Roguery in Print: Crime and Culture in Early Modern London

Early modern rogue literature presents historians with a puzzle. From the 1590s onwards, a steady flow of cheap pamphlets rolled off London printing presses to inform their audience about the innumerable scams, frauds, deceptions and confidence tricks practised by devious criminal tricksters: rogues. When these texts began to be compiled in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, scholars took them as descriptions of social reality. Shakespeare's London, they presumed, really was teeming with unscrupulous swindlers. These rogues were highly organised, endlessly innovative, and spoke in a special jargon impenetrable to outsiders. In the second half of the 20th century, however, it became increasingly clear that this world of roguery was entirely fictional; there was no evidence for its existence outside the pamphlets themselves. So what were they really about?

For the most part, literary scholars have shown more willingness to address this problem than their colleagues in history departments. One of the earliest attempts to explain what rogueologists like Robert Greene, Thomas Dekker, and Samuel Rowlands were doing was made by C.S. Lewis, who suggested, in 1954, that rogue literature was 'written to soothe the consciences of the wealthy' by blaming poverty on the sinfulness of the poor.[1] This notion was taken up and adapted by the New Historicists of the 1980s, who argued that the idea of an 'Elizabethan underworld' served to demonise the poor, distract attention from the realities of life in poverty, and bolster elite values of hierarchy and order. Historians, meanwhile, disregarded rogue pamphlets as entertaining but essentially useless. They had no value as evidence for the history of crime, which was increasingly studied by accumulating data from stacks of legal and administrative documents in the archives.

In *Roguery in Print*, Lena Liapi offers several new and compelling interpretations of the rogue literature phenomenon. She sets out to disprove the basic assumption of the literary approach and to place the texts firmly in their particular cultural context. 'These publications did not depict an underworld', she writes, 'but actually portrayed criminals as part of urban society and often as tricksters, friends, or drinking companions.' (p. 8) Rogueology was not comfort reading for the ruling class. Rather, she argues, it was part of a broader culture of cheap print through which people thought about changes in society, social life, and politics in the late 16th and 17th centuries.

Liapi begins with a brief history of the form. Based on a corpus of 122 texts published between 1590 and 1670, she outlines the ebb and flow of rogue pamphlet production. The flurry of texts produced in the 1590s, mostly by Greene, was not matched until the 1650s, though there was a steady stream until the outbreak of civil war, when printers suffering from paper shortages prioritised newsbooks and other, more topical, material. Large numbers of rogue pamphlets were published during the republican period and after the restoration of monarchy, mostly describing the exploits of royalist highwaymen—a subject Liapi returns to in her final chapter. Roguery did not disappear from the publishing market after 1670, but the following decades saw the development of a new kind of crime publishing—most obviously the printed *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*—which focused on journalistic reporting rather than fictional (or at least fictionalised) accounts of devious delinquents. In fact, Liapi detects the beginning of this shift earlier than is generally thought. Rogue pamphlets of the 1650s and 1660s already displayed some journalistic features: they were short and tended to focus on the exploits of specific (often real) criminals. A reader of one 1652 pamphlet added marginal notes of information which corroborated or disproved its contents (p. 46). This marked a departure from the older tradition of longer, more obviously fantastical, descriptions of roguish practices across a whole section of society.

Those descriptions, Liapi argues, have been persistently misunderstood. They were not, as many scholars have assumed, about poverty, but instead about trade, trust and—above all—London. Between the mid-16th century and the mid-17th, the capital's population grew from about 75,000 to around 400,000. This extraordinarily rapid growth was accompanied by an explosion of commerce, both with the rest of the country and within the city itself. For some contemporaries, this was cause for exultation; for others it was deeply troubling. Rogue pamphlets, like other forms of cheap print, expressed the ambivalence felt by Londoners towards their new commercial world. Trade was a motor of expansion, but it also brought widespread distrust and deception. The rogue, according to Liapi, was not a demonised 'other' but an extreme example of the new normal. As Greene put it, 'hee who cannot dissemble, cannot live' (p. 67). Rogues' tricks were distillations of universal sharp practice. According to a 1642 pamphlet titled *The Art of Living in London*, 'the Citie is like quick-sand the longer you stand upon it the deeper you sinke' (p. 64). In this context, rogues could even become instruments of justice, or at least fairness, like the highwayman in a 1640s ballad who declared: 'I think when I rob / a precise city Brother, / Tis cheat upon cheat, / and one cheat cheats another' (p. 71).

Londoners, Liapi writes, were learning to live with a 'precarious balance between distrust and sociability' (p. 93). Networks of friendship were essential for survival in the new urban environment, but they were also fraught with the danger of betrayal. A typical piece of roguery involved pretending friendliness and familiarity with a person newly arrived in the city, then cleverly exploiting their trust for financial gain. In this tension between genuine sociability and criminal deceit, Liapi finds a solution to the problem presented by rogue pamphlets in the history of crime. The apparent mismatch between the highly organised networks of thieves described in rogue literature and the total absence of such networks in the archival records is, she suggests, an illusion of perspective. Using depositions from Middlesex and Westminster Quarter Sessions, she argues that what the rogueologists described as criminal associations were, from a different point of view, the ordinary ties of urban sociability. When magistrates interrogated people suspected of being accomplices to highwaymen or receivers of stolen goods, those people claimed they only knew the criminals through commonplace social encounters—they had been introduced by a former master, they had stayed in the same public house, they drank together as friends. As Liapi puts it, these suspects 'attempted to reconstruct the purported criminal association as bonds of loyalty' (p. 108). By adopting the same perspective as the magistrates, the authors of rogue pamphlets presented a very different version of reality: 'the existence of organised networks of crime depended on the eye of the beholder' (p. 116).

Distorting perspectives were even more apparent in the mid-17th century, when rogue literature became thoroughly politicised. In the 1640s, parliamentarian publications described royalists as criminals who robbed and oppressed the people. This often involved dubious punning on the name of cavalry commander Prince Rupert: 'Prince Robert…is become a notable Robber' or even 'Prince of Robbers' (p. 120). In the

1650s, royalist pamphleteers adopted the figure of the rogue as an appealing criminal rebel against the new regime. Taking full advantage of the fact that, as Liapi puts it, 'it is very difficult to write about clever tricks without showing admiration for the witty robber' (p. 153), they created the heroic royalist highwayman. The archetype was James Hind, who had supposedly served in the royal army, helped Charles II escape after the battle of Worcester, and terrorised republican officials until his trial and execution in 1652. As a character in print, Hind combined the rogue's wit with the emerging stereotype of the cavalier, forever drinking, swearing, and toasting the king's health. He robbed only enemies of the royalist cause: 'Long-gown men, Committee-men, Excize-Men, Sequestrators, and other Sacrilegious persons' (p. 130). Like Robin Hood, he was an agent of moral justice: 'neither did I ever wrong any poor man of the worth of a penny' but instead 'made bold with a rich Bompkin, or a lying Lawyer, whose full fed-fees from the rich Farmer, doth too much impoverish the poor cottage-keeper' (p. 158). The witty, romanticised, royalist highwayman remained a stock character into the late 17th century and beyond.

Liapi gives a clear and convincing account of the nature and transformation of rogue literature in this period. There are, however, two issues which might repay further investigation: gender and genre. Liapi seems undecided as to whether or not all rogues were men. For example, she writes that 'the wit of the trickster was celebrated for *his* superiority over *his/her* victims' (p. 56, my italics). 16th-century characters like Mother Bunch or Long Meg of Westminster might qualify as female rogues. The prefaces of many pamphlets imagined a male audience, but two were written by women in response to what they saw as scurrilous and false accounts of well-known rogues by male writers, one of whom described his interlocutors as 'incensed females' (p. 49). Liapi briefly suggests that the rogue's association with drink and good fellowship, especially from the 1650s onwards, might be linked to a broader culture of alcoholic masculine bonding (p. 87). More direct engagement with the scholarship on early modern manhood would help to place the witty, subversive figure of the rogue in its patriarchal context. If nothing else, this analytical lens would help to make sense of texts like Greene's *Disputation betweene a heeconny-catcher, and a sheeconny-catcher whether a theefe or a whoore, is most hurtfull in cousonage, to the common-wealth* (1592).

As Liapi is well aware, the boundaries between rogue literature and other forms of cheap print were extremely porous. The genre overlapped with satires, romances, news pamphlets, ballads, and jest-books. This makes it tricky to be precise about what was or was not a rogue pamphlet. For example, Liapi writes that the rogue was a specifically urban character, encompassing 'urban beggars, thieves, cutpurses, confidence tricksters, and highwaymen, as long as their activities can be viewed as economic crime and contain an element of trickery' (p. 13). Wit, in particular, was 'a quintessentially urban characteristic' (p. 66). But what of rural rogues? Long-established stereotypes, like those of the cheating miller or cunning cobbler, clearly embodied both trickery and economic crime.[2] This is one aspect of a broader difficulty. The separation of rogue literature from other cheap, comical, and moralising publications is inevitably an artificial one. Texts like *Iests to make you merie* (1607) by Thomas Dekker and George Wilkins defy simple categorisation; the first half is a numbered list of short jokes in the classic jest-book style, the second half is an account of sharp practices typical of rogue pamphlets. In the bibliography, Liapi puts this text under 'Other Printed Works' rather than 'Rogue Pamphlets'. Some account of the selection process for her corpus of rogue pamphlets would help to clarify the reasoning behind decisions such as this. The line between rogue literature and jest-books was especially blurred; authors and stories moved easily between them.

The unity and stability of the rogue genre is also called into question by the mid-17th-century changes Liapi describes. Between 1590 and 1640, the frequently-reprinted 'discoveries of rogues' by Greene, Dekker, and other Elizabethans dominated the market. These were of moderate length and described a whole world of trickery and deceit. After 1640, the pamphlets were shorter—typically just one or two sheets (p. 37)—and mostly focused on the story of an individual trickster, not an entire society of rogues. Given these differences, does it make sense to consider the pamphlets published either side of 1640 as part of the same genre? The category of rogue literature was an invention of literary editors in the 19th and early 20th centuries. *Roguery in Print* presents a persuasive analysis of that literature, which could be applied to a wide range of texts beyond the limits of an artificially-constructed genre.

[1] C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1954), p. 59.

[2] For example: Andrew Boorde, *A ryght pleasaunt and merye historie, of the mylner of Abyngton* (1576); *The Cobler of Canterburie* (1590).

Source URL:https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2383

Links
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/316465