

RETHORIC OF PLACE IN  
HENRY PEACHAM JR.'S WRITINGS

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...where may wisdom be had  
but from many men and in many places?  
(Henry Peacham Jr.)

*Theoretical Perspectives*

The title of this Conference *Letteratura e Territorio* seems to posit a question which is both thematic and epistemic. We will start to deal with it by asking ourselves if “Literature and Territory” refers mostly to the so-called “Travel Literature”, with its own specific “materials” (i.e., *journals de bord*, tourist guides, travel tales, and travel myths) or if this is just one of the many facets that are implicit in the title of this conference.

The topic we are asked to discuss could, in fact, also be taken in a strictly “spatial” sense, in which case we should focus on description in terms of the etymology of the word “geography”, and its Ptolemaic meaning of “illustration of the known world”. In this second perspective the topic “Literature and Territory” implies attention to a specific place, and its representation through different phenomena and techniques, most of which are usually considered “un-literary”. I am alluding to the creation of maps (Palagiano 1997), the elaboration of farming techniques (Formica 1997), urban and landscape development theories and practices (Lassus 1998), and demographic and socio-cultural studies (Mela et al. 1998).

I will for a moment suspend my judgment on the thematic dilemma travel *versus* setting and, without coming to a decision regarding the priority of one over the other (and the literary *sub-genra* deriving from this split), I prefer to point out that there is yet another possibility in the investigation of our complex topic. A new line of enquiry is provided by the existence of a *Sea Literature* (Lombardo 1997), a *Literature of Gardens and Country Houses* (Lane 1992; Carpi, Franci, Silvani 1993; Laird 1998; Kelsall 1993), an *Orient Literature* (Breckenridge, Van der Veer 1993), a

*Literature of Exile* (Eagleton 1970; Gurr 1981; Braidotti 1994; Zaccaria 1998) and a *Frontier Literature* (Todorov 1983; Mochi 1987; Calanchi 1998), of which the American Far West is perhaps the most famous, but by no means the only example. These types of literature seem to indicate that “place” and “travel” are often complementary territorial *topoi*, even if each of them is richly productive of literature in its own way. The need to keep a distinction between the two terms “travel” and “place”, and their respective semantic areas, has gradually become less and less compelling, especially due to, and during, direct contact with primary texts.

An examination of the textual strategies through which descriptions of a town or a city (but the same would hold true for the description of any place) reflect or transcribe its physical elements, inevitably foregrounds the distinction between territory as a “real” space and territory as a “cultural” space. In the latter case “territory” is a product, or better a projection, of the historical, mythical, theological, political, philosophical and/or literary imaginary. The distinction between “real” and “cultural” is, on the other hand, extremely problematic, since knowledge of the world is itself inevitably mediated by language, and also because even the world “seen with one’s own eyes” activates a series of epistemic distinctions, including sense and perception, the eye and the gaze, as well as the wider issue of perception and cognition<sup>1</sup>.

The space devoted to description in novels, in cartography, city planning studies, or tourist guides (like the *Michelin Guide*), is one which is inevitably produced through semiosis and accurate rhetorical strategies. What makes any place that particular place is a rhetoric, from its very beginning, starting from the act of naming, even before anything else is added, in terms of description<sup>2</sup>.

Semiotics helps us to understand both name and description, as well as anything else that may be (and usually is) added in the li-

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1 The problem of perception and cognition is obviously too vast to be dealt with here; but let me just mention Rudolf Arnheim, Ernst Gombrich, Nelson Goodman and Jaques Lacan’s innovative observations on the role of the image, because I believe that their works are an indispensable starting point for the study of the eye, thought and gaze (see Arnheim 1954, Gombrich 1956, Goodman 1976, Lacan 1979).

2 Description itself should be treated as a philosophical and semiotic problem, even before one applies this concept to “place” or “travel”. In this respect, see: Locatelli C. 1998: 13-65.

terature of locality, including ideological colouring. Connotation and denotation acquire a different semantic importance, within the characterization of a single space or trajectory, and their role and meaning varies also in different times and in different cultures. Travel and landscape descriptions are therefore interesting indexes of the epistemic orientation of the culture in which they are produced.

In other words, travel and territory are “translated” in various ways by the literary imagination, through both the collective imaginary and the individual imagination and style of the single writer. Territories and journeys can come to symbolize different themes and objects: for example distance, alterity, holiness, progress, liberty, adventure, mystery. Travel is usually associated with a quest, with material or spiritual improvement of some kind. A description of place is usually meant as a mirror of a culture (native or foreign).

Information and symbol are two key components of any travel narrative or literature of place. The quantity and proportion of information and symbol are usually carefully calculated in different *genera*, in order to produce specific effects on the reader. Place and travel have their own rules in the epic, or in allegorical works, in tales of moral education, in fairy tales, in the picaresque novel, in the sentimental novel, in Neoclassical or Romantic poetry, in the *Bildungsroman*, in tales of adventure, in Modernist experimental fiction, in *science fiction*, and in the Postmodern novel<sup>3</sup>.

Instead of drawing a sharp opposition between “travel” and *milieu*, the literature of place *versus* the literature of travel, space *versus* itinerary, scene *versus* journey, milieu *versus* movement, we have to interpret the meaning and function of both and each of these elements within specific works and *genera* and within the contexts that have determined these creations. As I have said, spa-

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3 I will briefly mention some famous examples for each of these *genera*, ranging from *The Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, to *The Divine Comedy*, from John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* to Laurence Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey*, from Alexander Pope’s *Windsor Forest* to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Khubla Khan*, from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, from Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* to David Lodge’s *Changing Places*, and contemporary science fiction.

ce is defined, described and known as far as it is processed semiotically, or, in other words, appropriated, by a specific culture.

Another point I wish to make, before closing these theoretical observations, is that the ancient, but still effective, myth of the “readability of the world” (Blumenberg 1984), cannot be separated from the study of the relationship between “Literature and Territory”. Moreover, this myth of the “readability of the world” is strictly linked, in more recent times, to what I would call the twin-myth of “the writeability of the world” – a myth which is established and promoted by Mediaeval and Renaissance cartography, and by the proliferation of exploration journals, during the age that is usually defined, with typical Eurocentric prejudice, “the age of great geographical discoveries” (of the Indies and America). I must add that the myth of the readability of the world has sacred and idealistic connotations (these are evident, for example, in the Bible and in Romantic Transcendentalism), whereas the myth of the writeability has lay and pragmatic connotations, deriving from an age that thinks of knowledge as power and of wisdom as a way of life rather than as speculation (Bacon *docet*). To this very age belong both Shakespeare and the much less known Henry Peacham Jr., both of them being involved, more or less consciously, and to a different degree, in the construction, through literature, of both England as a nation, and of its imperialistic future.

#### *Elizabethan and Jacobean Landscape*

I will now focus on some representations of Jacobean England, and in particular on some representations of London, in the works of Henry Peacham Jr.<sup>4</sup>. Together with his pamphlets *The Art of Living in London*, and *The Truth of Our Times*, I will take into consideration his earlier pedagogical treatise *The Compleat Gentleman*,

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4 Henry Peacham Jr., (1578-1644?), son of Henry Peacham the Elder, a minister and rhetorician (author of *The Garden of Eloquence*), was himself a typical product of late Humanism. He was a teacher, engraver, antiquarian, writer, a complex character in XVII Century English culture. His best known work is *The Compleat Gentleman*, a treatise for the education of the aristocracy, but he is also remembered for several satirical pamphlets against Puritans and for his rich collections of Emblems (see Locatelli A., *Semantic Integration and Diversion in Henry Peacham's Emblems* in this volume).

and his short picaresque novel, *The Merry Discourse of Meum and Tuum*, in which descriptions of the capital are framed by “snapshots” of life in Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire.

My aim is to show how variations of *genre* (pamphlet, treatise or novel) determine a different description of the same place and territory. The difference depends on the purpose of writing, which is in turn responsible (whether consciously or unconsciously) for the authorial choice of one *genre* rather than another. The representation of territory clearly changes if the work is meant as an educational, informative, or entertaining text and therefore if it is a tale, a satire, a travel journal or a realistic novel. I believe that landscape description does not exist as an absolute *per se*, but is a variable of the narrative in which it appears.

As I have shown elsewhere (Locatelli A. 1993: 69-84), Shakespeare often turns to history and myths of cities such as Venice, Rome, Verona, Mantua (just to mention a few of his Italian settings) in order to create the myth of London as an internationally relevant centre and as the capital of the nation. Let us think, for instance, of his choice of describing Venice, but meaning London, in *The Merchant of Venice*, of describing Verona, but again meaning London in *Romeo and Juliet*; or let us consider the creation of analogies between the capital of England and Rome in *Julius Caesar*<sup>5</sup>. The use of certain adjectives and attributes in order to suggest similarities or contrasts with famous or strange and exotic places is part of a self-fashioning strategy, of an ennobling representation that the artist promotes on behalf of his own culture. Shakespeare clearly belongs to an age which is marked by a strong self-celebrating impulse, which is rooted in the defense of a national identity *vis à vis* contact with new worlds and different civilizations. Elizabethan and Jacobean curiosity about difference is far from being “pure” (and respectful of otherness), and combines instead with the perception of alterity as a necessary complement to national power, and hence with the violent appropriation of other worlds.

Because of their common historical background, Shakespeare’s plays can be productively compared to the works of his contempo-

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5 In this respect I wish to recall Yuri M. Lotman’s seminal observations on re-naming, myth-making, and labelling of cities such as Jerusalem, Rome, and Moscow (Lotman 1990: 123-204).

raries, including those of Thomas Nashe and Henry Peacham Jr., and, a few decades later, to the novels of Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding, whose attitudes, in their description of the same country and the same places, express a very different point of view from that of “The Bard of Stratford”.

Henry Peacham Jr. pays a lot of attention to London, in works of different import and kind<sup>6</sup>. London is seen in various ways, and “written” in concomitantly various styles. Changes in the description do not alter the fact that his ideology is the “opposite” of Shakespeare’s, because his intention is anti-mythical, and because Peacham’s London is described and defined as a place of adventure and vice, of pleasure and danger, rather than as the highest seat of moral and political authority. Peacham almost ignores the national or international relevance of London in political terms, which was, on the contrary, the main purpose of Shakespeare’s ideologized geography. As I have said, for the dramatist London is the symbolic centre of the country, and the core of a kingdom that is undergoing a process of expansion on the world scene; but for Peacham, London is “central” only in the sense that it attracts all kinds of people, from different regions, classes, and conditions:

London... the city whither all sorts reside, noble and simple, rich and poor, young and old, from all places and countries, either for pleasure (and let me add besides, to save the charge of housekeeping in the country) or profit (TALL: 243).

People from different backgrounds and cultures walk the streets of the English capital, all of them moved by a common, and certainly not heroic, desire for entertainment and gain, or, in Peacham’s own words, a desire for “pleasure” or “profit”. The subtitle of *The Art of Living in London* is significant in this respect:

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6 Henry Peacham Jr. *The Complete Gentleman, The Truth of Our Times and The Art of Living in London*, edited by Virgil B. Heltzel, published for The Folger Shakespeare Library, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York 1962. Quotations and page numbers refer to these editions. Titles are abbreviated as follows: TCG (*The Complete Gentleman*), TTOT (*The Truth of Our Times*), TALL (*The Art of Living in London*). *The Merry Discourse of Meum and Tuum*, edited by Angela Locatelli, with an Introduction, Notes and an Italian Translation, is published by Jaca Book, Milano 1998, and abbreviated as TMDMT.

The Art of Living in London; or, A caution how gentlemen, countrymen, and strangers, drawn by occasion of business, should dispose of themselves in the thriftiest way, not only in the city, but in all other populous places. As also, A direction to the poorer sort that come thither to seek their fortunes.

In *The Complete Gentleman*<sup>7</sup>, a work that Peacham had written several years earlier than *The Art*, the purpose of the young aristocrat's grand tour, seems to be the same (albeit expressed in Latin, as well as in English) as that of a visit to the English capital:

If, therefore, you intend to travel, you must first propound unto yourself the end, which either is ad voluptatem vel ad utilitatem, pleasure or profit (TCG: 161).

The advice provided in the pamphlets for unexperienced visitors to London, recall the schoolmaster's words in the Chapter "On Travel" in *The Compleat Gentleman*:

In your passage I must give you in either hand a light: preservation and observation-preservation of your mind from errors and ill manners; of your body from distemperature either by overeating, drinking, violent or venereal exercise (TCG: 161).

The idea that for people from all regions and social conditions visiting London is an experience resembling that of the young aristocrat sent abroad, may seem rather bizarre, but if we look at it more closely, we understand that this analogy is created in order to suggest that the English capital is a true and perfect microcosm. A similar concept is to be found in Dr. Johnson's famous *sententia*: "When a man is tired of London he is tired of Life". Incidentally, the sense that living in London is in some ways the equivalent of travelling abroad helps to erase the sharp distinction between travel literature and landscape literature.

Despite the similarities drawn, in each of the works, between a visit to London and travel abroad, we must notice that in *The Truth Of Our Times* and in *The Art of Living in London*, the tone is somehow more anxious and therefore the setting more sombre. The

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7 See, in particular, chapter XVIII of TCG: 159-170, "Of Travel".

*genre* has clearly changed from educational treatise (TCG) to cautionary tale or narrative.

But there is yet another feature of Peacham's "descriptions" that is worth noticing. Peacham often chooses to describe his settings in an unusual, and almost anomalous fashion, in the sense that they are always filtered by anthropomorphic presences and, in some instances, particularly in the picaresque novel (TMDMT), setting is almost subordinate to character. Space is often denoted by the people who occupy it, who either reside or move in it. From the discrepancy between the place and its inhabitants often comes Peacham's wonderful satirical vein. It is a satirical or comical element that extends the boundaries of *couleur locale* towards a sort of anthropological geography or a micro-history *ante litteram*.

Peacham's novel is pleasant and entertaining because the lively sketches of his characters brighten the rather cold description of an otherwise abstract place. He prefers to foreground the "watermen" working at Westminster Bridge, rather than this setting *per se*. He describes the Inns of Court through the eyes of the people who move through them, either as timid students, or as clever "elders". He lingers on the action of the bears and dogs' trainers, instead of spending words on the physical and architectural features of the buildings in which they work; yet the reader has the impression of having visited such buildings, because s/he has seen them through the eyes of the characters watching them. The episode of the Great Hall in *The Merry Discourse of Meum and Tuum* is interesting in this respect, because Peacham offers a description through the words of a character who is in charge of keeping the Hall clean. He tells his visitors (and us) that there are dust and cobwebs on the beams and under the benches, but also sings the praises of the place to Meum and Tuum. Their reaction to the building "turns into" the reader's perception of it: "to Westminster they goe, where looking about them, they admired the largeness and statelinese of the Hall"<sup>8</sup>.

In this episode we see that Peacham does not completely ignore the fact that London is the capital of the country and the symbolic centre of its history; he includes accurate historical information on the nobility that has inhabited and decorated Westminster, yet he

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<sup>8</sup> For a fuller description see TMDMT: 20-21 of the original TMDMT (Locatelli A. 1998: 88-91).

also wants to show that a *Theeving-lane* exists side by side with the Courts:

Forward they goe, and at last get to London a place they long longed to see, especially Westminster, and the Courts there in Terme time: wherefore they resolved to lodge and place themselves thereabout. Meum toke a Chamber in Theeving-lane: Tuum, a little darke roome, that had but one window, no bigger than a Cat might creepe through, hard by Hell, neare to the upper end of Westminster-Hall: being provided of their lodging, the next day they had an humour (having yet nothing to doe,) to goe see a Beare-baiting, over the Water... (TMDMT: 82).

On several occasions during the narrative, and not only in the picaresque *genre*, Peacham deals at length with the “lower quarters” and includes in his narrative the theatres, taverns, bear-gardens that are situated “over the water”, on the other side of the Thames. He thus refuses to provide a cold and neutral description of the capital. This proves that his “topography” and “geography” of London are very accurate and fairly unbiased ideologically. The bear-rings of the above quotation are undoubtedly situated in the very dark corners where Shakespeare’s career as an actor had started (but which he never explicitly recalls). In Peacham, on the contrary, it is clear that the City’s “high quarters” have an outside, an extra-territorial and extra-social dimension. The City, the Inns of Court, Westminster Palace and the “low” places are juxtaposed. In fact, the above quotation demonstrates that Peacham adopts “a rhetoric of place” that implies a strong correlation between the two areas. The city is a *polymorphic* space in its variety and it is a *dual* space in its contrasts. Peacham’s demystifying description (especially if compared to Shakespeare’s myth-making) is, of course, strongly linked to the literary *genre* that Peacham has chosen: the picaresque novel rather than the tragedy. In any case, the writer adopts a dialogic and carnivalesque (in Bakhtin’s sense 1979, 1981, 1988) world picture and philosophy.

In the late pamphlets Peacham provides a picture of the capital that is less contradictory than the dual place of the novel, but this London is gloomier, since these works abound in a series of warnings that are typical of “morality” literature. These precepts inevitably lead the writer to deal almost exclusively with the most dangerous areas of the city. The fun, the tongue-in-cheek attitude

of the picaresque *genre* has vanished from these pages. We meet bragging youths who end up in jail for drunkennes, or gamblers who steal from a young heir or from novices<sup>9</sup>, and we come across prostitutes and criminals<sup>10</sup>. Peacham contrasts all dangerous pleasures with happier and healthier pastimes, such as tennis, riding, archery or bowling<sup>11</sup>. By so doing he obviously opens our eyes to other facets of daily urban life.

Being the son of a rhetorician, and hence well trained in the use of tropes, Peacham Jr. routinely uses similes, metaphors, anthithesis, and a whole range of other figures of speech in order to give his description a very effective icastic quality. The city is seen and therefore pictured as “a sea, full of gusts”, as a “stomach”, as a “thorny wood”, or as “a quicksand”. We should not overlook the fact that these images outline a psychological space, rather than a physical territory, and that they are more suggestive than actually descriptive. This is the secret of their force of persuasion, and of their rhetorical appeal. In *The Art of Living in London* we read:

Now the city being like a vast sea, full of gusts, fearul-dangerous shelves and rocks, ready at every storm to sink and cast away the weak and unexperiens bark with her fresh-water soldiers, as wanting her compass and her skillful pilot, myself, like another Columbus or Drake, acquainted with her rough entertainment and storms, have drawn you this chart or map for your guide as well out of mine own as my many friends' experience (TALL: 243-44)<sup>12</sup>.

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9 “Next, let every man *beware of* play and gaming, as cards, especially dice, at ordinaries and other places, for in the city there are many who, when they live only by cheatin’, are so cunning that they will so strip a young heir or novice but lately come to town, and woodcocklike so pull his wings that he shall in a short time never be able to fly over ten acres of his own land” (TALL: 246).

10 “Drunken men are apt to lose their hats, cloaks or rapiers, not to know what they have spent, how much money they have, and full oft have their pockets picked by whores and knaves” (TALL: 246). “*Beware* in the city, *ab istis calidis solis filiabus*, as Lipsius saith, these overhot and crafty daughters of the sun, your silken and gold-laced harlots everywhere, especially in the suburbs, to be found” (TALL: 247).

11 “There is less danger in outdoors recreations then, as shooting, bowls, riding, tennis, etc.” (TALL: 246).

12 In this and in the following quotations emphasis is mine, unless otherwise indicated.

If the city is seen as a vast sea, the role of the narrator is explicitly compared to that of the great explorers, Columbus and Drake, who had just opened up important routes to the New World. That posits an equivalence, or at least a strong similarity, between the ability of those who sail across the ocean and those who manage to survive, or even find their fortune, in the city. In other words, the narrator, through this comparison, is creating a myth of both the city and himself at the same time.

Again, later on, in the metaphor that depicts the city as “a wood where there is as many briars as people”, the narrator portrays himself as a much-needed defender of naive travellers:

Who therefore soever shall have occasion to come to the city... he is entered into a wood where there is as many briars as people, everyone as ready to catch hold of your fleece as yourself. For we see that sheep, when they pass through a thorny or a bushy place, they leave locks of wool behind them; so imagine a populous city could not live or subsist (like a stomach) except it have help and nourishment from the other parts and members (TALL: 244).

The omnivorous quality of the city is manifest in the figure of the “stomach” which emphasizes its “cannibalism”, despite the fact that this simile is shown in parenthesis. In Peacham’s eyes, as well as in the eyes of a whole series of writers that follow, this “devouring” quality is given as a typical feature of the (early) modern metropolis, of which London is the archetype. One is tempted to suggest that descriptions of Nineteenth Century London are as much the outcome of direct observation and experience, as they are the result of a re-writing process that through the great realistic novel of the XVIII century harkens back to Jacobean prose, and to Restoration “City Comedy”. We must reasonably conclude that cities and places that have a literary dimension are always re-written even when they appear to be described as “seen with the writer’s own eyes”, and for the first time. On the other hand, this happens because the reader’s expectations are already oriented towards certain elements of the description that s/he “wants” to recognize in the new text. Finding the elements s/he is aware of from previous texts so obviously gratifies the reader that s/he would judge the description to be inadequate if they were missing.

But let us return to Peacham's text, and deal with the third simile we have mentioned:

For the city is like a quicksand: the longer you stand upon it the deeper you sink, if here money or means to get it be wanting (TALL: 245).

This "portrait" of the city conveys, between the terrible lines of warning, a sense of it as a place where excitement and entertainment are found, but at a very high price. The city "belongs" to all sorts of cynical and corrupt characters, and therefore visitors have to be both brave and careful: "If you are a countryman and but newly come to town, you will be smelt out by some cheater or other" (TALL: 249). Crowded places should be avoided, theatres in particular (which, as I have said, flourished in the underprivileged sections of London) because theatres are attended by all sorts of people, including clever pickpockets. Peacham reminds us that "The fingers of a number go beyond your sense of feeling" (TALL: 249) and, in *The Art of Living in London*, he corroborates his suggestion with the episode of the lady whose purse was stolen, from under her petticoat, simply because she misunderstood the nature of the gesture, as she candidly confesses to her husband later.

Peacham adopts the first person in his narratives in order to give more credibility and prestige to his discourse. This reminds us of an important semiotic truth: i.e. the fact that travel literature is always based on the myth of experience. In this sense, Peacham's "autobiographical" pages are often a mixture of travel literature and detailed landscape description:

I have observed as I have gone along those countries many excellent points of good husbandry in the fields and gardens which we here in England have not been acquainted withal, as in manuring their land so at one time that it shall bear a great crop seven or ten years together; their artificial plows that shall turn up in a day as much as two of ours; their neat and handsome stacking of their corn abroad to stand dry all the winter; their many devices for draining grounds, casting of moats and town ditches; many excellent forms of grafting, adulterating plants and flowers, with infinite such devices (TTOT: 219).

The social typology that Peacham outlines in *The Art of Living in London* sometimes reminds us of what Tobias Smollett proposes in *Roderick Random*. When Roderick, the picaresque hero, goes to London, with his mate Strap (a sort of Sancho Panza) their impression of the city confirms the view of a place that is more difficult than enjoyable or interesting. In fact, Strap says:

God send us well out of this place, we have not been in London eight and forty hours, and I believe we have met with eight and forty thousand misfortunes. We have been jeered, reproached, buffeted, pissed upon and at last stript of our money: and I suppose by and by we shall be stript of our skins (Smollet 1972: 72).

A detailed comparison between *Roderick Random* and *The Merry Discourse of Meum and Tuum* shows that the picaresque novel has become “darker” in the years between Peacham and Smollett’s lives. In their works there is evidence of the fact that London has absorbed more and more people from the underworld and has suffered growing criminal activities. In fact, the fiction concerning the city is changing both as regards tone and genre. We are drifting towards the so-called *Rogue Literature*, which is certainly less “merry” than Peacham’s discourse on his “very own and golden” city.

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