

Picaresque

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 22 Dec 2002

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Nigel Price — 22 Dec 2002, 17:50

Patera Nutria wrote:

I won't argue that picaresque tales are not still around. I'm happy to be corrected.

However: "The word picaresque derives from the Spanish *picaro*, which means rascal or crafty good-for-nothing" (Michael Alpert, introduction [p.7] to **Two Spanish Picaresque Novels**, pub. by Penguin.)

Tom Jones is a decent example, from the same historical period (roughly).

But that's just a detail.

From close observation of my daughters' pet rats, I know that grooming is vital for their health and well-being. I hope that the esteemed myopotamic pastoral rodent can therefore forgive me if I indulge in some almost completely irrelevant nit-picking about a recent comment of his!

For while Patera Nutria is certainly correct about the origin of the term "picaresque", I would strongly want to dispute that "Tom Jones" is a good example of the form in English.

While "picaresque" narratives are typically about rogues, their distinguishing structural feature is that they are loosely plotted and episodic. Generally, the central character moves around the place and meets different people and encounters various, often unrelated, adventures. Some critics therefore regard it as a "bridge" form from the chivalric romance to the novel. The argument in a nutshell would be that the picaresque story usually makes some attempt at characterisation (though often caricatured and grotesque), and thereby rises above the archetypal approach to character used in the mediaeval romance and its renaissance literary descendants. On the other hand, unlike the novel, the plotting of the picaresque tale is loose and unstructured.

Although there are plenty of episodes in "Tom Jones", and yes, he does travel round the countryside, the plotting is highly rigorous and precise. True, there are one or two stand alone sections, like the Man on the Hill episode, but the others are inter-related in a most sophisticated manner. I remember Buchan scholar Dr David Daniel comparing the plotting in "Tom Jones" to the precisely meshing of components in a gearbox or aero engine - very unlike the loose plotting in a picaresque story. At best, one could say that there are picaresque elements in "Tom Jones".

So while I would agree that Vance's Cudgel stories are good examples of modern picaresque, I would perhaps suggest Thomas Nashe's "The Unfortunate Traveller" (1594) as a better example of the genre in English than "Tom Jones". It's not an easy or pleasant read, but an important step in the development of the modern novel. The description of the massacre of the German Anabaptists is vividly horrific and an interesting insight into popular sentiments towards Non-Conformists in Elizabethan England.

FWIW, everything that Fielding says in "Tom Jones" about Wiltshire mud is absolutely true.

Regards
Nigel
Minety, Wiltshire

Alice K. Turner — 23 Dec 2002, 05:57 · follows Nigel Price

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Correct--the last sentence, that is. The meaning has changed. I invite you both to do a Google on "picaresque Tom Jones." Follow it up with "picaresque Don Quixote" and then with "picaresque Candide." No one could possibly call Candide or the Don rogues; in their different ways they are as saintly (or delusional) as Silk himself. It is the form that is the defining factor now. (I wish I could cite you examples from my once beloved OED CD-ROM but alas it no longer works with XP. Grrrr.)

Just for fun, I kept an eye out, reading yesterday's New York Times Book Review, for use of the word in reviews of new novels. I found it twice, once about two girls who found a rock band that goes on the road ("So we follow Hopey as she stumbles into social conundrums and sexual adventures as all good picaresque heroines (or heros) must.") and one featuring the straight man on a vaudeville comedy team. ("[T]his picaresque tale...whose fortunes spanned the glory days of burlesque, Hollywood's golden age and the ascendancy of television.")

That first line (about Hopey) strikes me as a pretty good example of the modern usage.

-alga

-alga