed at restraining and repressing the vagrant masses. These legal measures included decrees stating that only beggars too old or in any way unable to work should receive a beggar's licence, while 'sturdy' vagabonds should be tied to the cart-tail, whipped until bloody, returned to where they came from and, once there, 'put...to labour'; that idlers who refuse to work should be consigned as slaves to their denouncers, forced to work in exchange for bread and water, and if they ran away thrice, executed as felons; that vagabonds and idlers above fourteen years should be whipped, and burned through the ear unless set to work, while their children were bound to service; that every town should set up stocks of materials for poor to work on, that houses of correction should be opened in every county for those refusing to work; and finally, failing all of the above, that dangerous and incorrigible rogues and criminals were to be committed to jail, banished or executed.¹

Michel Foucault makes the important point, with respect to the punitive mechanisms envisaged by this corpus of legislation, that at the heart of the absolutist technology of power there was the inscription of its visible mark on the subjected body (54-57). This argument has been further elaborated by Silvia Federici who, drawing on Marx's analysis of the primitive accumulation, associates the repressive policies recalled above with the attempt to impose a new, proto-capitalist work-discipline. Marx describes how 'primitive accumulation' converted property, belonging to group institutions like church, state and class, into private property, paving the way for 'capitalist agriculture' and 'creat[ing] for the town industries the necessary supply of a "free" and outlawed proletariat' (732-33). Federici elaborates:

the violence of the ruling class was not confined to the repression of transgression. It also aimed at a radical transformation of the person, tending to eradicate in the proletariat any form of behaviour not conducive to the imposition of a more strict work-discipline. It is in the course of this vast process of social engineering that a new concept of the body and a new policy towards it began to take shape. Their novelty was that the body was attacked as the source of all evils. (4)

Direct evidence that the legal measures devised to contain vagrancy were directly concerned with controlling the workforce and producing a new work-discipline can in fact be found in the *Statute of Apprentices*, first issued in 1563, which primarily aimed to limit the geographical movement of the wandering multitude, introduce a rigid system of labour regulation, and establish a maximum limit to wages. The *Statute* included articles stating that:

no manner of persone or persones after the foresaide daye of September...shall reteyne or take into service...by any means or collour to worcke for any lesse tyme, or terme, then forr one hoole yere in any of the sciences craftes mysteryes or arts of clotheires, wollen clothe wevers, tuckers, fullers[;] ...every person being unmarried, and every other person being under the age of thirtie yares...and having bene brought upp in any of the saide Artes, craftes or sciences...and not having landes, Tenementes, Rentes or Heredyamentes, Copyholde or Freholde, of one estate of inherytaunce...be reetynd and shall not refuse to serve accordinge to the tenor of this statute, uppon the payne and penaltie hereafter mentioned[;] ...every artificier and labourer...shall contynewe and not departe from the same worke...before the fynyshyng of the said worke, upon payne of ymprysonment by one monethe withoute bayle. (Tawney and Power 2:339-342)

II

The socioeconomic and political context provided by these documents is, I think, not only crucial to an historical understanding and analysis of the early modern genre of rogue literature, but it also serves to readdress some of the theoretical and interpretative issues raised by recent revisionist critical interventions in Renaissance literary studies. As Carolyn Porter has noted, new historicist critics have characteristically depicted ‘masterless men’s subversive resistance...as the product of the dominant culture’s power’ (774). This one-sided view of the working of ideology and power results from a model of textual interpretation that focuses narrowly on forms of representation of the lower-classes that reinforced the absolutist state’s control over them and reinscribed their subjectivity in its hegemonic ideological structure. Thus, for instance, although Stephen Greenblatt’s reading of Harman’s *Caveat* begins with an acknowledgment that the ‘underworld’ characters and practices presented by the pamphlet represent a mirror image and conscious imitation of ‘the hypocrisy of a cruel society’, Greenblatt ends up concluding that it would be a mistake ‘to regard their intended effect as subversiveThe subversive voices are produced by and within the affirmations of order; they are powerfully registered, but they do not undermine

that order' (51-52). In other words, Greenblatt identifies the insubordinate lower-classes as the always-already-doomed subaltern, whose 'subversive voices' are represented by the text only to contain them, and therefore to deny any possibility of authentic subversion.

In order to provide a more sanguine alternative to this interpretative model, then, I want to focus on the relation between 'power' and the horizon of class relations, conflicts and ideologies. Specifically, my position here is that the dynamics of subversion and containment recalled above could be more productively reinscribed in a dialogical – and therefore properly dialectical – understanding of class and class ideology. This is at variance both with the construction of class as a mere embodiment of an objective social *datum*, and with the conception of class ideology as a fixed set of values or a model of self-representation of a particular section of society, which can be analysed in isolation from the social ensemble as a whole. Rather, here class and class ideology are understood as strategic formulations or operators that ordain and reorganise a plurality of conflicting and heterogeneous social forces, tendencies and worldviews into a dynamic and contested field of allegiances and oppositions (see Jameson 83-85). Thus, by (re)constructing class relations and ideologies as sites of open contestation, it will also be possible, at the level of textual interpretation, to disclose how the 'antagonistic dialogue of class voices' (Jameson 85) manifests itself in the individual text or narrative genre in form of unsettling tensions and contradictions.

I have already observed that the function that rogue literature declared itself to be performing, was first and foremost exposing the menace that the vagrant multitude, living in disorder and at the edge of civility, posed to the aggregate of hierarchical class relations that constituted Elizabethan society. This society was based on principles of cohesion and stability referred to as 'commonwealth', which Smith defined as 'a society or common doing of a multitude of free men collected together and united by common accord and covenantes among themselves, for the conservation of themselves aswell in peace as in warre' (62). The texts belonging to this narrative genre presented themselves as discursive interventions that aimed to sustain and defend this commonwealth against the threat coming from the ungoverned margins of society. Accordingly, Harman introduces his *Caveat* with a dedication to the Countess of Shrewsbury that asserts the conformity of the existing hierarchy of rank and wealth distribution to a natural index of moral values and individual qualities:

... and I well, by good experience understanding and considering your most tender, pitiful, gentle, and noble nature,—not only having a vigilant and merciful eye to your poor, indigent and feeble parishioners; yea, not only in the parish where your honour most happily doth dwell, but also in

others environing or nigh adjoining to the same; as also abundantly pouring out daily your ardent and bountiful charity upon all such as cometh for relief unto your luckly gates—I thought it good, necessary, and my bounden duty, to acquaint your goodness with the abominable, wicked and detestable behaviour of all these rowsey, ragged rabblement of rakehells, that—under the pretence of great misery, diseases, and other innumerable calamities which they feign—through great hypocrisy do win and gain great alms in places where they wil[il]y wander, to the utter deluding of good givers. (81)

Predictably, this celebration of the philanthropic generosity of the aristocratic dedicatee, by glossing over the social reasons and implications of the unequal distribution of resources, provides an individualising, depoliticised and therefore false solution to the social problems of vagrancy and poverty—a solution, that is, which conveniently screens off the deep economic roots and structural causes of the problem. As we have seen, Harman is mainly concerned with the threat posed by the vagrants’ disguising of their identity in order to infiltrate the local community and abuse the munificence of the aristocrat. His description of the daily ritual of social communion at the Countess’s gate thus turns out to be an idyllic transfiguration or idealised representation of reality, which functions as a site for the reader’s ideological interpellation. This romanticised portrayal of the harmonious and ordered space of the parish, with the aristocratic house located at its centre, in fact constitutes a rhetorical device aimed to co-opt the reader in condemning the intrusion of the outsiders, who threaten to destabilise the peaceful and secluded world supervised by the aristocrat’s all reaching ‘vigilant and merciful eye’ (cf. Taylor 1-24).

Harman’s text, however, represents a specific moment in the development of the genre. In later rogue literature, which is mostly set in the metropolitan landscape of London, the decline of the old cellular structure and corporative system of social and affective bonds, represented in Harman’s portrait of the mid-sixteenth century rural community, is evident. The dedication of Greene’s *A Notable Discovery of Cosenage*, to begin with, is not to an individual aristocratic figure, but ‘To the young gentlemen, merchants, apprentices, farmers, and Plain countrymen, health’ (157). The commonwealth, that in Harman’s *Caveat* was identified with the fixed and tightly ordered microcosm of the self-enclosed geographical space of the parish, in Greene’s ‘cony-catching’ pamphlets is constituted by a whole spectrum of distinct and fluid social dynamics and relations. Moreover, in Greene’s texts the criminal other is not represented as an interloper coming from a geographical outside. Instead, the criminal is a member of a community within the community, of an underworld that lurks beneath the surface and at the margins of urban society, and whose populace of thieves and

outlaws stands against the plurality of class interests with which, on the other hand, it is inextricably locked in struggle. This marginal social space is separated from the outside world not by geographical boundaries, but by means of the strange language—the ‘cant’ or jargon unintelligible to the non-initiated—that provides the inhabitants of the underworld with a semiotic and communication system of their own, that is to say with an autonomous subculture.

This subculture is precisely what the text sets out to reveal and decode. As Linda Woodbridge notes, the ‘promise of disclosure animates the whole genre. Robert Greene and other “cony-catching” writers claim to have infiltrated the criminal underworld to disclose its secrets to a vulnerable, non-streetwise public’ (2). But in order to offer the reader a gaze into this world apart, the narrative has to give voice to its inhabitants, interpret ‘their conceits’, ‘decipher their qualities’ (Greene 157), and illustrate their ‘philosophy’, ‘opinions’, ‘principles’ and ‘aphorisms’. In Alan Sinfield’s words, ‘a text that aspires to contain a subordinate perspective must first bring it into visibility; even to misrepresent, one must present. And once that has happened, there can be no guarantee that the subordinate will stay safely in place’ (48).

Perhaps this subversive potential was not lost on writers like Greene, who felt compelled to couch their narrative in an overly condemnatory, censorious tone. Indeed, although Greene’s cony-catching pamphlets promise to survey a complex and mysterious subterranean world, all they actually do is to confirm and reproduce contemporary dominant fears about the growing number of idlers, vagabonds and petty criminals. These fears are exemplified by texts such as William Harrison’s popular treatise *The Description of England* (1577), where beggars and the unemployed are portrayed as ‘creatures abhorring all labour and every honest exercise’, as the ‘thriftless sort’, who ‘lick the sweat from the true labourers’ brows’ (cited in Beier 10). Likewise, Greene’s cony-catching pamphlets present not so much a realist representation of the life of the London slums, but a moralising discourse about it that feeds into the prevalent anxieties and stereotyped conceptions about the life and practices of the marginalised sectors of early modern urban society:

These cony-catchers, foists, nips, priggers, and lifts, while they live are most unprofitable members of the commonwealth; they glut themselves as vipers upon the most loathsome and detestable sins, seeking after folly with greediness, never doing anything that is good... And as the gangrene is a disease incurable by the censure of the surgeons, unless the member where it is fixed be cut off, so this untoward generation of loose libertines can by no wholesome counsels nor advised persuasions be dissuaded from their loathsome kind of life... Sith then, this cursed crew, these Machiavellians—that neither care for God nor devil, but set, with the epicures, gain, and ease, their *summum bonum*—cannot be called to any honest course of living, if the honourable and worshipful of this land look

into their lives, and cut off such upstarting suckers that consume the sap from the root of the tree, they shall neither lose their reward in Heaven, nor pass over any day wherein there will not be many faithful prayers of the poor exhibited for their prosperous success and welfare—so deeply are these monstrous cozeners hated in the commonwealth. (*The Second Part of Cony-Catching*, in Salgado 198-199)

In his notes on the early modern ‘legislation against the expropriated’, Marx writes that in essence this legislation ‘treated them [beggars, vagabonds, etc.] as “voluntary criminals”, and assumed that it depended on their good will to go on working under the old conditions that no longer existed’ (734). This is also the guiding assumption of contemporary rogue literature, in which the overlapping discourses of vagrancy and criminality construct these social categories in terms of individual attitudes, inclinations and qualities. As Richard Halpern has noted, these discourses intersected with another, equally individualising one. This is what Halpern describes as the ‘discourse of capacities’, which conceived ‘the individual as a set of given potentialities that manifested themselves in economic activities’ and represented the key to upward social mobility. These potentialities ranged ‘from concepts such as intelligence, talent, creativity, or cleverness to the abilities to impose and endure various kinds of self-discipline such as industry, parsimony and persistence’ (88).

So, within this discursive framework, the ‘masterless men’'s way of life came to represent the deviant other of the new proto-middle-class social ethos based on diligence, thrift, hard work and self-discipline. This ethos, as Louis B. Wright has illustrated (170-200, 228-296), found its expression in the ideology of the reformation promulgated in countless edifying sermons and religious pamphlets, in literary works such as Thomas Deloney’s novels, and in plays like Thomas Heywood’s *The Four Prentices of London* (c. 1594) or Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* (1599). According to this polarisation, the tradition of rogue literature produced a negative image of the mutinous ‘masterless man’ against which the expanding Elizabethan middle-class literary public could counterpoise a system of normative social identities and behaviours, and a positive representation of itself. It follows that the texts belonging to the genre of rogue literature say as much about the worldview and ideology by which they are informed, as about the subject on which these are projected. As various commentators have noted, the rogues and criminals’ subculture exposed in Elizabethan low-life pamphlets tellingly reveals itself to be a sort of demystifying inversion, paradoxical reproduction or transgressive mimesis of practices that could be found at the very heart of what was taken to be respectable society (Salgado 13, Greenblatt 51-52). This point is also made in a pamphlet, probably

written by Robert Greene himself but attributed to one ‘Cuthbert cony-catcher’, entitled *The Defence of Conny-catching* (1592):

For truth it is, that this is the Iron Age, wherein iniquity hath the upper hand, and all conditions and estates of men seek to live by their wits, and he is counted wisest that hath the deepest insight into the getting of gains: every thing now that is found profitable is counted honest and lawful: and men are valued by their wealth, not by their virtues. He that cannot dissemble cannot live, and men put their sons nowadays apprentices, not to learn trades and occupations, but crafts and mysteries. (Salgado 346)

What is the real status of this text or its intended effect we don’t know, but its disenchanting representation of the social order seems a good note on which to conclude, for it reveals something of the troubled political unconscious of the early modern narrative genre of rogue literature.

NOTES

1. Respectively in ‘Concerning Punishment of Beggars and Vagabonds’ (22 Henry VIII c. 12, 1531); ‘For the Punishment of Vagabonds and for Relief of the Poor and Impotent’ (14 Elizabeth I c. 5, 1572); ‘For Setting the Poor on Work, and for the Avoiding of Idleness’ (18 Elizabeth I c. 3, 1576); ‘For the Punishment of Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars’ (39 Elizabeth I c. 4, 1598). These are excerpted in Slack 1995, 52-53. See also Slack 1982.

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