

Epilogue: From Romance to Novel

From a modern point of view, it is astonishing how little prose fiction has been mentioned in these pages. There were Malory's *Morte Darthur*, More's *Utopia* (in Latin) and Sidney's *Arcadia*. Verse and drama were certainly much more popular. However, there are also works that have not been mentioned. The modern novel did not develop directly from the medieval and renaissance romance, which was set in an essentially unreal world of fantasy. The novel is marked from the start by closeness to reality, by a concern for verisimilitude.

Therefore we might look for one starting point in the popular moral tracts produced by Robert Greene (1558 - 1592) who was a wild drunkard well acquainted with the taverns and brothels of London, for which he abandoned his wife and children. In *Greene's Groats-Worth of Wit, bought with a Million of Repentance* (1592) he tells an "edifying" story in which the hero (Roberto, himself) tries to cheat his brother out of a fortune with the help of a prostitute, but she keeps the money for herself and Roberto becomes more and more degraded. The same combination of descriptions of wickedness with a moral ending is found in *The Repentance of Robert Greene* which describes the spectacular life and death of the writer himself.

Thomas Deloney (1560 - 1600) was a simple silk-weaver who wrote many **ballads** on popular and national themes. These were published on single pages known as 'broadsides' and sold at fairs. He also wrote prose fiction on the life of humble folk. In *Jack of Newbury* (1597) and *The Gentle Craft* he shows clothiers and shoemakers making good through hard work, in scenes with much humour and striking dialogue. In *Thomas of Reading* (1600) a tavern-keeper and his wife plot to murder a guest and carry out their plan in a way that many critics have compared with *Macbeth*, only Deloney was writing before Shakespeare's play.

Interest in "low life" is a very common human characteristic. Elizabethan printers quickly realized that cheap pamphlets combining descriptions of depravity with moral messages warning against it, would be very profitable. The dramatist Thomas Dekker wrote plays set in popular London, *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1600) being best known. He also wrote *The Wonderful Year, 1603* describing the effects of the plague on ordinary life, as well as *The Seven Deadly Sins of London* and *The Gull's Horn-Book* (1609) which describe in a very lively fashion how crooks and confidence tricksters cheat honest folk. Jonson later set *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair* in a similar social context.

The best-known of all the works of Elizabethan fiction is *The Unfortunate Traveller, or The Life of Jack Wilton* (1594), by Thomas Nash (1567 - 1601). This tells the story of a page who lives by his wits, tricking gullible people. The work is the first **picaresque** tale in England (the Spanish word *picaro* means a trickster; the models are the Spanish *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *Guzman de Alfarache*). The hero goes with the earl of Surrey to Italy, meeting many famous real people like Erasmus and Sir Thomas More on the way. He goes off with a courtesan and in Italy they rescue the Pope's mistress from a Jew's plot, then steal her jewels. There are many twists to the episodic plot, with murders, executions, rapes, betrayals. At last Jack marries the courtesan and repents of his wild life.

Cervantes' *Don Quixote* was translated into English in 1612, but it had little or no effect on English writers until the 18th century. The *Novella* (short tale), either translated from French or Italian or written in English, was very popular, several served as sources for Shakespeare, but the form has left little or nothing worth remembering in its own right.

The work generally considered the first French novel (in the modern sense) was *L'Astrée* by Honoré D'Urfé, published in four parts, 1607, 1610, 1619, and 1627. It is a sentimental, unrealistic, pastoral romance about refined virtues but the setting, instead of being an unreal Arcadia, is the rural France of the author's childhood. It was translated into English and was popular in court circles. Equally popular were two romances by Madame de

Scudéri, *Le Grand Cyrus* (1649-53) and *Clélie* (1656-60) with a high-flown heroic ethos that influenced heroic drama in the Restoration.

An important aspect of the novel is interest in the oddities of human personality. This was first fostered by the translation into Latin in 1592 by the Frenchman Isaac Casaubon of the Greek *Characters* of Theophrastus (372-287 BC); Theophrastus, who succeeded Aristotle as head of the Peripatetic School, described in an often amusing way various characteristic human faults and failings. This was translated into English and finally published in 1616 but even before that, in 1608, Joseph Hall had expanded Theophrastus's scope by adding good characteristics to the bad in his *Virtues and Vices*. Sir Thomas Overbury collaborated with Webster, Dekker, and Donne to produce a very popular volume of *Characters* in 1616 that was often reprinted. The 17th century fashion of **character-writing** culminated in France with the much-admired *Les Caractères* of **Jean de la Bruyère**, first published in 1688 and expanded in eight editions, the last in 1694.

Equally important for the development of the novel was the growing interest in introspective psychology, encouraged by the *Essays* of **Michel de la Montaigne** and **Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy**. Likewise, the novel assumes an interest in place and setting, not always domestic; this must have been encouraged by the various descriptions of the great 16th century journeys of exploration contained in *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, and Discoveries of the English Nation* compiled by **Richard Hakluyt** and published between 1589 and 1600.

A glance at Sidney's *Arcadia* or Bacon's *Essays* shows how complicated the usual English prose style still was until the early 17th century. For the novel to evolve, English prose had to find a simpler style. The pamphlets of the Civil War period must have helped a great deal in this, as well as the development of a plainer style for scientific and philosophical writing associated with the Royal Society at the Restoration.

When English prose fiction finally came alive, it was in an unexpected way. **John Bunyan** (1628 - 1688) was a tinker who learned to read in a village school; he fought as a common soldier on the parliamentary side in the Civil War. He became deeply interested in free Christianity, joined a "nonconformist" church in Bedford in 1653, and began to preach. At the Restoration, when the Anglican Church was re-instated, free preachers were not allowed and Bunyan spent much of the next 12 years in prison for unauthorized preaching. He was released in 1672. His great work is *The Pilgrim's Progress*, that he finished during another brief period in prison in 1676. The first part of *Pilgrim's Progress* was published in 1678, the full work in 1684.

This story of the Christian life as an allegorical journey, with its evocations of ordinary life, its varied characters and lively dialogues of temptation and exhortation, had an enormous influence on the English people for the next two centuries. It was read at every level of society, in many families it was regularly read to the children, and until the 20th century it was often the only book simple people owned beside the Bible. It and the Bible had an almost equal influence on styles of religious speech and thought.

Contemporary with Bunyan, but very different, Mrs. Aphra Behn (1640 - 1689) is thought to be the first English woman to earn a living by writing. She wrote about 15 plays, mainly satiric comedies, many of which explore the problems of arranged marriages. Her best-known work of fiction is *Oroonoko, or The History of the Royal Slave*. This is similar in elevated tone to the heroic drama but it is often quoted today in the context of (anti-) colonial literature since its hero is a "noble savage" of great refinement and superior education, a slave brought from Africa to Surinam. The author describes her fiction as 'A True History' and claims to have lived in Surinam in her youth. This is probably not true and although the work is very moving in its denunciation of slavery, it is very unreal in its picture of Africa.

The dramatist William Congreve wrote a similarly romantic piece of fiction in his youth, *Incognita* (1691) but it is not usually found to be of great interest. The last and greatest precursor of the novel was **Daniel Defoe** (1660 - 1731). His name was originally Foe, he added the 'De' to suggest a noble French origin. He was a journalist, a political pamphleteer, a nonconformist who failed in business and accumulated enormous debts. When he published *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, he was already nearly sixty. This well-known story of a man who spends over twenty years alone on an island and survives because he re-creates most of the essential features of western civilisation for himself, became one of the great archetypal tales of the European Age of Reason. Crusoe has become a modern Everyman, the isolated individual who refuses to succumb to misfortune.

Defoe followed this with other fictional works including *Captain Singleton* (1720), the remarkable *Moll Flanders* (1722), *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *Colonel Jack* (1722), and *Roxana* (1724). Some critics still deny these works the title of "novels", mainly because they are so "realistic" and contain little poetic development of character. Yet *Moll Flanders* in particular is written with an imaginative power, an interest in human character and environment, in morality and in suffering, that make it quite obviously one of the great English novels and therefore, with the rest of Defoe's works, one of the first. Likewise, Swift's great satire **Gulliver's Travels** (1726) is not usually seen as a true novel.

It is perhaps a desire for neat classification, combined with a snobbish feeling that Defoe was rather too much of a popular journalist, that explains why he is not celebrated as the author of the first English novel. This distinction is usually given to Samuel Richardson, with the publication of *Pamela* in 1740 marking the start of the modern English novel. Still, it is perhaps important to remember that infinitely more people have read *Robinson Crusoe* with infinitely more pleasure and benefit. In many ways, it is the work that, more than any other, defined the spirit of the age that lay ahead: an age of enterprise and individualism, of hope and of confidence in the benefits of material civilisation. An age of prose in which the courage and spirit of the unfettered human person were celebrated as never before.