

***Lazarillo de Tormes* at the Crossroads of Culture, Literature and History**

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It is a matter of interest that the *Lazarillo de Tormes* was printed in four places in 1554 and the fact that no one has found a princeps edition to date (Rumeau 33-34; Blecua 3-5). It is also a relatively short book, 70 pages in some editions, albeit it immediately achieved extraordinary success all over Europe (Martino).

The book is an example of a coming-of-age book where we are introduced to the character from birth until his manhood. It is also the first step towards the rogue romance, the *novela picaresca*. *Lazarillo de Tormes* sets the template for the two other Spanish picaresque novels, *Guzmán de Alfarache* by Mateo Alemán and *Vida del Buscón* by Francisco de Quevedo (Rico 1984). The *Lazarillo* takes us from Lazarillo's birth in the river Tormes to his "success story" as a town crier and who has been married off to an Archpriest's mistress.

His life consists of being a blind beggar's boy. Before that his father was convicted for theft and was sent to the Holy Land as the squire of a grandee as punishment and where he died. The narration at this point and some of the basic facts of Lázaro's life are cloaked in a deliberate ambiguity, half truths and outright lies (Maiorino 21-35). The father's iniquity is referred to in biblical language instead of the crime of theft of the people who brought their sacks of grain to be milled. He performs "surgery" on the sacks that people bring to him. He loses his life in a religious cause instead of punishment for thievery.

The very name of the character is Lázaro González Pérez. The author creates for his character a kind of applicable "generality" in which process such a common name of a common person could also make him pass for Everyman (Frenk Alatorre 195).

His widowed mother is the person referred to in historical documents of the society of the time as a "viuda necesitada." Erasmus and other reformers of the time saw the effects of being a "needy widow" as saving them from the state of prostitution. It was declared in documents that such people needed to be helped in order to save them from the occupation of prostitution.

The "needy widow" takes up life with a Moorish groom, distinguished in Spain by the euphuism of "hombre Moreno", by no means a privileged position in the Spain of the Sixteenth century. He too turns out to be a thief, stealing blankets. He was declared to be punished by the torture of pouring hot fat on the wounds of whipping.

Once again, Lazarillo's mother is constrained to leave the area and seek work elsewhere. When a blindman comes to the inn where she works, she gives up her son because she had difficulties providing for him, and also she has a mixed race son from the groom. In a heartrending scene the mother gives up her son saying, "Hijo, ya sé que no te veré más. Procura de ser bueno y Dios te guíe. Criado te he y con buen amo te he puesto; válete por ti" (Rico 2005, 22).<sup>1</sup>

Lazarillo is now completely on his own. He is a child without parents, without an anchor of security in the world. The Blindman submits Lazarillo to a test. He brings him to a stone that has the shape of a bull. He tells him to put his ear close to the stone and to listen. As a totally inexperienced person, he follows the Blindman's instructions. In so doing, the Blindman bangs Lazarillo's head against the stone. The Blindman laughed heartily at Lazarillo's innocence and says: "Necio, aprende que el mozo del ciego un punto ha de saber mas que el diablo" (Rico 2005, 23).<sup>2</sup> Lazarillo's response

<sup>1</sup> "Son, I know that I'll never see you again. Try to be good and may God guide you. I have tried my best to raise you and now I have placed you with a good master. Look out for yourself!"

<sup>2</sup> "Stupid, you must learn that the Blindman's boy must know a little more than the devil himself".

is already a sign of having learned something. He says: “Verdad dice este, que me cumple avivar el ojo y avisar pues solo soy, y pensar como me sepa valer” (Rico 2005, 23).<sup>3</sup>

The Blindman is an old tradition in the Middle Ages and also appears in folklore. Indeed imitating the “good people” becomes one of the aims of Lazarillo, although the word “good” covers a large space and some “good” associations beg the question of its ethics.

There is throughout the tale a series of misfortunes that Lazarillo goes through, whence the title of the book, *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes and his fortunes and adversities*. In the episode of the groom/step-father, we see the stratification of Lazarillo’s society: his mother is one of the need widows and his father and step-father are among the poorest people. Lazarillo is given up by his mother to a blind beggar. This work is a compendium of the poverty stricken people. Claudio Guillén, one of the most perceptive of critics of the Lazarillo, alluded to the life of Lazarillo as one filled with cares and his life is to be understood as living a strife-full existence, of a life tormented by poverty and need (Guillén 78).

The edict of 1492 promulgated by the Catholic Monarchs rid Spain of its most industrious classes—Jews and Moors. The reconquest of Spain over the Moslems, an 800-year struggle, made Spain the first nation-state in Europe under the direction of the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella. Spain during the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries was wracked with wars, spiritual and economic problems. On the one hand the presence of the followers of Erasmus and Luther. Their followers in Spain suffered under the repression of their thinking and publications. The Spanish Inquisition aimed its work principally at believers who reneged the faith or did not comply with the customs of the church (Coll-Tellechea). The edict mentioned above also created a class of converts to the faith, Jews and Moors who were obliged to convert to Christianity or be exiled. There was a significant exodus of Jews and Moors to various parts of the world. But there was also a group referred to as “marranos,” ‘piglets’, Jews and Moors who outwardly pretended to be faithful Christians publicly but in secret practiced the rites and rituals of their own faiths. The costs of being convicted of secretly practicing their rites and rituals could be severe: jailing, torture to reveal the names of other “marranos”, and being burned at the stake (Netanyahu).

So this system of forced religiosity created a group of forcibly made “New Christians,” as opposed to the category of “Old Christians,” those whose forebears fought in the reconquest. Numerous persons were of Converse descent, including St. Theresa of Ávila, whose grandfather was “reconciled” in Toledo in the fifteenth century. This class also created for itself false genealogies, in order to show that they were “Old Christians.” Being a “New Christian” in the sixteenth century was to have few privileges and to be second-class citizens (Bataillon 85).

The years of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Spain were outwardly a society of *grandees* but inwardly it was a country hounded by particular problems. There were terrible years for Spain: illnesses were rampant, there were a series of droughts and crops failed, young men were recruited for military service and therefore there was a shortage of manpower to till the soil and look to the economy. These soldiers were in the ranks in Spain, France, Italy and the New World. There was also a class of *segundones*, second in the line of inheritance, for the the law of primogeniture favored the eldest son to inherit property and other things. This society of *segundones* could not always find work. Thus this group had to eke out a living as best they could. They were not prepared to carry on the work of those that had been recruited to serve in the army. As Anne Cruz and Claudio Guillén have noted, there was a general departure from the country to the cities. Also a strict agricultural economy was replaced by other work. There was, in short, a general poverty throughout Spain. Gold and silver obtained from the New World went to pay the Genoese and the Swiss bankers for loans the

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<sup>3</sup> “This man speaks the truth, and I should keep my eyes open and be keen for I am alone in this world and I should think about looking out for myself”.

Spanish kings –the emperor Charles the Fifth and Philip the Second made in order to pay for having such an empire that went in Europe from Portugal to Bohemia in what is now Czech and Slovakia countries, and throughout Mexico and South America.

These conditions prevailed throughout Spain, and the increase in begging as a profession that is noted by Anne Cruz and Claudio Guillén forms the background of the first chapter of *Lazarillo de Tormes*. The adventure of Lazarillo and the Blindman is itself taken from literature, Folklore and life. The poverty that Lazarillo undergoes is a link with general problems that faced Spain.

In his experiences with the Blindman, Lazarillo undergoes considerable hunger and cruelty. He must live by his wits otherwise he would starve and he must furtively turn to theft to obtain some of the Blindman's food and wine. The chapter culminates with a savage attack on the Blindman by having him smash his face and body against a stone pillar.

The work is a highly anti-clerical one. Various members of the clergy are submitted to satire (Friedman). Lazarillo becomes the servant of a very avaricious friar. He must steal bread from a locked bread box which the Friar keeps. This chapter is where one sees the author's debt to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Lazarillo claims that mice have nibbled away at the friar's "breadly paradise," as Anson Piper explained it. There is also the possibility of reading Eucharistic contours to the chapter. If the Blindman lived off the alms people gave him in the name of God, and prevented Lazarillo to satisfy his hunger through the symbolic blood of Jesus, now another friar prevents Lazarillo from obtaining the body of Christ from the bread he has to steal to survive. He is ejected from the miserly Friar's house when the friar discovers the key which Lazarillo kept in his mouth at night. A whistle emerged through the air passing over the hole in the key. Lazarillo had concocted a tale about a serpent being in the house. The Friar thinks that he has discovered the serpent and beats Lazarillo about the head.

In the third chapter we see one of the greatest literary creations in the person of a well-dressed but impecunious Squire. Lazarillo thinks that his problem of surviving is resolved when the Squire asks him to be his servant. When they return to the Squire's empty house exactly at supper time, Lazarillo must swallow a bitter pill because he realizes that the Squire has no food and no money. It is Lazarillo who must beg for food for both of them. The chapter consists of the haughty Squire as being without any means. In the end Lazarillo is left by the Squire rather than the opposite. But in keeping with the structure of the work, Lazarillo learns from the Squire that appearances count and the Squire, in spite of his economic and moral vacuity, will become a model for Lazarillo in his future.

There is a transitional and brief chapter that functions as a link between the long first three chapters and the long fifth chapter. In this transitional chapter Lazarillo serves a pederast priest. Lazarillo ends the chapter in a brusque way. He says: "Y por esto y por otras cosillas que no digo salí dél" (Rico 2005, 111). It is the "cosillas" that interests us but the author had to respect limits. The whole chapter is covered by a startling diplomacy which alludes to the priest as having introduced Lazarillo to the theme and practice of sex.

One of the great complaints of Luther and Erasmus was the trafficking of papal bulls. Masuccio Salernitano in his *Novellino*, has a beautiful tale about a pair of clerics who swindle the poor believers out of money through the sale of such papal bulls (Papiro). In the *Lazarillo* two con men go to a town and call the inhabitants to come to the church. In the middle of one of the sermons a person that was hostile to the cleric has an epileptic fit. He is cured of the fit through the papal bulls, then people flock to buy them. At the end of one such episode Lazarillo realizes that it was just a joke and there was no miracle at all.



In the following chapter Lazarillo, now Lázaro, serves a chaplain, who has a side business of selling water. Lázaro works all week for the chaplain but he gets to keep his money by selling the water one day a week. In this way he is able to purchase “good” clothing and a second-hand sword, finally ending up mimicking the Squire he had once served and who, consciously or unconsciously believes this is the way to make it in life, “medrar.”

The seventh and last chapter represents the end of Lázaro’s climb to success and respectability. He obtains a state job, that of town crier. He also gets a wife. The Archpriest of San Salvador marries off his mistress to Lázaro, in spite of rumors that she had given birth three times and her frequent visits to the Archpriest at odd hours. But Lázaro is willing to close his eyes to these rumors because the Archpriest buys Lázaro’s good will with used clothing and occasional gifts of food. *Lázaro* is the passive aggressive: he takes and keeps his mouth shut and believes that his wife is as chaste as any other woman in Toledo; so much for the happy cuckold and he glosses over the gossip for convenience sakes. But he refers to this moment as being at the acme of all good fortune: a happy cuckold with a state job, dressed in old, second hand clothing, married to the ex-mistress of an Archpriest (Roncero López 240).

It is this time that *Lázaro* is defending his and his wife’s honor that the author engages in some verbal trickery. After defending his wife he seals his harangue with the statement, “I swear to her honor on the Holy Host.” It is all a part of the insinuativeness of the *Lazarillo*. No God-fearing Old Christian would hazard such an oath, and a book that speaks covertly by a poor wretch who is a willing cuckold would hardly be believed (Redondo 248). It is the author who has codified his narrative in several levels (Márquez Villanueva 125). But the road signs could not be clearer. The author was probably a converse himself (Rosenberg). Making such an oath was simply beyond the area of actions by a Christian (Ferrer-Chivite).

But the novel ends on a curious note. The author changes gears and refers to “esto fue el mesmo año que nuestro victorioso Emperador en esta insigne ciudad de Toledo entró y tuvo en ella Cortes” (Rico 2005, 135).<sup>4</sup> There was nothing to celebrate in that year. The death of the king’s wife among other tragedies. As I mentioned above, the economy of Spain was in terrible condition. Spain, like the Squire, was all sparkle and very little substance. It marked a moment in the history of Spain where there was little to point to of substance, foreshadowing among other things the tragedy of the failure of the Spanish “invincible Armada”.

This little work pictured a Spain that was externally lustrous but corroded on the inside, and it was all done through the narration of the life of a poor wretch. Lázaro pleads an innocence that is vacuous and false, and this is how to read the state of Spain at the time seen through the eyes of a *converso*.

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<sup>4</sup> “This was the same year that our victorious Emperor entered this great city of Toledo and held Court in it”.

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