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*Narrators and Narratees in the English Picaresque Tradition, 1591-1753: The Forms and Functions of Moral Ambiguity*

Abstract

My dissertation explores the English picaresque tradition by examining the interplay between narrative strategies and their ethical implications. Specifically, I examine how the textual interaction between narrators and narratees interacts with the underlying theme of moral ambiguity within the picaresque tradition. The literary works I analyse include a wide range of English texts that share significant features with the prototypical picaresque form that originated in sixteenth-century Spain. This selection ranges from late sixteenth-century rogue pamphlets to mid-eighteenth-century novels. In doing so, I adopt a dual perspective: a diachronic approach, building on recent developments in diachronic narratology, and a more rhetorical narratological one. My intention is to shed light on the evolution of narrative devices and functions over the period under consideration, and to link them to their ethical implications. I place particular emphasis on understanding the historical and cultural context surrounding the emergence of various sub-genres featuring morally ambiguous characters, which coalesced into the composite picaresque tradition in England. My aim is twofold: firstly, to provide a comprehensive account of the English picaresque tradition, focusing on its common concern with moral issues and thus transcending the dichotomous biases that have often characterised picaresque studies. Secondly, I aim to identify points of convergence between rhetorical and narratological conceptualisations and those rooted in the historical approach to literary texts. In doing so, I hope to contribute to anchor narratological studies more firmly beyond the study of the post-1800 novel.