

COMMENTARY

Modern Chivalry (4 Volumes 1792-1815)



Hugh Henry Brackenridge

(1748–1816)

Modern Chivalry is still a funny book--witty, droll and understated like much literary British humor and similar to the pokerfaced tall-tale tradition that began in the American South during the 1830s and reached apotheosis in Twain's picaresque *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). The rational hero is repeatedly exasperated by his servant Teague, an illiterate Irish immigrant. Teague seduces a chambermaid and succeeds in shifting the blame to a minister, he is invited to join the American Philosophical Society only because he finds a dead owl in the road, he becomes a newspaper editor though he can neither read nor write, he gets appointed Ambassador to Great Britain and seems destined for the Presidency.

See fictional film adaptation in novel *Hollywood* (2004).

Michael Hollister (2015)

“A more thoroughly American book than any written before 1833.”

Henry Adams

“[Brackenridge] remains perhaps the best contemporary observer of the true ‘rising glory’ of America in the last quarter of the eighteenth century: the freedom of the individual to choose his own occupation and to improve his condition without the handicap of rigid class distinction.... More than once he found himself defeated at the polls, vilified in the local newspapers, and suspected by his party leaders. His recourse, fortunately, was to satire...

There is no better record [than *Modern Chivalry*] of the society which rebelled against Alexander Hamilton's internal revenue measures in the so-called Whiskey Insurrection of 1791-1794.... It is a

picaresque novel obviously modeled on *Don Quixote*, with chapters of author's commentary in the manner of Swift's *The Tale of a Tub* and Fielding's *Tom Jones*. The subject matter dominates the form, and *Modern Chivalry*, though sprawling and uneven, retains vitality.... The first two volumes...and the third...describe the frontier's exaltation of the common man, personified by Teague, the ignorant Irish immigrant, without regard to his merits. A fourth volume...was based on the Whiskey Insurrection. The fifth and sixth volumes...satirize political journalism and the popular distrust of courts and lawyers....directed against both the absurdities of classification in biological science and the pettifogging aspects of the law."

Blair, Hornberger, Stewart, Miller
The Literature of the United States I, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953,1966) 498-99

"Except for the work of Brockden Brown, the most important early American novel was Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*. In many ways it is better than Brown, the work of a distinguished patriot and a distinguished mind.... Steeped in the classics, in *Don Quixote*, Rabelais, Montaigne, and the eighteenth-century Augustans, he brought Roman dignity to his backwoods residence... The realism and common sense of *Modern Chivalry* would have delighted the [Neoclassical] Augustans, though they would not have relished its sprawling form.... It is the closest American approach to the picaresque novels of Europe, though it is somewhat overweighted by reflective passages, not all of which are so amusing as the one in which Brackenridge accounts for the races of mankind by assuming that 'Adam was a tall, straight-limbed, red-haired man, with a fair complexion...and that Eve was a negro woman'."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 8-9

"For comic force and satirical point and power of observation, [no American compares] to the Pennsylvanian Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748-1816), who between 1792 and 1815 published the various installments of his satirical novel *Modern Chivalry*.... He coveted, he said, and followed the style of Hume, Swift, and Fielding--like Swift in *A Tale of a Tub* alternating chapters of narrative with ironical essays on all manner of subjects. Captain Farrago, the hero, is a new Don Quixote, who takes it into his head to leave his farm in western Pennsylvania 'and ride about the world a little, with his man Teague at his heels, to see how things were going on here and there, and to observe human nature.' As a description of manners in the early days of the Republic the book is unapproached by any other.

Races, elections, rural conjurers, pseudo-scientists, inns, duels and challenges, treaties with Indians, the American Philosophical Society...hedge parsons, brothels, colleges, Congress, Quakers, lawyers, theaters, law courts...dancing masters, excise officers, tar and feathers, insurrections: all these are displayed in the first part of the book with verisimilitude and spirit. Much of the action of this part is furnished by the doings of Teague, a grotesque and witless Sancho Panza, whose impudent ambition survives the most ludicrous and painful misadventures. Brackenridge regarded him as typical of the political upstarts of the period, and his triumphs as an accusation properly to be brought against the public which followed such sorry leaders.

In Part II Captain Farrago, after a brief hiatus spent on his farm, resumes his travels, which at first do not take him beyond the limits of the nearest village, with its newspaper, academy, coffee house, lunatic asylum, and fair, but which eventually bring him to a settlement in the back country of which he becomes governor. The remainder of the book, ostensibly a chronicle of the new settlement, is virtually a burlesque of the history of America in the years following the Revolution. The settlers war with the Indians and make a constitution. They legislate like half-mad tyros, under the guidance of a visionary from Washington who holds that beasts should have the vote as well as men, and actually persuades his fellow-citizens to commission a monkey clerk of the court and admit a hound to the bar.

Brackenridge, himself a firm democrat of the classic school, aimed his satire primarily at doctrinaires and demagogues, but he laid his whip on almost all current follies and affectations, extending and revising his work through seven volumes, finally collected in two, to keep pace with new absurdities. Learned and pugnacious, as well as humorous, he had a popular audience in mind.... For half a century *Modern*

Chivalry was a good deal read, nowhere more so than along the very frontier which it satirized. One of the first books published west of the Alleghanies, it is the only early American novel which is still entertaining, and it is a lasting document on its confused time."

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1940-68) 6-7

"The satirical novel was not so prolific as the sentimental, for its irony was disturbing to the Calvinist mind, and its humor, often arising from sordid picaresque episodes, was objectionable. Yet the use of satire is one of the first signs of intellectual maturity, of the writer's consciousness of his art. Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* may therefore be listed as among our more important achievements in the last decade of the eighteenth century....

As a picaresque story *Modern Chivalry* contains many of the stock elements and devices of eighteenth-century British fiction. Chief of these is the framework of roadside adventures experienced by a master and a servant--a parody...of *Don Quixote* and Sancho Panza....a blundering, conscienceless, irrepressible oaf who passes from one ludicrous scrape to another, to be rescued and lectured (vainly) by his master on each occasion.... Teague is a walking embodiment of some of the ills of a raw republic, and his crude actions stimulate Captain Farrago's...analysis of governmental abuses....

Brackenridge was not opposed to democratic government. Indeed he explains that to him it is 'beyond all question the freest.' His target in *Modern Chivalry* is not democracy itself but rather its incompetence and corruption. Crude and illiterate as he is, Teague is everywhere invited to assume positions for which he is totally unqualified except by a certain good-natured acquiescence.... When on one occasion he disappears, the Captain not unnaturally fears that he will find him speaking in the Congress or lecturing at a university... His general method is to show Teague in an incongruous situation from which he is somehow extricated by the Captain, and then to pass on to appropriate philosophical reflections regarding government and society.... Thus Brackenridge thrusts at Hamiltonian politics and at the excessive power of the courts.... 'The great moral of this book,' he concludes, 'is the evil of men seeking office for which they are not qualified.'... Because he loved democracy, he became one of its sternest critics....

He once asserted that English is better written in America than in England and his own prose could stand comparison with most of the best that eighteenth century England produced. He said he intended *Modern Chivalry* for 'Tom, Dick and Harry in the woods'; but its quality was such as to appeal primarily to the intelligentsia. His was one of the ripest minds of the era. While the lady novelists were dispensing simple, serious lessons in morality for young folk, Brackenridge was teaching his fellow men how to be good citizens. His was the harder task."

Alexander Cowie
Literary History of the United States
(Macmillan 1946-63) 178-80

"In its more than one hundred and fifty years of existence, *Modern Chivalry* has become, according to Mark Twain's definition, a classic--a book which many people have talked about, but which not many people read. This, as its whimsical author might have explained, may not be entirely the book's fault, for *Modern Chivalry* has long been out of print...

Like *Don Quixote*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and Fielding's *Tom Jones*, all of which must often have been in Brackenridge's mind as he wrote, *Modern Chivalry* is a tale of adventuring, episodic and repetitive--what is generally known...as a picaresque novel. But whatever its European antecedents, it is a distinctively American book, not just because of its homespun, native characters and its often slapstick, broad humor which links it casually to Irving's "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1819), to Augustus B. Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (1835), and to Seba Smith's accounts of the escapades of Jack Downing; but also because it is a narrative of journeying and questing, like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or, at farther remove, *Moby-Dick*--another of those tales, loosely strung, which it seems might go on and on, without plotted ending.... Teague O'Regan had less good sense than Huckleberry Finn, and fewer moments

of grace--unlike Huck, he yearned to be 'civilized,' and all at once; but as much as Huck, he was his own worst enemy....

Captain Farrago is a good-natured caricature of the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal--a small farmer, well-read and well-mannered, who had patriotically enlisted for the defense of his country...and who then returned to cultivate his lands and observe his countrymen, quick to correct and admonish.... Most people, by and large, are foolish. Brackenridge, to be sure, is serious about the dangers of popular suffrage; he manifestly distrusts the Indian and says some scurrilous things about the Negro... Some readers, when presented with Teague befeathered and caged, will recall Melville's later presentation in *Israel Potter* of a manacled Ethan Allen....

Brackenridge's language...is simple, direct, colloquial, and sometimes coarse. He calls a hussy a hussy, speaks with natural familiarity of bodily functions, and does not feel that he needs to use dashes or asterisks when it is necessary to have a character described as a son of a bitch. Many years would pass, and much public and private censorship, before everyday speech was more faithfully recorded, or the activities of ordinary people presented with such unblushing candor."

Lewis Leary
Introduction
Modern Chivalry
(College & University Press 1965)

Michael Hollister (2015)