

Roderick Random, Literacy, and the Appropriation of Plebeian Culture

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This article characterizes Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random* (1748) in terms of a specifically mid-eighteenth-century ambivalence about polite literacy and progress that both precludes its reading as a *Bildungsroman* and limits the utility of modelling the novel as an agent of empire. Though the preface and ending of the novel affirm traditional hierarchy, the digressive and peripatetic middle values such as plebeian virtues in the protagonist as loyalty, righteous opposition to injustice, and manly competence, which are formal elements resembling such popular chapbook romances as *Jack the Giant-Killer*. Particularly significant are both the novel's portrait of Roderick's defiantly and virtuously impolite childhood and the depiction of maritime life as an alternative to the corruption and snobbishness of land-bound life, an alternate ethos that is complicated by its facilitation of the slave-trading that ultimately enables the Great House fantasy with which the novel concludes.

abstract

TOBIAS SMOLLETT'S first novel *Roderick Random* (1748), written when he was twenty-seven years old, concludes with an intense and lengthily described happy ending of wealth, power, and romantic union that would seem to be due not to the "Fortune" credited by the eponymous narrator but to his very profitable participation in the slave trade.¹ The novel might then seem to support Edward Said's characterization of British fiction as supportive of British imperialism in the regular reliance of domestic plots on imperial booty as a kind of *deus ex machina* enabling happy endings: here, "local metropolitan benefit" is indeed accrued by forays into the periphery of empire, "distant but convenient treasure spots."² That this model explains little about the novel says as much about the simplistic model of agency and identity it presumes as about the mid-eighteenth-century ambivalence

¹ Tobias Smollett, *Roderick Random*, ed. Paul-Gabriel Boucé (1748; New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 435. References are to this edition.

² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 112.

about polite literacy that seems to have shaped the writing and first reception of *Roderick Random*. Even as the complexities with which power regularly coexists with powerlessness in this novel would seem to limit the applicability of Said's model to it, his call to attend closely to the imbrications of power and intimacy is quite apt, immediately foregrounding the character who both teaches Roderick how to be a slaver and is treated by him as a kind of slave: his sailor uncle, Tom Bowling.³ As the ethical heart of the novel, Tom Bowling evinces more consistently than does any other character the "dignity of sentiment and practice"—the commitment to putting others' well-being before his own—that the preface declares the province of social superiors. Roderick's condescension to this uncle is the most dramatic moral failing of the many lampooned by the novel's satiric survey of corruption, high and low. The ending of *Roderick Random* is incommensurate with Said's model of "local metropolitan benefit" and lucrative periphery, first, because Tom Bowling, plebeian poster child for loyalty, righteous opposition to injustice, and manly competence, is also the conduit to Roderick's elevation to the position that enables that snobbish rejection. In addition, the kinds of happiness meted out to characters in this ending also require greater nuance than Said's model might allow: Tom Bowling's conspicuous exclusion from the happy Great House ending of marriage, reproduction, and wealth is also an alternative kind of happy ending. He alone of Roderick's numerous male allies remains uncoupled and non-reproductive at the novel's close, and his return to the sea excludes him from polite elevation in ways that both dismiss him and, perhaps, save him, embodying a resistance to progress that Said's model can neither see nor explain.

³ Roderick resists service on a ship with his uncle for years; he finally assented to his uncle's offer of "a method of getting a fortune in a few years, by my own industry" only after Tom Bowling frees him from debtors' prison (400). Tom Bowling gives his nephew one-third of the £3000 he earned on his last voyage. According to Joseph Massie's 1759 tabulation of the percentage of the kingdom's families earning annual incomes ranging from £3.2 to £26,940, that amount of money was the annual income of less than one-half of 1 per cent of the families of England. They have earned this money by purchasing slaves and gold dust in Guinea and selling them in the Buenos Aires. For a discussion of Smollett's relationship to slavery, see James G. Basker, "Smollett's Racial Consciousness in *Roderick Random*," *1650–1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era* 6 (2001): 77–90; and James P. Carson, "Britons, 'Hottentots,' Plantation Slavery, and Smollett," *Philological Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (1996): 471–99.

The murky causality that connects the impoverished, peripatetic, combative protagonist with a happy ending of status, wealth, and power suggests an ambivalence about literacy and progress that is very much of the novel's mid-century moment. His successful ascent and assimilation are also subtly associated with loss. Though the episodic middle of *Roderick Random* often pushes readers to experience its first-person narrator as tellingly unreliable and lacking in self-awareness, its final chapters, utterly lacking in such irony, seem to allow for no other perspective than the protagonist's. Triumphant returned to Britain after several years of global wanderings in search of an income, rich and newly reunited with his (slave trader) father, the protagonist re-encounters secondary characters whose fates confirm for him not only the innate social superiority on which he has insisted throughout the novel but also the abiding rightness of aristocratic hierarchy *tout court*. He repurchases the family estate in Scotland, which the boorish and unworthy aristocratic cousin-inheritor had lost to gambling debts. He further reconsolidates aristocratic patrilineage by bringing his father back to the ancestral home that he had abandoned in Roderick's infancy after being rejected by his own father, a hard-hearted patriarch whose cruelty is made to seem a brief aberration from noblesse oblige by Roderick's exultant reclamation of the Great House: "As there is no part of the world, in which the peasants are more attached to their Lords, than in Scotland, we were almost devoured by their affection" (434). The rightness of his restoration, confirmed by frolicking peasants, verges upon satire. The positive ethical value accorded Roderick's wealth and position is flagged by the virtue they enable: charity to individuals he encounters, the desire to provide a comfortable home for his beloved's aged mother, and the ability to pursue, wed, impregnate, and protect his aristocratic beloved, even if her brother, who sees him as socially inferior, continues to deny his consent. The wish fulfilment offered by this ending shows less that wealth and power are possible to all plucky young men who go to sea to trade in slaves than that Roderick's wealth and power in his ancestral locality are a boon to those around him.

Roderick Random is, in effect, two novels in one. On the one hand, it explicitly denigrates plebeian culture, denouncing romance as anti-progressive, celebrating literate politeness, and

depicting plebeian characters as, in effect, permanent children, static and lamentably uneducable. On the other hand, its protagonist is most likeable, morally compelling, and effective when he inhabits plebeian modes. Contrary to expectations bred by the preface, the protagonist's classical education seems primarily to obstruct his rise. The wealth and elevation with which the self-consciously literate protagonist is rewarded in the novel's conclusion reflect not the power of his classical cultivation but something closer to the "traditional plebeian virtues" that Andrew O'Malley has discerned in the protagonist of the popular, even quintessential, eighteenth-century chapbook *Jack the Giant-Killer*: "cunning and wit (often a very bawdy wit at that), luck, and supernatural assistance to help secure wealth and social advancement."⁴ The respect given to both Tom Bowling's devotion to the common good and his ability to become rich is the more significant for the ways in which he is associated with orality and opposed to literacy: he is a stereotypic sailor like those that abound in the era's ballads, and, a flat character, his story of triumph against the odds of a plucky underling against fantastically powerfully opponents evokes the plots of chapbook romance. This contradictory depiction of literacy as a measure of fitness for social elevation makes *Roderick Random*, perhaps in spite of itself, an endorsement of a less elitist social hierarchy than may at first seem to be the case.

The novel's ambivalence about the ways that literacy and progress should and do interact shapes Roderick's characterization: though he, like Tom Bowling is sometimes a kind of chapbook hero, vital, rude, and combative, he also styles himself a polite gentleman, insisting on the value of his knowledge of Latin and denouncing chapbooks and their unpolished readers. Roderick self-identifies with his uncle as a deserving subordinate: he most clearly gains moral authority in relation to this model. But he also self-identifies against his uncle as nobly born and self-evidently his superior: himself a natural gentleman where Tom Bowling is a permanent proletarian. That these conflicting strains characterize Roderick both as a child and as a newly married laird suggests that the novel is misread as a *Bildungsroman*.⁵ Roderick's

⁴ Andrew O'Malley, *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 23.

⁵ My reading here, reflective of my sense that Roderick Random neither matures nor substantially changes in the course of the novel, differs from many critics'

flatness should not be read, however, as an indication either of his lesser ethical value or of Smollett's lesser skill. *Roderick Random*, that is, values its boy protagonist not only for the self-controlled and civilized man he might become, but also for his refusal of politeness. Its well-known low humour has a moral edge, a proletarian ethos of corporeality and pretension-debunking.

Chapbook Romance and Ethics of Literacy

Roderick Random opens with a preface that denounces the producers of romance—imagined as if definitionally elite—but not its consumers, who are presented as helplessly passive before their superiors. Romance involves two kinds of zero-sum depredations by the powerful on the already powerless. The institution of “priestcraft” spread romance in pursuit of power: it “debauched the minds of men,” pushing them to “the most absurd pitch of credulity,” after which writers culpably “brought negromancy to their aid,” producing “ludicrous and unnatural” characters distinguished not “by dignity of sentiment and practice” as in ancient literature by “bodily strength, activity and extravagance of behaviour” (“Author’s Preface,” xxxiv); thus, in Smollett’s imagined history, romance deformed a normatively progressive temporality that it is the patriotic duty of the writer to support.⁶ Thus the preface’s essentialist economy of romance figures the relationship between literacy and class identity as

views of the novel. John Barrell argues that “Roderick’s own sense of hardship ... [teaches] him to do his best to alleviate the hardship of others.” Barrell, *English Literature in History, 1730–1780: An Equal, Wide Survey* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1983), 196. For Evan Gottlieb, Roderick’s violent tendencies vanish as he learns etiquette in London, “mount[ing] the steep learning curve toward understanding and reproducing the norms of metropolitan culture.” Gottlieb, *Feeling British: Sympathy and Identity in Scottish and English Writing, 1707–1832* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), 67. Deidre Lynch reads *Roderick Random* as a specimen of a typical eighteenth-century novel plot in which “worth accrues to the gentleman-in-the-making in proportion as, launched on a Grand Tour of some sort, he samples the world’s variety and familiarizes himself with a range of social conditions and degrees.” Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 81. Juliet Shields sees in Roderick’s marriage a Utopian “model of Anglo-Scottish union” that “is dependent on Roderick’s reformation.” Shields, “Smollett’s Scots and Sodomites: British Masculinity in *Roderick Random*,” *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 46, no. 2 (2005): 186.

⁶ Paul-Gabriel Boucé, introduction to *Roderick Random*, by Tobias Smollett, ed. Boucé (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), xxxiv.

absolute, dichotomous, and unchanging: romance is a sort of opium of the masses, deepening the abyss between the helplessly credulous lowborn and the self-interested, powerful superiors who prey upon them.

Smollett's assumption that literacy valuably cannot but produce individual and national progress exemplifies what Brian Street has called the "autonomous" model of literacy, through which literacy bestows upon the individual ineradicably enhanced mental capacities and, upon societies, economic and social progress. But resituating literacy in "the social institutions in which it is practiced [and] the social processes whereby practitioners acquire it" in the novel suggests that the achievement of literacy can, in Street's words, be less liberatory and more "'restrictive' and hegemonic, ... concerned with instilling discipline and exercising social order."⁷ Neil Postman also points out that literacy can correlate with the achievement not of autonomy but rather passivity: "some minimal reading skill is necessary if you are to be a 'good citizen,' but 'good citizen' here means one who can follow the instructions of those who govern him. If you cannot read, you cannot be an obedient citizen."⁸ R.A. Houston, writing specifically of eighteenth-century Scotland and England, notes that "literacy was not an essential skill for many Scottish or English people" until the nineteenth or twentieth century: "the significance of oral forms remained strong and the usefulness of academic learning was not as obvious as we might assume."⁹ The preface further intensifies the ideological stakes of literacy by framing Roderick's fitness as a protagonist in Aristotelian terms, through which his elevation by education is required to make his sufferings meaningful: "To secure a favourable prepossession, I have allowed him the advantages of birth and education which in the series of his misfortunes will, I hope, engage the ingenuous more warmly in his behalf" (xxxv). David Cressy articulates the presumption that informs both this characterization of the regressive force of romance and this

⁷ B.V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 118.

⁸ Neil Postman, "The Politics of Reading," *Harvard Educational Review* 40, no. 2 (1970): 246.

⁹ R.A. Houston, *Scottish Literacy and Scottish Identity: Illiteracy and Society in Scotland and Northern England, 1600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 194.

description of the qualifications for a present-day protagonist: “literacy was highly desirable, at least in the minds of those who already had it,” a normative association of literacy with growth and success that François Furet and Jacques Ozouf see steadily spreading through early modernity.¹⁰ There is room to question this familiar valorization of literacy, for its desirability seems to have existed in the absence of demonstrable proof that literacy did increase the odds of wealth.¹¹

Notwithstanding Smollett’s confident relegation of romance to the past, such “military fable[s] of the middle ages” in Samuel Johnson’s dictionary definition (third edition),¹² persisted through the eighteenth century in chapbook form. Victor Neuberg notes that “these small, not unattractive little books formed almost the entire reading matter of the poorer classes in eighteenth-century England,” an association of romance with low status that might seem to corroborate the terms of Smollett’s elitist disavowal of it (2).¹³ Typically twelve pages, with woodcut illustrations, and generally costing a penny, chapbooks were distributed throughout early modern Britain by chapmen, pedlars of printed materials and other goods, who travelled from town to town. Chapbooks are often wrongly regarded as having been understood in their own day as ephemera; recent scholarship in the history of the book suggests that where there was money to read, chapbooks

¹⁰ David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 115.

¹¹ See David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–20; Dana Nelson Salvino, “The Word in Black and White: Ideologies of Race and Literacy in Antebellum America,” in *Reading in America: Literature and Social History*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 140–56.

¹² Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd ed. (Dublin, 1768), s.v. “romance.”

¹³ Victor Neuberg, introduction to *The Penny Histories: A Study of Chapbooks for Young Readers over Two Centuries*, ed. Neuberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). See also John Simons, “Romance in the Eighteenth-Century Chapbook,” in *From Medieval to Medievalism*, ed. Simons (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), 122–43. My claim of the importance of romance to *Roderick Random* thus differs from Robert Irvine’s detection of a division in *Roderick Random* between satire and romance that is resolved in romance and associated with feminine authority. Irvine, *Enlightenment and Romance: Gender and Agency in Smollett and Scott* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), 69.

were often among the most treasured possessions of rural households. The medieval sources of other popular titles and their connection with chivalry grew dim with revision and reprinting. Adding eighteenth-century dates and contemporary attire in the woodcut illustrations, these popular chapbooks mingle without comment such traditional tropes as tournaments and Saracens with new realities of apprenticeship and trade.

Although “romance” is here vaguely defined and anachronistically placed in history, its association with an all-male world in which rivals compete for control of the nation makes it primarily neither amatory nor foreign. William Warner describes the rhetorical opposition to and silent appropriation of female-authored romance as an effort to remasculinize fiction-writing and legitimate it as genteel: Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding are represented as claiming that “England is to France as the (elevated) novel is to the romance, as fact is to fantasy, as morality is to sensuality, as men are to women.”¹⁴ The romance that matters most to the theme and form of *Roderick Random* is not continental amatory romance but homegrown chapbook romance, with its violent homosocial world of striving against fantastically powerful oppressors.¹⁵ The pleasures offered by the novel are substantially those offered by chapbook romance: adventure, fighting, bawdy wit, and miraculously good luck. Though this disavowal and appropriation in many ways is analogous to that tracked by Warner, it differs substantially in that its focus is primarily on internal divisions of Britain by class; these divisions drive the plot’s evocation of Scotland, the Seven Years War, and the slave trade. Though the preface and conclusion legitimate both aristocratic privilege and Roderick’s claim to it, the body of the novel, in which an impoverished and abused

¹⁴ William Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel-Reading in Britain, 1684–1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 21. Warner has traced the complex processes of borrowing and disavowal through which the popular amatory “novels of Behn, Manley and Haywood were devalued and overwritten in the 1740s” in order to question the omnipresence in criticism of that era and our own of dyadic oppositions of Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson’s moral, masculinized, “truly English” realism to the allegedly Francophilic and effeminizing tendencies of romance (43).

¹⁵ See Eithne Henson’s discussion of eighteenth-century chivalric romance as “the narrative of the individual in conflict with powers enormously greater than his own.” Henson, “*The Fictions of Romantick Chivalry*”: *Samuel Johnson and Romance* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1992), 38.

Roderick moves through a series of temporary jobs including apothecary's apprentice, servant, and mercenary, presents the upper tier as corrupt, abusive, and illegitimate. The allegedly aristocratic Roderick of the preface gains authority and reliability only on board ship, by sharing the lower orders' resentment of their superiors: they recognize the upper orders' efforts to appropriate their labour, and they strenuously resist conscription in that role. This derivation of moral authority in opposing privilege as unmerited and destructive of national well-being sits uncomfortably with the Great House fantasy that concludes the novel.

The preface's denunciation of romance as anti-progressive stands in stark contrast to the novel's plot and characterization, which idealize literacy only ambiguously as the producer of progress. For the linked assumptions that Roderick's fitness for book-learning both attests to his natural status as aristocrat and requires his exemption from manual labour are roundly contradicted in the book. It is only when he does finally sail with Tom Bowling that he is able to break out of the serial employment and steady poverty that comprises the plot: he works as an apothecary's apprentice, a journeyman, a ship surgeon, a servant, an heiress-seeker, and a gambler before getting on the ship that ends the seriality. Not only does his learning fail to "make his fortune," but it also sets him up to be conned. He meets a Latin-speaking landlord who, "finding we were both read in the classicks," runs up a bill for wine and food for which he extorts a large sum from Roderick. "Animum rege, qui, nisi paret, imperat," he sneers maliciously as Roderick pays and flees (47). Roderick's classical education again obstructs worldly success some months later when he is working on a Navy ship onto which he has been impressed. He is deemed a spy by an incompetent captain, who has found his diary, which he keeps in Greek. Two Greek-speaking sailors, fresh from the Levant, are produced, with whom Roderick must converse or face imprisonment. To his auditors' amusement, he protests that he "had learned only true original tongue, in which Homer, Pindar, the evangelists and other Great men of antiquity wrote"; only by tricking his superior is he able to escape (176). Remembering the novel's prefatory praise of Don Quixote as a debunker of romance illusion, we might be prompted to see Roderick's persistence here in his wishful belief that learning denotes superiority as laughably quixotic. The tone

is uncertain, as mockery of Roderick's pretensions overlaps with a mocking denigration of the unlearned very like Fielding's in *Tom Thumb* of those too coarse to see the difference between chapbook and classical heroism.

These portraits of elite learning, subtly blaming those who pursue it as self-indulgent, should inform our sense of the meaning of Roderick's encounter in debtors' prison with the impoverished poet Melopoyne, whose extended and self-pitying autobiography as an unappreciated genius has been read in relation to Smollett's own early disappointments as a would-be author.¹⁶ Despairing that there is no market for translations of the classics into English, Melopoyne tries and initially fails to write halfpenny ballads that will sell. He is only ambivalently relieved when he becomes, by persisting, "such a proficient, that my works were in great request among the most polite of the chairmen, draymen, hackney-coachmen, footmen, and serving-maids" (385). Roderick hears this account in prison: he is there for fraud against his tailor (broke, he took a suit on credit in order to pawn it), and Melopoyne is there for debt. On the one hand, this section's sympathy with penury evokes the contempt for the punitive machinery of debt collection found in *Jack the Giant-Killer*; the king's son, entering a town in which a corpse lies rotting in the square, having been arrested for debt, pays the dead man's debts and becomes a hero in the eyes of the people. And yet in this scene, this kind of sympathy is bestowed not upon the poor, who crowd the debtors' prison and whose purchase of chapbook ballads has provided Melopoyne with the little income he has, but upon a learned playwright and translator of the classics. Mullan and Reid note that "distaste for popular culture is most keenly expressed in the literary forms such as novels, periodicals, and criminal biographies which were considered to be closest to it."¹⁷ The self-contained inset drama of Melopoyne accords with this model even as it highlights the peculiarities of this particular novel's relation to literacy. This representation of literacy seems to demean the labouring classes whose purchase of his deliberately tasteless products has allowed Melopoyne to "ma[k]e many a good meal upon a monster" (385). At the same time, the novel's sustained differentiation between

¹⁶ See, for example, John Skinner, *Constructions of Smollett: A Study of Genre and Gender* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1996), 40.

¹⁷ John Mullan and Christopher Reid, *Eighteenth-Century Popular Culture: A Selection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 16.

those with and without the money to shop elevates the “chairmen and draymen” above the imprisoned Melopoyne: they, not he, have the power to make choices and act upon them.

This contrast—between the power ideally possessed by the learned and the power bestowed by the possession of even a little bit of money, the few pence needed to purchase a ballad—is given an additional ironic twist when the pitying Roderick gives some money to Melopoyne as he leaves, having been bailed out of debtors’ prison by his uncle Tom Bowling: it is Tom Bowling’s money that both frees Roderick and allows him to act upon his “veneration” for the suffering poet. Roderick corroborates Melopoyne’s faith in hierarchy—the literate above the illiterate, epic poetry above chapbook ballads—both by agreeing with his views and by acting them out, a kind of literacy-based noblesse oblige. And yet this wilful demotion of money below an idealized nobility is possible only because of Tom Bowling’s ability to make money and his willingness, born of commitment to family, to give it away. (At the foundation of this appropriation of the money of the proletarian to prop up the aristocracy lies slave labour.) Melopoyne’s disappointment with popular culture deepens the novel’s dream of a world in which literacy correlates with status, exempting the supremely literate from the imperative of labour. But Roderick’s regular recourse to idealizing cliché is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his response to Narcissa. Of the upper-class characters that Roderick encounters, she alone is virtuous; she alone in the novel is a “real aristocrat” of the idealized type—polite, refined, and generous—affirmed by Roderick, against the evidence, throughout the novel. She is also the only upper-class character to share Roderick’s fantasy that literacy marks aristocracy, as if by blood. Discovered shipwrecked on the coast of Cornwall, an impoverished Roderick takes work in her household as a manservant, a staple plot element of romance. He overhears his mistresses discussing Tasso’s *La Gerusalemme Liberata* and cannot resist the “opportunity of displaying my talents”; he “read and explained the whole of that which disconcerted them, to the utter astonishment of both” (223). The two women’s suspicions, unalloyed by his assertion that he learned Italian “during a voyage up the Straits,” are set to rest when he tells them that he is Scottish: “learning is so cheap in my country, that every peasant was a scholar” (224). As

if in recognition of Scotland's ancient colleges and high literacy rate, relative to England, Roderick casts Scottishness as a deviation from the normative equation of learning with status. Scottish learning as represented in this novel, however, is better typified by the abusive schoolmaster who beat Roderick when, despairing of instruction, he taught himself Latin. Here again the middle of the novel stands starkly at odds with the preface. There Smollett explains Roderick's national origins in terms of both the high quality of Scottish schools relative to England and the Scottish "addiction to travel."¹⁸ But those who travel in *Roderick Random* do not do so by choice: they are poor young men who lack both family connections and money for bribes, young men who, abused by their masters, are ready to enlist as soldiers or sailors in desperate pursuit of survival. The Scottish "addiction to travel" that Roderick allegedly displays would seem to refer more to class than to nation, and to explain not an "addiction" but dire need.

Children, Sailors, and Progress

The dyadic oppositions that give the novel its energy and, perhaps, render it thematically incoherent—oppositions between the illiterate labouring poor and the cultivated elite, and between rejection and acceptance of aristocracy—are usefully approached

¹⁸ The negative portrait of Scottish schools in these early chapters also contradicts Smollett's prefatory explanation of his protagonist's Scottishness. Smollett "allowed [his protagonist] the advantages of birth and education" in hopes of inspiring pitying identification in his readers (xxxv). He made his protagonist a "North-Briton," he writes, because of the high quality of Scottish schools, suitable to "the dignity of his birth and character" (xxxv). The portrait of Mr Syntax is oddly incommensurate with Smollett's intention to honour the achievements of Scottish education, which included the founding of the universities of St Andrews in 1413, Glasgow in 1451, and Aberdeen 1495. This is not the Scotland that passed an Education Act in 1496 enacting compulsory education for eldest sons of noblemen, not the Scotland that required by law a school per parish, subsidized in part by fees paid by local landowners, in pursuit of universal literacy—a goal it had largely achieved by the mid-eighteenth century. See R.A. Houston, *Scottish Literacy and Scottish Identity: Illiteracy and Society in Scotland and Northern England, 1600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and T.G.K. Bryce and W.M. Humes, eds., *Scottish Education* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999). Leith Davis attends to this aspect of Smollett's explanation of why he chose a Scot as protagonist, arguing compellingly for "the ambiguous perspectives regarding national affiliation and narration that ... characterize the rest of the book." Davis, *Acts of Union: Scotland and the Literary Negotiation of the British Nation, 1707–1830* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 67.

in terms of current conversations in the fields of popular culture studies and British history. The protagonist's schizoid responses to Tom Bowling may seem to accord with Peter Burke's influential "bipolar" view of early modern society, which posits an opposition between an elite "big tradition" of literary culture, acquired through schooling, and a "little tradition" enacted in places of common assembly such as taverns and festivals. Because the elite participated in the "little tradition," Burke casts it as, in effect, a common culture: reading *Roderick Random* in these terms might cast its protagonist's unwilling experience of labouring-class life as an interlude in the "little tradition," ending finally with rightful restoration to privilege and prestige.¹⁹ Much as Roderick himself might like to be seen this way—in effect, as a Prince Hal learning governance by mingling with the little people, able whenever he chooses to return to the castle—the novel's depiction of class is more complex. Roger Chartier's critique of the assumption that "intellectual divisions run along social boundaries" resonates here. Chartier urges scepticism in relation to both schematic models like Burke's of opposed spheres and the relegation of particular artifacts and practices to each. Chartier suggests instead a model of "culture as appropriation": "We must replace the study of cultural sets that were considered as socially pure with another point of view that recognizes each cultural form as a mixture, whose constituent elements melt together indissolubly."²⁰ Even as *Roderick Random* insists on social purity, idealizing a version of aristocracy in which the identities and experiences of reading of high and low are naturally and permanently distinct, it dramatizes, in two ways, a world of "melting together." That the characterization of both Roderick and Tom Bowling owes much to chapbook heroism, as does the moral force of the middle sections' sustained indictment of elite selfishness and incompetence, indicates the complexity with which notions of literacy functioned in relation to class and

¹⁹ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 1994), 28.

²⁰ Roger Chartier, "Culture as Appropriation: Popular Culture Uses in Early Modern France," in *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Steven L. Kaplan (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984), 223. See also Roger Chartier and Lydia Cochrane, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 30.

status in mid-eighteenth-century Britain. For both the novel's appropriation and its intense disavowal of chapbook romance and plebeian heroism suggest that the readerly dreams indulged and cultivated by the novel are not only or even primarily of wealth. Rather, both the preface's repudiation of romance readers and Roderick's strenuous insistence on a social purity belied by his experience signal a deeper wish for distinction, a "natural" state not unlike race that is, in fantasy, permanent, ineradicable, and proven by the deference of subordinates. In this sense, the dream that *Roderick Random* offers its readers is of having your cake and eating it too: of being simultaneously wild child and disciplined adult, plebeian and aristocrat, Scot and Briton. The novel moves its protagonist through these opposed schemas not cumulatively, changing him by his experience of the low so that he deserves the high; rather, it depicts him alternating between axes presented as incommensurate.

Roderick Random's vacillation between high and low accords with "the dichotomous" model of eighteenth-century society, as described by David Cannadine, "that assumed there was one single, deep division, in which people were polarized between high and low, the few and the many, gentlemen and nongentlemen, superior and inferior, polite and common, learned and ignorant, rich and poor, nobility and commoner, 'laced waistcoats' and 'leather aprons.'"²¹ "Britons understand and describe their social worlds" in this period, Cannadine writes, in terms of three "idealized models" of society: a traditionally graduated order (the "hierarchical" model), a society in which the middling classes figured prominently both as moral custodians and as engines of economic productivity (the "triadic" order), and the dyadic or "dichotomous" model evident in *Roderick Random*.²² "Like sheep and goats, or the saved and the damned, or 'one half of the world' against (or ignorant of) 'the other half,' this was a powerful and potentially adversarial model of a deeply riven society that was held together neither by the individualized relationships of an elaborately ranked and classified hierarchy nor by the middle class that bridged the social gap between those above

²¹ David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 31.

²² Cannadine, 21, 31, 32.

and those beneath.”²³ Approaching *Roderick Random* from this perspective, we see that while Roderick steadily sees only two strata in British society, he alternates his identification between laced coats and leather aprons or, in this case perhaps, sailors’ tarred breeches.²⁴

Roderick meets his “benevolent kinsman” Tom Bowling when he returns home after working for some years as a lieutenant on a man-of-war. Learning that his sister has died and that Roderick’s father (disowned by his aristocratic father after he married a poor relation who had been working as a housekeeper in the family home) has fled the country in despair, leaving his son “a friendless orphan,” the outraged Tom Bowling resolves not to leave Scotland until he has made him do right by the boy. Where the appearance of this first adult to assert the duty to protect him might seem to warrant gratitude, Roderick’s first-person narration initially describes Tom Bowling’s resolve in demeaning and stereotypic terms. Such persuasion “was a task to which he was by no means equal, being entirely unacquainted with the ways of men in general, to which his education on board had kept him an utter stranger” (8). In the course of the book, the elite child’s condescending presumption of superior knowledge of the world to his slang-speaking sailor uncle is belied by Tom Bowling’s resistance of ill-treatment by his superiors and his ability to make money. As finally ironic as this scene’s denigration of Tom Bowling’s ignorance is its insistence on the value of Roderick’s learning. It is the labouring-class Tom Bowling who first voices objection to the rich old man’s intention of “see[ing] what the lad was fit for, and bind[ing] him apprentice to some honest tradesman or other” (11). He asserts that Roderick is, contrary to the old man’s assertion, “the best scholar of his age, in all the country” and thus unfit to be “ma[d]e a taylor of”: “I had rather see him hang’d” (11). This dyadic model of class, to which Roderick himself adheres throughout the novel, sees educational ability and accomplishment as proof of natural superiority,

²³ Cannadine, 31.

²⁴ See also Douglas Hay and Nicholas Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society: Shuttles and Swords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): “Dyadic views of society gradually gave way over this period to more complex formulations” (25). Hay and Rogers cite increasing elite scepticism about witchcraft as exemplary: “High culture and low culture may have become increasingly distinctive” (35).

valuing status even more highly than wealth. The “sheep and the goats” here are those who do, and those who do not, deserve deference, respect, and exemption from labour. The school usher speaks for a related, but different, dyadic model of class when he assures Tom Bowling of the ultimate cash value of Roderick’s education: Roderick’s “genius, which would certainly, one day, make [his] fortune on shore, provided it received due cultivation” (15). Much struck by this praise and prediction, the “generous tar” resolves to send Roderick to university, “though he could ill afford it,” and the two set off for Glasgow (15).

The Enlightenment “ideal of prolonged and sheltered childhood,” in Anna Davin’s phrase (through which only elite children achieved full humanity), is evident in *Roderick Random* only in its absence and in the protagonist’s rhetorical recourse to it as the measure of his custodians’ failings.²⁵ “The more my years and knowledge increased, the more I perceived the injustice and barbarity of his behaviour”: from the novel’s first pages, Roderick opposes starkly the cruelty, prejudice, and injustice of those with authority to the overlooked abilities of the poor and the young. He identifies with his poverty, beating up a schoolmate who “insults [his] poverty,” the first of many fights at school. He is, he tells us, hated for his red hair and scapegoated for all the town’s troubles: robbed orchards, dead cats, and stolen gingerbread (6). Roderick’s grandfather decries his scholarly aspirations as evidence of delusions of grandeur predictive of a life of crime. Roderick’s response to this punishment again denies all legitimacy to adults: “Far from being subdued by this infernal usage, my indignation triumphed over that slavish awe which had hitherto enforced my obedience” (6). He calmly organizes a violent rebellion among his schoolmates against their teacher, the opening salvo of which was to be Roderick’s spitting in his face. Then “two of the strongest boys in the school” were to lay the teacher over a bench and flog “his bare posteriors ... with his own birch” (16). Tom Bowling’s righteous readiness physically to resist injustice echoes Roderick’s; soon after Roderick scrapes

²⁵ Anna Davin, “What is a Child?,” in *Childhood in Question: Children, Parents, and the State*, ed. Stephen Hussey and Anthony Fletcher (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 16. See also Hugh Cunningham’s focus on lack of physical strength as a definer of childhood in *The Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1991).

with the schoolmate who taunted him as poor, Tom Bowling decapitates the vicious pet bulldog that Roderick's cousins have often set upon him (9). Tom Bowling helps Roderick beat up his malicious teacher. He duels the commander who insults him as Scottish, for which assertion of honour he has to flee the country, temporarily losing two years' pay.

The novel's association of both Roderick Random and Tom Bowling with righteous violence evokes Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's description of "the sailors' hydrarchy," an "alternative order of the common sailor" that grew within, and threatened, imperial hierarchy.²⁶ This pursuit of "the autonomous power to organize the ship and its miniature society as they wanted" derived in part from the legacy of piracy, which had been largely routed by the Royal Navy by the 1720s because of the threat it posed to mercantile capitalism, in particular to the slave trade: "the struggles waged by sailors of the revolutionary era for subsistence, wages, and rights against impressment and violent discipline first took autonomous shape among the buccaneers in America."²⁷ The characterization of Tom Bowling abuts the radical reality of mid-century maritime hydrarchy, its well-known readiness to resist tyranny and, according to Linebaugh and Rediker, its key role in fomenting the American Revolution.²⁸ Linebaugh and Rediker express the two-sided representation of the maritime proletariat in this era: "when docile and slavish, it was described as the hewers of wood and the drawers of water"; but "when the proletariat was rebellious and self-active, it was described as a monster, a many-headed hydra."²⁹ Smollett's insistence on the first of these aspects remembers indirectly the second.

At the same time, however, Smollett draws back from explicitly recognizing the ways in which the organization of shipboard life in both the merchant service and Royal Navy enacted "democra[cy] in an undemocratic age" (162). Through the long middle of the novel, hydrarchy is a Utopian alternative to the immobility, corruption, and cruelty of land-side society, as well as

²⁶ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 154.

²⁷ Linebaugh and Rediker, 156, 157.

²⁸ Linebaugh and Rediker, 213.

²⁹ Linebaugh and Rediker, 328, 329.

the undignified province of the unlettered. Juxtaposing maritime hydrarchy to status hierarchy, the novel lets the mutually exclusive alternatives run parallel, participating in both while occluding the threat each posed to the other. That threat was intense. In an argument for the systematic exploitation of maritime labour by eighteenth-century mercantilism and the persistent radicalism of those transatlantic workers, Rediker imagined the seaman Edward Barlow in dialogue with the surveyor and physician William Petty, author through the 1680s of a series of pamphlets on political arithmetic that advocated the increased use of statistics in mercantile activity. The two men debate the relation of maritime labour to Britain's rising political power. Petty celebrates the diminishment of capital risk in deep-sea shipping, the regularization and increased profitability of trade, and the establishment by 1763 of "England's maritime hegemony," all reflective of British naval power. Edward Barlow counters by asserting the "seamy underside to Petty's dispassionate language of political arithmetic": "The merchant's ideal of increased work and productivity usually meant increased exploitation of seamen. Creating, organizing, and disciplining the 'labor force' frequently meant dispossession and the sting of the lash. Capital gained at the expense of lower wages. Reduced capital risks sometimes increased the material and physical risks of maritime labourers. The elimination of piracy entailed ruthless suppression of popular challenges to merchants' property."³⁰ The shipboard scenes in *Roderick Random*, dramatizing the incompetence and selfishness of alleged leaders, the injustice of impressment, the horrifying medical care and living conditions, and the toll taken in lives and limbs by fighting and fever, clearly take Barlow's sceptical view of the national progress enabled by mercantilism and war.

This self-conscious rejection of established order as illegitimate and oppressive provides a useful context in which to consider Roderick's stereotyping description of Tom Bowling. Tom Bowling is, he says,

a strong built man, somewhat bandy-legged, with a neck like that of a bull, and a face which (you might easily perceive) had withstood the most obstinate assaults of the weather. His dress consisted of a soldier's coat altered for him by the ship's taylor, a striped flannel

³⁰ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 75.

jacket, a pair of red breeches japanned with pitch, clean grey worsted stockings, large silver buckles that covered three-fourths of his shoes, a silver-laced hat whose crown over-looked the brims about an inch and a half, a black bob wig in buckle, a check shirt, a silk handkerchief, an hanger with a brass handle girded to his thigh by a tarnished laced belt, and a good oak plant under his arm. (8)

Rediker's description of the "distinctive appearance" associated with seamen by 1740 echoes the physical details of this description, even as it ascribes a very different value to them:

The mid-eighteenth-century 'Jack Tar' wore wide, baggy breeches, cut a few inches above the ankle and often made of a heavy, rough red nap. The breeches were tarred as a protection against the cold, numbing wetness. He frequently wore a checked shirt of blue and white linen, a blue or gray 'fearnought' jacket, gray stockings, and a Monmouth cap. Some of his apparel he might well have made for himself, so deft was he with needle and thread after years of mending sails at sea. Always making clever use of commonplaces, the seaman used bits of hardened cheese or 'ye Joints of ye Back-Bone' of a shark as buttons on a jacket.³¹

Both descriptions cite the tarred breeches and checked shirt that were most closely associated with the stereotypical sailor. But Smollett's tar is framed in terms of time (the old-fashioned buckles and hat) and potential for violence (the hanger, the oak stick). Rediker frames his account of the stereotypical "Jack Tar" in celebratory attention to his unexpected skills (sewing, crafting cheese and sharks' teeth into buttons).

Endorsing Roderick Random's self-description, John Barrell sees the novel's conclusion as rewarding him for his achievement of gentlemanly disinterest, one measure of which is, for Barrell, Roderick's loss of his accent: "he must learn the language of the centre as he must learn the language of the circumference."³² Tom Bowling's nautical dialect, one of the novel's many comically rendered forms of colloquial speech, disqualifies him, in Roderick's eyes, from the alleged transcendence of the merely local that marks true gentlemanliness. Losing his accent makes even Roderick's speech more literate, in effect valorizing spoken English as written. This denigration of orality as sublinguistic both echoes Thomas Hobbes's and Samuel Johnson's measure

³¹ Rediker, *Between the Devil*, 11.

³² Barrell, 199.

of civilized literacy and contrasts sharply with George Orwell's praise of the plebeian Jack the Giant Killer as the measure of the valuably English. Hobbes excluded curses *in toto* from the language use by which he defined reason: "cursing, swearing, reviling, and the like, do not signify as speech; but as the actions of a tongue accustomed."³³ The "tongue accustomed" does not display the rationality that marks the superiority of mankind to "all other living creatures"; no more do pre-verbal children, for which reason Hobbes considered them only potentially "reasonable creatures."³⁴ It is this calibration of "more and less written speech" that marks Tom Bowling as regressive.³⁵ Johnson, perhaps the most influential advocate of making spoken conform to written standards, accepted the expressive power of expletives—their "power and emphasis"—even as he excluded them from his dictionary: "Nor are all words which are not found in the vocabulary, to be lamented as omissions. Of the laborious and mercantile part of the people, the diction is in great measure casual and mutable; many of their terms are formed for some temporary or local convenience, and though current at certain times and places, are in others utterly unknown. This fugitive cant, which is always in a state of increase or decay, cannot be regarded as any part of the durable materials of a language, and therefore must be suffered to perish with other things unworthy of preservation."³⁶

Jeremy Lewis sees Smollett as "a hack who was also a master of English prose," and he defines this mastery not in terms of the "introversion, the subtleties and ambivalences prized by the academic mind" but in terms very like those that led George Orwell to praise Smollett as "Scotland's best novelist," valuing Smollett's candour, humour, and emphasis on relentless episodic action.³⁷ The "low" energy that Orwell values in Smollett also

³³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin (1651; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41.

³⁴ Hobbes, 31.

³⁵ See also Nicholas Hudson, "Oral Tradition': The Evolution of an Eighteenth-Century Concept," in *Tradition in Transition: Women Writers, Marginal Texts, and the Eighteenth-Century Canon*, ed. Alvaro Ribeiro, S.J., and James G. Basker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 161–76.

³⁶ Johnson, "Preface," n.p.

³⁷ Jeremy Lewis, *Tobias Smollett* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), xix, xviii. George Orwell, "Tobias Smollett: Scotland's Best Novelist," *Tribune*, 22 September 1944; reprinted in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters*

figures in his praise of the chapbook romance *Jack the Giant-Killer*, responses to which Orwell casts as a measure of national well-being. In his 1944 essay “Raffles and Miss Blandish,” Orwell praises Jack not only for his possession of plebeian virtues such as those noted by O’Malley—cunning, wit, and a miraculous achievement of status and wealth—but as an emblem of democracy.³⁸ Orwell sees in his own era a dangerous divergence from tradition. “Until recently the characteristic adventure stories of the English-speaking peoples have been stories in which the hero fights *against odds*,” he writes, a tradition that informs his view that “the basic myth of the Western world is Jack the Giant-Killer.”³⁹ He is concerned that such popular narratives instead seem now to “[teach], either overtly or implicitly, that one should side with the big man against the little man.”⁴⁰ The particular challenges faced by post-war Britain may inform Orwell’s scathing conclusion that the “basic myth” of English-speaking peoples might need updating, having shifted from a celebration of “fight[ing] against odds” to the worship of power acquiring more power: a kind of “Jack the Dwarf Killer.”⁴¹ Orwell’s celebration of Jack’s failure either to know his place or to accept seemingly inevitable defeat by forces hugely more powerful than he reflects Orwell’s belief that playing against the odds is, in the words of an early reviewer, “morally superior to the leader-principle, the cult of brute power.”⁴² Praising Jack, Orwell lauds the resistance of the less powerful to elite tyranny: even as this endorsement of Jack differs diametrically from Smollett’s portrait of romance as a nation-ruining creation of the elite, it shares its situation of the smaller question of

of George Orwell, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol. 3, *As I Please 1943–1945* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 244.

³⁸ Orwell, “Raffles and Miss Blandish,” *Horizon*, October 1944; reprinted in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, 3:223. O’Malley, 23. O’Malley discusses sanitization of *Jack the Giant-Killer*, contrasting seventeenth- and late eighteenth-century incarnations (22–23).

³⁹ Orwell, “Raffles and Miss Blandish,” 3:223.

⁴⁰ Orwell, “Raffles and Miss Blandish,” 3:223.

⁴¹ Orwell, “Raffles and Miss Blandish,” 3:222.

⁴² Harry Levin, *New Republic*, 6 May 1946, 665–67; reprinted in *George Orwell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Jeffrey Meyer (New York: Routledge, 1975), 215–18. Levin opens: “English critics, by circumscribing their definition of culture, have missed a great deal” (215).

romance within the larger field of class identity. In these terms, the middle of *Roderick Random* makes the protagonist Jack-like as he “fights against the odds”; the beginning and end see him siding decisively with “the leader-principle.”⁴³

From the 1740s onward, elite children were offered didactic works written specifically for them that promised their readers elevation by literacy; here again, fitness for social elevation could be indicated by a proper disavowal of Jack the Giant-Killer, a letter from whom was included in John Newbery’s *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744), often deemed the first work of “children’s literature.” This Jack, however, has lost his “plebeian virtues” of cunning, wit, and luck and has become a “champion of industry, obedience, and book-learning as the keys to success in life.”⁴⁴ The gift of the book itself, Jack writes, reflects his approval of the good report of Little Master Tommy’s good behaviour that he has heard from his nurse:

you are obedient to your Master, loving and kind to your Play-fellows, and obliging to everybody; that you rise early in the Morning, keep yourself clean, and learn your Book; that, when you have done a Fault, you confess it, and are very sorry for it. And though you are sometimes naughty, she says you are very honest and good-humoured; that you don’t swear, tell Lies, nor say indecent Words, and are always thankful when any body gives you good Advice; that you never quarrel, nor do wicked Things, as some other Boys do. This Character, my Dear, has made every body love you.⁴⁵

The promise of elevation into full humanity, up the hierarchy from child to adult, rests upon presumption of real superiority of adults as such—and, by extension, the real superiority of all superiors. This confidence that the privileged deserve their privilege is lacking in *Roderick Random*. The novel makes us wonder, in Cannadine’s terms, if sheep might be better governors of the nation than goats and if life as a sheep might be a better—happier and more virtuous—life than being a goat. This questioning, of course, involves only white men, privileged and poor, English and Scots. The humanity and the physical presence of the African people whose sale makes it possible even to think

⁴³ Orwell, “Raffles and Miss Blandish,” 3:223.

⁴⁴ O’Malley, 23.

⁴⁵ John Newbery, *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book, Intended for the Instruction and Amusement of Little Master Tommy and Pretty Miss Polly* (London, 1760), 14.

of choosing a life path are, as Said would have us remember, almost totally effaced.

Smollett's portrait of the vengeful, proud, high-spirited, bawdy, tenacious Roderick Random is brought sharply into focus by juxtaposition to this model of childhood. Early and late, Roderick is not a good boy like Little Master Tommy. Roderick's violent resistance of authority is presented as perhaps his key virtue: "slavish obedience" is not for him (6). This combination of alienation and violence characterizes him from his earliest days, when he cuts to the skull a schoolmate who mocks his poverty. Though the Roderick we see in the novel's final chapters does not whip any schoolteachers, this ending suggests less that he has eschewed violence and come to affirm polite self-control than that violence is unnecessary to him at this time. So, too, although the ending sees Roderick seemingly vindicated in his steadfast belief that he is a gentleman born, this affirmation of fantasy by no means affirms the reality of a meritocratic aristocracy that gives that belief meaning. Indeed, his fantasy requires recognition that he is what he has always been, unchangingly superior to those around him.

Is *Roderick Random* best read, finally, as a chapbook-like story of a plucky underling who by wit, might, and luck rescues the downtrodden, defends his nation, and is rewarded with a princess? Or is it a *Bildungsroman*, in which a coarse provincial acquires, via travel, labour, and disappointment, the self-control, worldly knowledge, and connections necessary to secure his restoration to the social privilege he sees as his birthright? The beginning and the ending of *Roderick Random* cast it as the latter; the long middle marks its affiliation to the former. The value of such questions lies less in the hope of their definitive resolution than in the mid-century difficulty of demarcating literate and illiterate, elite and popular, adult and child, to which they point us. With Said, I have urged here attention to the invisible labour that unwillingly creates and supports the civilized Western individual. My project here is Saidian in its scrutiny of the gap between idealizing explanations and material realities dramatized in the text and in its focus on the class-based assumptions about identity, power, and value that suffuse Roderick's compellingly self-interested point of view. But at the same time, this novel and the mid-eighteenth century does not permit the facile morality that the critical push to centre the

periphery can bring. Its ambivalence about upward mobility, the standardization of culture associated with polite literacy, and “progress” would seem to defy Said’s detection only of two kinds of agents, Europeans who culpably benefit from the exploitation of non-Europeans and non-Europeans whose erasure from, or marginalization in, self-congratulatory Eurocentric depictions of the world must be challenged. Said’s moralizing dichotomy between innocent victims and malign victimizers, active Europeans and passive non-Europeans, does not finally provide tools with which to consider either the fact that it is immersion in the stereotypically illiterate and plebeian that enables Roderick’s final claims of progress—of “roundedness,” one might almost say—or the relief with which we seem subtly to be encouraged to watch him sail away.



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