Captain from Castile Short Guide

Captain from Castile by Samuel Shellabarger

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Contents

Characters

Characterization in a Shellabarger novel, especially in Captain from Castile, is superficial and secondary to plot and action.

Pedro de Vargas is an eminently likable young man who gets by through quick thinking and a deft hand. He moves through a fast succession of scenes — from imprisonment in the dungeons of the Inquisition to the invasion and conquest of Mexico to intrigues in the court of Emperor Charles V — leaving him little time to reflect on the consequences of his actions. Manly and noble, Pedro is also ingenuous, unlike later Shellabarger heroes.

Catana Perez, the heroine, is more spirited, practical, and worldly than the virtuous heroines of the later novels, but she is as much a stock character as they are. Beneath her rough exterior beats a heart of gold. The villains, arrant scoundrels all, come perilously close to being little more than comic strip bad guys.

Less disappointing by comparison are the novel's historical characters, Cortes, Montezuma, Charles V, Chevalier Bayard. But the lines of even their characters are only faintly sketched, since Shellabarger settles for telling the reader about them rather than showing. Pedro detects a "selfish unscrupulousness" behind Cortes' character, but leaves it at that. Shellabarger does not explore in any depth the fascinating contradictions in the conqueror's character or the secret of his sway over conquistadors and captives alike.

Social Concerns

Early in Captain from Castile young Pedro de Vargas, the hero, muses that in only one day in his town of Jaen, Spain, he had "befriended a pagan heretic, saved the virtue of a barmaid, and given comfort to a murderer." But in the New World — Mexico — where Pedro and the others all end up, what people once were is of little matter. Indeed, the heretic, actually an Aztec chief, exhibits more Christian virtues than a hypocritical priest of the Inquisition, the barmaid more innate quality than a vain highborn Spanish senorita, and the murderer — he killed when drunk — more loyalty and worth than a Spanish grandee. Virtue, devotion, and trust, the hero learns, are not the exclusive attributes of aristocrats. In the New World egalitarianism flourishes. Riches and honors are the hero's for the asking in Spain at the story's conclusion.

But having learned to detest hypocrisy, corruption, cowardice, and tyranny, both religious and political, Pedro and his bride, the faithful barmaid, set out for life in the New World, the new Eden.

Techniques

The format for Shellabarger's historical novels varies little from book to book. The young, handsome, plucky hero finds himself caught up in the sweep of history — the conquest of Mexico, Italian unification, dynastic struggles in France, the siege of Quebec — in scenes of hairbreadth escapes and last minute rescues, torture and murder, swordplay and sieges. His enemies are dastardly dyed-in-thewool villains who eventually receive their deserved comeuppance. The ladies in his life range from alluring Venuses, engaging hussies with whom he momentarily dallies, to chaste Dianas, the ideal women of his dreams whom he marries, although in Captain from Castile it is the diamond-in-therough he weds and not the lady on the pedestal. On the whole, however, his heroes prefer swordplay to sex. There is certainly nothing in any of these books to cause a blush on the cheek of one of the young girls at the school where Shellabarger served as headmaster. Indeed, he was disdainful of novelists who relied more on sex than on history to put across their books.

Characterization in these sprawling panoramic novels is rudimentary, plots improbable, and coincidences made to do the work of the imagination. If the novels cannot be taken seriously as fiction, they are, still, vastly entertaining and informative, even educational.

For what distinguishes a Shellabarger historical romance is the skillful combination of fast moving, rousing action and carefully researched and interesting historical backgrounds. His novels are rich with learning and alive in adventure.

One might search vainly for subtlety in these books, but one could not ask for better examples of sheer storytelling and narrative power. One rapidly turns the pages to find out what is going to happen next. The suspense is powerful as one wonders how the hero will escape from the dungeons of the Inquisition or from an Aztec altar stone where he is to be burned alive as a human sacrifice; how he will evade the assassin's knife and the gouging out of his eyes; how he will be rescued from life as a galley slave or from the enemy's prison.

Shellabarger spares no pains in making these highly charged and exciting stories as accurate as possible. His meticulous recreation of the past gives his novels their variety, color, solidarity, and depth. They are researched down to the smallest detail. For example, in trying to discover how Cortes moved horses from Spain to Mexico— on deck or below — Shellabarger wrote over forty letters to various authorities and pored through many reference works. Cloak-and-dagger though these novels may be, the cloak the hero wears and the dagger he wields are historically accurate.

Moreover, the remarkable pageantry against which the story is enacted never interferes with the headlong action. Unlike novelists who must work up a period, Shellabarger knew his history well. He does not drag in prepackaged details of clothing, food, architecture, furnishings, customs.

They are unobtrusively worked into the fabric of the story. At the same time, Shellabarger's novels cannot compare with the great historical fiction being written in the very years his own novels were appearing: Zoe Oldenbourg's The World Is Not Enough (1948), Hope Muntz's The Golden Warrior (1949), Edith Simon's The Golden Hand (1952), H. F. M. Prescott's The Man on a Donkey (1952). These are novels not only historically accurate factually — as are Shellabarger's — but also true to the spirit, the motives, and the spiritual and moral color of their historical times. Unlike his novels, these are marked by sound craftsmanship, plausible characters who take for granted their historical backgrounds, and believable plots free of exaggerated sentimentalism and incredible melodrama.

One should not, however, condemn Shellabarger for what he did not intend to do. His novels display a firm grasp of historical material that is presented in a lively fashion in a style that is always competent. Their narratives never meander or become bogged down in philosophical musings. What parallels there may be between the times he writes about and his own are implied rather than stated.

A first-class spinner of yarns, Shellabarger knows how to keep his action flowing, how to create and maintain suspense, and how to top climax with climax. Writing mysteries taught him never to be dull. His characters live exciting adventures against highly colored and vividly described settings.

His aim was not to write creative fiction but entertainment. This he did, of the highest order and with great popular and critical success.

Themes

Captain from Castile takes place during one of the most exciting periods in western history — the conquest of Mexico by Cortes and the opening up and exploration of the New World. The conflict between Cortes, the daring and ruthless adventurer driven by glory and gold, and Montezuma, the gentle and generous Aztec king committed to a religion of bloody human sacrifice, is one of the great stories in history and is one of the important concerns in the novel. Through Pedro's adventures, Shellabarger describes the conquest of one culture over another and the victims left behind — in this case the unfortunate Indians — in Western civilization's determined march onward.

Another substantive theme can be found in the author's depiction of the crosscurrents in the character of sixteenth-century Spain — a strange mixture of wanton cruelty and religious zeal — that marked Spain's emergence from, medieval to modern times from a small divided country to a global empire.

Literary Precedents

The most obvious literary precedent for Shellabarger's historical novels, as more than one reviewer pointed out, was the swashbuckling fiction of Alexander Dumas pere (1802-1870), romances such as The Count of Monte Cristo (1844), The Three Musketeers (1844), and The Black Tulip (1850). Like Dumas, Shellabarger is not concerned with the niceties of the art of fiction but with color and romance to the point of excessive melodrama. Like Dumas, Shellabarger does not concern himself with psychological perceptions.

Unlike Dumas, however, Shellabarger is much more careful and authentic about his history.

One might also mention the immensely popular romances of Sir Henry Rider Haggard (1856-1925), noted for their spell-binding narratives and exotic settings: King Solomon's Mines (1885), Allan Quartermain (1887).

More immediate literary precedents are Hervey Allen (1889-1949) and Kenneth Roberts (1885-1957). Allen's 1933 historical novel, the vastly successful Anthony Adverse, set in the Napoleonic era, took its hero all over the world in a series of rousing adventures. Anthony Adverse, however, is more philosophical in tone and franker in its treatment of sex than Shellabarger's work, and whereas Allen's historical sources are somewhat suspect, this is not the case with Shellabarger. Published in the 1930s and 1940s, Roberts's historical novels of the colonial and revolutionary periods in American history — Arundel (1930), Rabble in Arms (1933), Northwest Passage (1937), to name a few — are based on conscientious research but contain plots as wildly melodramatic and characters as woodenly stilted as Shellabarger's. Roberts's pictures of violence, battles, flight and pursuit, and men in action are as superb as anything to be found in Captain from Castile or Lord Vanity.

One should also mention the novels of Thomas Costain (1885-1965) whose popular historical romances cast in the same mold as Shellabarger's began to appear a few years before Captain from Castile and whose last one was published ten years after Lord Vanity. Costain's novels rivaled Shellabarger's in popularity.

Related Titles

Prince of Foxes Cut from the same cloth as Pedro de Vargas in Captain from Castile, Andrea Orsini in Prince of Foxes (1947) is both more interesting and less believable than his Spanish cousin. Whereas Pedro is not much different at the end of his story than he is at the beginning — the simple, extroverted hero — Andrea is a man of more complexity and dimension. An opportunist, ruthless and cynical in his attitudes, he is reawakened to probity and decency. He changes in the course of his story. At the same time, Shellabarger has made Andrea so much the Renaissance man par excellence — master of diplomacy and wit, painter whose work rivals that of the great Mantegna, composer and musician, supreme strategist of sieges and battles — that it is hard to believe this low-born youth could be so adept at all the Renaissance virtues.

Camilla, the heroine, is too virtuous and her husband, Varano, too noble, to be taken as anything more than the means to Andrea's spiritual change.

That Belli should become a holy man not only strains but fractures credulity.

More interesting and better drawn are the portraits of the novel's historical characters, especially Cesare Borgia, whose great charm and sinister nature Shellabarger most convincingly captures. Cesare is the man willing to pay the price for greatness: his reputation in history. In her one appearance, Lucrezia Borgia is much truer to the facts of her history than to the myths of her legend. Rodrigo Borgia, Pope Alexander VI, also makes a brief appearance.

Shellabarger's estimate of him as "sensual, shallow, and greedy" is undoubtedly correct. Fearing that some readers might find his characterization of Pope Alexander as a slight to the Catholic Church, Shellabarger points out in a textual aside that "contemporary and modern Catholic historians of the Church have adequately condemned him." There are also skillful pictures of various members of the d'Este family — Duke Ercole, Cardinal Ippolito, Don Alfonso. On the whole, Shellabarger's historical personages are shrewdly drawn and plausibly developed.

In this sweeping novel of Italy, set during the days of the Borgias, the hero Andrea Orsini learns that treachery in the name of a good cause can never be justified. If good does at times spring from evil, then it is to God's dispensation and not to evil that praise must go. One cannot ever serve God through villainy. Means determine the end. Thus argues vigorously the noble lord Varano, the voice of Andrea's conscience, planting seeds of doubt about Cesare Borgia's deceptions and ruthless policies in the mind of Cesare's protege, Andrea.

Varano's ideal city state, Citta del Monte — not to be found on any map of Renaissance Italy — is held together by love and justice, not fear and terror.

Loyalty and law, not betrayal and guile, are the underpinnings of the state's stability. The rule of love brings peace to Citta del Monte.

Shellabarger writes of the Italy of the Renaissance, but surely he had modern parallels in mind — Prince of Foxes appeared two years after the cataclysm of the Second World War.

Varano states, "The curse of Italy — it may be of the world — is that cities and states acknowledge no law superior to themselves. For only where law is, there is peace." But if, Varano continues, states unite "not for the sake of peace but to provide a conqueror with the greater means of war, what profit have we?" His words may be directed against Cesare, but the political analogues between Borgia tyranny and modern totalitarianism are difficult to overlook.

It would be wrong, however, to see this flamboyant, suspenseful, and entertaining novel as a political parable.

Yet beneath these exciting and colorful pages lies a lesson about the necessity for decency in politics and the importance of truth, justice, and honesty as the foundations for society.

Set against the rich and spacious canvas of Italy during the waning years of the Italian Renaissance when Cesare Borgia rose to power and fell, Prince of Foxes tells the story of Andrea Orsini, soldier of fortune and disciple of the great Cesare. Peasant born, Andrea passes himself off as an aristocrat and joins the forces of the powerful Borgia. He is as steeped and as skilled at treachery and counter — treachery, betrayal and double — dealing, as is his noble master. For a time Andrea believes Borgia to be Italy's savior and redeemer in his attempts to unite her warring city states under his aegis. But through the love of the chaste Camilla — wife (in name only) of Varano, one of Borgia's intended victims — and through the friendship of Varano himself, Andrea sees that loyalty to his master leads nowhere. Changing allegiances, Andrea thwarts Borgia's schemes. Renouncing ambition and power for love and decency, Andrea satisfies the spiritual hunger he has felt since joining with Cesare and frees himself from the self-scorn that has beset him.

Andrea's conversion is paralleled by that of his sidekick, the cutthroat Mario Belli, assassin by profession and traitor by nature, who through the intervention of a holy person — Saint Lucia of Narni — announces his intention in the book's closing pages to enter holy orders as a Franciscan friar.

In addition to being a thrilling story of politics, intrigue, and romance, Prince of Foxes is also a lively and knowledgeable guide to life in the Italy of the Borgias. Displayed before the reader is the glitter and pageantry as well as the dark side of one of the most stimulating epochs in the history of western man.

Lord Vanity Lord Vanity (1953) soundly condemns the amoral behavior of eighteenth-century European society with its pursuit of worldly success and pleasure. Shellabarger depicts a world lacking in spiritual values and devoted to the worship of Lord Vanity. "Lord Vanity rules our present world," says the voice of conscience in the book, the poet Vernier. Lord Vanity, the Prince of Darkness, is as much at home in the watering spas of

Bath as he is in the other settings of the novel, the drawing rooms of Paris and the palazzos of Venice. The choice offered Richard Morandi, the hero, is starkly clear: belief or nonbelief, honesty or sham, the practice of Christian values or the worship of worldliness.

Regenerated in the book's closing pages through his love for the virtuous heroine, Maritza, Richard leaves with her for America, the New World, where liberty, equality, and fraternity are to be found. The egalitarian note of Captain from Castile (1945) is sounded again. In the New World the hero, born on the left side of the bed, belongs as much or as little as anyone else.

Shellabarger recognizes that America is no paradise. Yet as Richard muses, "It's so big and new that a man has more of a chance to be himself." Maritza, fresh and courageous, belongs to the New World; Amelie, the doubledealing courtesan and the other woman in Richard's life, "reflects the Old." In the Old World, Lord Vanity is entertained nightly in the perfumed salons and glittering casinos. He has not yet crossed the Atlantic to the forests of the American vastness where one can breathe the fresh autumnal air.

As is the case with its predecessors, Lord Vanity is a picaresque novel of kaleidoscopic happenings. It follows its hero, Richard, the illegitimate son of a wealthy and noble Englishman, through eighteenth-century Europe and America. Readers first encounter Richard as an actor and musician in Venice during Carnival time, next as a Venetian galley slave, then as a young dandy in England under his father's sponsorship, later as a soldier in Wolfe's attack on Quebec, and finally as a secret agent in a dissolute Paris.

At the end of the novel, Richard is preparing to return to America with his beloved Maritza who has remained faithful to him despite his moral lapses.

Like Prince of Foxes (1947), Lord Vanity deals with both high adventure and romance. Desirous of taking his place as the son of Lord Marny and as a devotee of Lord Vanity, Richard lets nothing stand in his way, including scruples. He is a man seemingly without any compelling or unifying principle to his life except the pursuit of pleasure. Thus his regeneration a few pages from the end strikes one as implausible. It is stated for readers rather than logically developed and clearly shown throughout the book.

Shellabarger assuredly deplores the adoration of Lord Vanity, yet the char acters who best illustrate worldly values and amorality are far more interesting and vastly more entertaining than the novel's hero or good characters such as Maritza and her father.

Thus the power of Shellabarger's disapprobation is greatly diminished.

Richard's thrilling adventures are colorfully developed against a backdrop of history that has both richness and depth. As a character, however, Richard, the illegitimate son of a wealthy and noble Englishman, is very much a stick figure. He is passive, content to drift from adventure to adventure. A shallow man, he is too much the dabbler and gadabout to be as successful an opportunist as Andrea in Prince of Foxes. All too willing

to be a votary of Lord Vanity, his conversion grows more out of the author's need for a happy ending than from any gnawing doubts on Richard's part.

Nor is the unblemished Maritza, whose moral goodness supposedly snatches Richard from the allures of Vanity Fair, any more convincing.

Indeed, neither hero nor heroine is anywhere as diverting as the story itself. More successful is Amelie, Maritza's rival. Although her morals are questionable, she is far more alive and engaging than the prim Maritza.

Virtue has its rewards, but in this novel, at least, fictional characterization is not one of them.

The book's most fascinating characters are Richard's father, Lord Marny, and Richard's occasional nemesis, Cavaliere Marcello Tromba. Although fictional, both are based on real men.

Marny is a most persuasive portrait of Lord Chesterfield, the worldly and cynical statesman and diplomat, best remembered for his letters on deportment and manners to his natural son.

Count Alessandro di Cagliostro serves as the model for Tromba. Like Tromba, Cagliostro, a charlatan, traveled throughout Europe posing as a man of rank, all the while duping the credulous through seeming feats of magic and alchemy.

Marny is depicted as a man knowledgeable about the value of money in terms of the pleasure and power it buys. A clever, cynical, caustic man, he is completely dedicated to Lord Vanity, yet he is aware of the essential emptiness of Vanity Fair. The only warmth this otherwise cold man cherishes is his love for his natural son. His is a credible and shrewd characterization.

Equally impressive is Tromba, blackmailer, duelist, schemer. Mountebank though he may be, he is also wonderfully beguiling and charming.

Shellabarger has invented circumstances and imaginary adventures for both these men to suit his narrative needs. But his depiction of their attitudes toward life is faithful to those both Chesterfield and Cagliostro held: Man is basically selfish, virtue stands for nothing, pleasure is life's greatest end. Both men are striking exemplars of the novel's titular character. They are also, despite Shellabarger's disapproval of them, Lord Vanity's most captivating and irresistible characters.

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