

Bourland's Introduction to Alarcón's Life and Work

This perspective on Pedro Antonio de Alarcón's life and his works is derived by TC Rindfleisch from the Project Gutenberg version of [El Sombrero de Tres Picos](#). This introduction was prepared originally by Prof. Benjamin P. Bourland of the Adelbert College of Western Reserve University, and published by Henry Holt and Company, New York, Copyright, 1907 and 1934.

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I. Alarcón's Life

Pedro Antonio de Alarcón was born at Guadix in the province of Granada, the 10th of March 1833, the fourth of ten children of an old and noble family, whose wealth had been lost in the wars of the Napoleonic period and the disorders that had followed. His father destined him for the bar, and after reaching the baccalaureate at the age of fourteen, at the *seminario* of Guadix, he went to Granada to begin his professional studies, only to be recalled by the *res angusta domi* to his home, where perforce he exchanged jurisprudence for theology, and began preparation for the priesthood.

The boy's heart was not in his professional studies, and his best efforts were given to other matters; he taught himself French and Italian, began to write, and formed the project of going to Madrid, to set up as a man of letters. His parents declined to support him in this ambition, but Alarcón persisted. Through Torcuato Tárrago, a young writer at that time living in Guadix, he was introduced to a Cadiz publisher, who undertook the issuing of a weekly journal, *El Eco de Occidente*, which was to appear at Cadiz and Granada, and whose literary redaction was to be entrusted to the two young men. The venture was successful. After three years' work the savings seemed sufficient, and on the 18th of January, 1853, Alarcón left home.

He went first to Cadiz, where he gave his attention to matters concerning the journal, and a month later he reached Madrid,—without introduction or friends, but with some little money and with a goodly sheaf of verses, notably an ambitious continuation of Espronceda's *Diablo Mundo*, all of which he burned, after much interviewing of publishers. In short, he did not get along at all at the capital, and when his money was gone and the husks were sour, he made his own the immemorial custom of the prodigal, and went back to his father's house. A complete reconciliation followed his return. He had been drawn for military service: his father purchased his release, and gave him permission to live in Granada, where he renewed his connection with the *Eco de Occidente*. In Granada also he found agreeable literary society, and the year spent there was one of profit to himself and of success for his journal, in whose management he had an increasing influence and part.

His first mingling in politics was in 1854, when he took open and active part in the rebellion that culminated in the mutiny of Vicálvaro (the 30th of June), distinguishing himself by his noisy and

militant radicalism, and gaining the ill-will of many of the elements whose favor, in his later life, he found it wise to win—the clergy, the army, the national militia. Before the end of the year he was in Madrid, where he became the editor of *El Látigo*, the most extreme of the anti-royalist periodicals. This connection was ended by a duel, and Alarcón gave up politics for the time, and retired to Segovia, to restore health broken by irregular living, and to write. *El Final de Norma* was the most ambitious work that dates from this time, with a very great number of short stories and miscellaneous articles published in various journals, all of which brought him a considerable reputation throughout Spain. In 1856 he visited Paris and "wrote up" the exposition of that year for the Spanish press. Towards the end of 1857 he made his appearance at the theatre of the Circo at Madrid, with his one play, *El Hijo Pródigo*. The *première* was riotously successful, but the critics were against the author, whose personality seems to have been a large factor in the matter, and the piece was soon withdrawn. In 1859 Alarcón volunteered for the campaign in Morocco, and after doing excellent service, was honorably discharged in April, 1860, when he returned to Spain. The fruit of this military experience was the *Diario de un testigo de la Guerra de África*, which is of his best work. The book was exceedingly successful commercially, and the author's profits permitted him the journeying in France, Switzerland, and Italy, whose story is told in *De Madrid a Nápoles*, two volumes of fairly acute observation and superior literary worth. (August, 1860—February, 1861).

From this time until 1873 Alarcón was devoted to an active political life, into whose details we need not follow him. He was deputy from Guadix much of the time, and was prominent as a writer for the *Época*, then as now the first conservative newspaper of Spain, and later as one of the founders and editors of *La Política*. He had much success, and we are told that only feelings of personal delicacy stood between him and the holding of at least one ministerial portfolio. In 1866 he was one of the signers of a celebrated protest of the unionist deputies, and was dignified by being sent into exile for a time, and afterwards being forbidden to live in Madrid. In 1863 his father died, and in 1866 he was married in Granada to Doña Paulina Contreras y Reyes.

From 1873 until his death, July 18, 1891, he lived principally in Madrid, until 1888 taking a large part in literary life, and not without some mingling in matters public. In 1875, as one of the early supporters of the Alfonsine restoration, he was made Councillor of State; and on December 15th of the same year he was elected to the Spanish Academy, in which he took his seat about a year later. His pen was very active. *El Sombrero de tres picos*, *El Escándalo*, *El Niño de la Bola*, *La Pródiga*, *El Capitán Veneno*, are from this final period, which was opened with *La Alpujarra*. He gave much time also to revising, selecting, and destroying, to which process we owe the definitive collection of works noticed below. In 1887 his powers began noticeably to fail. In 1888 there was a first hemiplegia—then other attacks followed in December 1889, and February, 1890, and the final one in July, 1891.

II. Alarcón's Works

Alarcón's writings have been brought together in nineteen volumes, sixteen of which are of the well known *Colección de Escritores Castellanos*. There are three volumes of short stories, the *Novelas Cortas*; four longer novels, *El Escándalo*, *La Pródiga*, *El Final de Norma*, *El Niño de la Bola*; two stories that are neither long nor short, *El Capitán Veneno* and *El Sombrero de tres picos*; one volume of popular sketches, *Cosas que fueron*; three volumes of travels, *Viajes por España*, one volume, and *De Madrid a Nápoles*, two; an historic-geographical study, *La Alpujarra*; one volume of essays, *Juicios Literarios*; and one volume of verse. The three volumes outside the collection contain the celebrated *Diario de un testigo de la Guerra de África*.

Of all this mass, only two works are really first-rate: *El Sombrero de tres picos* and *El Capitán Veneno*; of the special merits of these we shall speak again presently. The diary of the African war has won praise, and so have the books of travel; an occasional short story is good; the longer novels have no permanent worth, the verse is insignificant.

The most ambitious of the novels, *El Escándalo*, was published in 1875. Its author, in his *Historia de mis libros*, included in the collected works in the volume with *El Capitán Veneno*, makes a defence of this book that is most illuminating as to the principles of criticism practiced by the Spanish critics of the day, and that gives us a clear sight of the literary conditions of the time. The artistic question does not seem to have been raised: the one asked is simply as to the author's attitude toward certain other matters, chiefly of religion; and it is on the correctness of these views that the book is to stand or fall. Alarcón in his defence, accepts the situation, and joins issue: and he does this with a willingness that lets us see that his own mind could discover no impropriety in treating literature in that way.^[1] Herein lies the explanation of many weaknesses in Alarcón's work, which, given his many good qualities, might else cause us to wonder.

Alarcón's best points are a very keen eye for a situation, thorough control of a language adequate to his matter, an excellent idea of the exigencies of style offered by his situations, and a keen sense of humor, which, however, occasionally goes to sleep or deserts. His weakness lies in the faulty idea of his task already pointed out, in a certain immaturity, a childish petulance that stays with him to the last, and in an utter inability to develop a character. He can picture one admirably, but he cannot make one grow; and in general, he does not try it. The one place in which he has some measure of success in this not easy task is in Don Jorge of the *Capitán Veneno*, whose struggle is very prettily exhibited; but the great, the serious effort, Fabián Conde in *El Escándalo*, falls flat. His is a metempsychosis, not a development.

The Spanish language does not lend itself with much grace to the needs of the modern short story. Its leisurely diffuseness is a fair reflex of the mode of thought it represents; so Alarcón cannot, except within the four seas of Spain, be held a really good writer in this *genre*.^[2] It is in the happy borderland between the long and the very short, that he has done his best. Finding himself for once—or for twice—with a literary task (quite unconsciously to himself, it is true) exactly fitted to his abilities, he has arrived, and succeeded. *El Capitán Veneno* and *El Sombrero de tres picos* are real works of art, for their author in them has shaken himself free of self-consciousness, forgotten to preach or to moralize, let ethics and politics alone and written without outward haste or inward restraint.

Alarcón's work in pure literature was beyond question much hampered by his political life, and by the false notions of the aims and ends of belles-lettres into which, as he grew older, the life of the times and his own disposition caused him to fall. The history of Spain of his lifetime is a nightmare. Whether, if he had lived in happier days, he would have done better work, is one of those literary questions that are good and pleasant to think and talk over, but unprofitable to write about. Still, the constructive psychologist should have great joy in Alarcón, should he have the patience to read all his works, for the man reveals himself naked as do few; and it is most edifying to see the conservative academician of *El Escándalo* and *La Época* making his peace with the world and with heaven for the sins of the editor of *El látigo*. Truly he seems to wish that we should know that he felt indeed that he had sinned much, and need make great haste.

III. El Sombrero de Tres Picos

El Sombrero de tres picos was written and published in 1874. It made its first appearance on August 2, 9, 16th of that year, in numbers 23, 24, 25, of the *Revista Europea*, was issued in book form immediately, and has passed through thirteen editions. Alarcón has given two

accounts of its genesis—one in the original form of the preface to the book, and the other in his *Historia de mis libros*. They are not mutually exclusive, though the second mentioned, which the author has allowed to stand, forgets much that is confided in the first.^[3]

The success of the story was immediate and deserved. The pseudo-modest praise, "the least bad of my books," applied by Alarcón to *El Escándalo*, might be transferred and made positive here. The skill of construction, the exact sense of propriety that preserves every decency while yielding no shred of the interest, the really admirable dialogue, and the beautifully Spanish atmosphere of it all, make us wish that the author's judgment had led him oftener into these ways, where alone his desire fails to outrun his performance. Alarcón has written sensational sermons—witness *El Escándalo*; psychological romance, with the psychology left out, as in *La Pródiga*; infantile melodrama, in *El Niño de la Bola*; and utter balderdash, as *El Final de Norma*; but *El Sombrero* is not like any of these. It is worthy of the rank it holds among the longer short stories of literature, a strong, objective piece of work, without shade of self-consciousness; a fine story, in short, admirably told. Aside from its purely aesthetic value, the book is a precious document to the student of the history of manners and customs in Spain, both in its lines and in the much that is to be read between them.

Adolfo Bonilla y San Martín has recently published a short account of the sources of *El Sombrero*.^[4] He takes it back to a well-known story of the *Decameron* (day 8, novel 8), and reprints two popular ballads, to one of which, already published by Agustín Durán in his *Romancero General* (Vol. 2, p. 409), Alarcón in his preface acknowledges his indebtedness. The other ballad seems from language and form to be younger; the content of the two is almost identical. It is not my purpose in the present place to enlarge on Bonilla's article, though I suspect that the theme in its cruder forms is considerably older than Boccaccio; he has given us all that served as the first-hand sources of our story, and more, and he seems to me beyond any doubt to be in the right in holding that the differences to be noted between these sources and the novel are Alarcón's own, not the product of some other model, to him (Bonilla) unknown. To my mind this conclusion should be more strongly put. In his preface Alarcón tells us where he found the story, and makes direct reference to the Durán *Romancero*; had he had another, more strictly decorous, version at hand, one in short better suited to his need, he had surely mentioned it. Bonilla seems to me to take far too seriously the closing lines of the preface, which, to one without the pale, seem simply a graceful confession of faith in the basic decency of Spain. For the sources of the book, then, Alarcón's preface and Bonilla's essay must seem a sufficient guide.

The text here printed is that of the thirteenth Spanish edition. Two passages have been omitted; one (after page 6, line 28 of this text) touching taxes and imposts, as being unduly difficult, and of no help to the story: the curious may find it in the notes. The other, a bare two lines, had too much local color for dignified appearance in the American classroom. The only other changes the editor has allowed himself are occasional deviations from the somewhat arbitrary system of capitalization followed in the model.

My friend Professor De Haan, of Bryn Mawr College, did me the favor of making a collation of this text with that of the first edition in book form, which, as it appeared so promptly after the other, is probably to all intents and purposes identical with that of the serial. The differences to be noted between the first and thirteenth editions are altogether matters of style, except in the preface, where, as noted, the end is very different in the two. As I have not had access to all the editions, I cannot say with certainty when the revision was made: it is likely that it came when Alarcón prepared the definitive edition of his works for the *Colección de Escritores Castellanos*: in which case the first revised edition would be the eighth or ninth. The changes are often interesting as showing the working of the better second thought;—here the flow of the syntax is made a little smoother, there a harsh word has been suppressed. In general the text has gained

by the author's later attention, though there is an occasional spot where the style seems fresher and more vigorous in the older form.

El Sombrero de tres picos has been much translated and has been used as material for at least four comic operas. Alarcón mentions two, one French, one Belgian, in *Historia de mis Libros* (page 247); I have been unable, so far, to find out anything about these. A third, by M. Giró, is spoken of by Albert Soubies, *Histoire de la Musique*, Espagne, XIX siècle, Paris, 1900, page 54. The title of this one is *El Sombrero de tres picos*, and it was brought out at Madrid. The fourth, *Der Korregidor*, music by Hugo Wolff, libretto by Rosa Mayreder, was first given at Mannheim in 1896.

IV. Bibliographical Note

The biographical matter of this introduction is taken from two short lives of Alarcón, one by José Calvo y Teruel, prefixed to the 1870 edition of *Poesías serias y humorísticas*; and the other by Mariano Catalina, written after Alarcón's death (1905) and published with volume I (*Cuentos Amatorios*) of the *Novelas Cortas*.

Of serious critical matter concerning Alarcón, I have seen, besides what is in the usual histories of Spanish Literature, only the essay on *El Sombrero de tres picos* by Luis Alfonso, prefixed to the book, in the *Colección de Escritores Castellanos*, and what is given by Padre Francisco Blanco García, in his *Literatura Española en el Siglo XIX*, 2d edition, Madrid, 1903, vol. II, pp. 452-467. Both seem unscientific, and not useful, though both have very good will; and Luis Alfonso's essay has a certain value as an historical document.

Footnotes:

- [1] He emphasizes these views in the inaugural discourse he delivered when he took his seat in the Academy.
- [2] That he knew this, and to a degree was willing to admit his shortcomings, is made clear by his preface to the *Novelas Cortas*, where he sets up as mitigating circumstance his own youth and the newness of the short story in modern Spanish literature.
- [3] The two may be said to complete each other, the original preface giving the account of Alarcón's first dealings with the subject, the other telling of the real writing of the book. In the preface he says that the material was turned over at first, in conference, by a number of literary men, at some date not given, but evidently of the earlier part of Alarcón's career: and that it was "assigned" to José Joaquín Villanueva, who planned a *zarzuela* with the title *El que se fue a Sevilla*, but died before his work was fairly under way. Nothing more was done until 1866, when José Zorrilla came back to Spain from Mexico. The matter was suggested to him and he planned a comedy, but did not write it. In the *Historia de mis libros* we read that the idea of working out the theme came back to Alarcón in connection with the promise of a short story to a popular periodical in Havana; that his interest grew as he worked at it, and that he was led by the merit friends found in the story to keep it for the Madrid public.

(See preface to first edition of *El Sombrero de tres picos*, Madrid, 1874, beginning with *chabacanería*; i. e. after p. 4, line 15 of the present text; Alarcón *Historia de mis libros*, pp. 244-249).

- [4] *Revue Hispanique*. Tome XIII, 1905, pp. 5-17.