
REVIEWS

Giancarlo Maiorino. *At the Margins of the Renaissance: Lazarillo de Tormes and the Picaresque Art of Survival*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003. 184p.

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At the Margins of the Renaissance: Lázaro de Tormes and the Picaresque Art of Survival, Giancarlo Maiorino's analysis of a sixteenth-century Spanish picaresque tale, examines the stages of Lázaro de Tormes' life as well as the literary, cultural, and economic contexts of the production of the text. *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades*, written in 1530-1534 and published anonymously in 1554, purports to be an autobiography of a town crier addressed to "Your Honor," possibly produced as a response to accusations that he has permitted his wife to commit adultery with Lázaro's patron, the Archpriest of St. Salvador.

Lázaro's story, as Maiorino emphasizes, begins in famished gutters inhabited by the Spanish impoverished, and Lázaro's fortune improves only because of his determination to survive. During his ascent into the ranks of the fed and employed, he must relinquish his independence and morals in exchange for security and life. Maiorino's reading of this picaresque tale foregrounds the brutal realities of Lázaro's life in order to reinterpret the high culture Renaissance literature and the foundations of the novel.

Maiorino approaches *Lazarillo de Tormes* from the perspective of econopoetics, which "considers how socioeconomic factors are central to the poetics of literary works," specifically "parallels between economic and literary modes of productions turn mimesis into 'econo-mimesis,' which brings to the fore those precapitalist aspects of the Renaissance" (2). This emphasis on the destitute realities depicted by the *literatura desesperanzada*, "rooted in philosophical pessimism and economic dispossession" (6), forces a recognition of intense poverty in which most Spanish peasants lived even while the empire, enabled by the spoils of the New World, oriented itself toward conspicuous consumption.

Some of Maiorino's most interesting claims relate to the development of the novel as a genre of the poor. He argues for *Lazarillo de Tormes* as the first modern European novel and suggests that the genre grew out of "low" culture rather than the middle class. While Lázaro's tale begins in abject poverty and remains trapped by

his hunger for many years, Maiorino's argument should give further consideration to the Lázaro's circumstances when he constructs his story. By the time Lázaro is requested to explain his tolerance of his wife's sexual improprieties, he has traded idealized virtues and hunger for the miracle of a job through which he can demand compensation for advertising goods. His wife's connection with the archpriest brings him reliable grain supplies and regular gifts of meat. Just as does Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, narrated by a woman who has struggled from Newgate to prosperity, Lázaro achieves a secure and stable position in society through his own determination and self-interest before he begins to write.

Maiorino supplements Renaissance historical studies by considering the dominating influence of hunger and poverty on Spanish literature. Within the deprived worlds inhabited by the *ciego*, Lázaro's first master the blind beggar; his second master, a priest who starves Lázaro while devouring sheep's heads and bread; and the third *blanca-less escudero* who has aristocratic heritage but lacks finances even to eat, Lázaro redefines virtue and humanity by his needs. Maiorino presents Lázaro as undergoing zoomorphic evolution through which his parasitic characteristics dominate his humanistic values. After observing the *escudero* feign his prosperity by publicly using toothpicks to clean teeth that have not chewed food for days, Lázaro recognizes the role of appearance in manipulating circumstances but also prioritizes physical well-being over abstract virtues. He defeats the physical mousetrap, a synecdochic symbol "of social mores that eventually victimize masters and servants alike" (31), when he outwits the priest to steal crumbs of bread and metaphorically when he responds to charges against him by indicting the social order that has forced him to trade human virtue for animal necessities. In effect, the production of Lázaro's autobiography functions to initiate him into the elite world of the educated and flourishing even though the impetus for his act, the accusations against him, prove again that prosperity is always tenuous when surrounded by poverty.

Lázaro's transition from a naïve child to street-smart forager and finally into a stable member of his community offers insight into competing educational systems and values. Maiorino concludes that Lázaro's education must include independent literary and philosophical studies in addition to the guidelines of survival and prospering that he discloses in his history in order for him to be capable of producing his text. Between recollections of near starvation, Lázaro references Pliny and Cicero. In *Lazarillo de Tormes*, "Low' picaresque and 'high' heroic images intersect in a parodic mode that becomes momentous once it is transcribed into a literary framework" (127). Maiorino implies that Lázaro's literary act should influence our perceptions of genre, education, writing, poverty, and historical events.

At the Margins of the Renaissance contributes greatly to critical dialogue about

Lazarillo de Tormes and the picaresque. Maiorino's emphasis on the economic disparities and class turbulence during the Spanish Renaissance provides vivid details about daily life and models a methodology to expand historical awareness of the period through careful attention to literary texts. While the culture of poverty demonstrably grounds Lázaro's autobiography, less fulfilling are Maiorino's connections between this novel and class influences on the development of the novel as a genre. Students of the picaresque or with interests in literary depictions of class will find this study informative and insightful. ✱