

Humor in *Lazarillo de Tormes*

Humor in *Lazarillo de Tormes*

H. Kay Moon

Social shifts may have altered many of the elements that have made *Lazarillo de Tormes* a delightful reading experience, but its principal characteristic, humor, is as pertinent to our aesthetic enjoyment today as it was in the sixteenth century.

The word humor has devolved from its originally exclusive use as a term for the four humors of the body (blood, phlegm, choler, black bile), the predominance of any one determining the temper of the mind or body, to its present meaning as it applies to everything that appeals to man's disposition toward comic laughter. Laughter, according to some psychologists, is ascribed to surprise; "we laugh at the new and unexpected."¹ Thus, if one is able to explain why a situation is new or unexpected, he may by the same method explain why it is humorous. Such categorizing seems rigidly arbitrary, as indeed are most attempts at categorizing. Perhaps a brief review of the most pertinent theories regarding humor is apropos to mitigate, if possible, the tendency toward arbitrariness in dealing with the problem as it relates to *Lazarillo de Tormes*.

Some authorities maintain that laughter is instinctive,² or even to be classed among the emotions.³ Conflicts arise between the opinion of Henri Bergson and C. A. Claremont, Bergson maintaining that the appeal of humor "is to the intelligence pure and simple,"⁴ while Claremont maintains that laughter is associated with lack of intelligent understanding.⁵ Floyd H. Allport regards laughter as preeminently a response to a social situation,⁶ and other authorities, such as Gardner and Lois Murphy, agree that "laughter is in itself a certain index of social perception."⁷ Certainly, as Bergson indicates, "the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human."⁸ The concept of humor as an attribute of social consciousness is especially significant in *Lazarillo de Tormes*, particularly in the light of one of the theories regarding *causes* of humor, viz., that "the comic is always that which enhances one's own superiority."⁹ This is an opinion of rather wide vogue which may be traced to Thomas Hobbes' seventeenth century explanation of humor as evidence of "sudden glory."¹⁰ Perhaps it is a feeling of social superiority and a comfortable assurance that we are above such involvements that permit us to laugh at Lázaro's misfortunes and the general debasement of dignity of all the characters throughout the narrative.

Stephen Leacock in "Humor As I See It" maintains that there is in all of us a vein of the demoniacal humor or joy in the misfortune of others.¹¹

C. A. Claremont further authenticates this idea: "Till sympathy prevents us, we tend to laugh at the deformed. First it was a physical deformity, but this kind of joke is now out of date. In a later period, idiots were laughed at, and now we find ourselves amused by defects in intelligence."¹² This channel of thinking is shared by Knight Dunlap, who insists that the first and probably the most primitive type of the comic includes bodily suffering and pain. Such situations "appeal especially to savages. . . although probably none of us are unresponsive to them."¹³ Mr. Dunlap classifies other types of humor according to the nature of the suffering or humiliation involved. He affirms that the ideal comic is that type of humor which enables one to laugh at himself. This is a high type of humor, not found among primitive peoples.

The author of *Lazarillo de Tormes* did not need our modern analysts to advise him of these elements of humor. He used human misfortune as a springboard for laughter several centuries before their advent. In fact, it is his protagonist's constant effort to escape his misery that supplies the point of departure for all the comic elements of the story. But though the laughter involved is due to a primitive type of appeal, the reader's admiration of Lázaro's ability to laugh at his own misfortunes—and to make us laugh with him—is always keen.

The humor involving pain and humiliation is frequently allied with humor resulting from admiration of cleverness and a display of stupidity or naïveté, and often with a satisfaction over justice done.

Within the framework now established regarding the causes of laughter, let us for convenience classify the types of humor in *Lazarillo de Tormes*:

Satire is the principal element in the work in question, and to be sure, humor is a basic—or specifically, *the* basic element of satire. The various types of humor employed serve the purpose of the satirical element. If there were no humor, the author's attack on society would necessarily take the form of a direct invective, but the good satirist will make his attack without seeming to let the problem occupy him *seriously*. He will not allow his victim the honor of anything more than distant amusement at his foibles. Satire is the mistress which all other humorous elements serve to embellish in *Lazarillo de Tormes*.

As has been stated, human misfortune supplies the basis for virtually all the humor in the novel. If there is any humor in the blind man's trick of smashing Lázaro's head against the stone bull, it must stem from admiration for the beggar's cleverness in a brutal, practical joke, and scorn for Lázaro's naïveté, in falling for it, but at the basis of this comicality is Lázaro's pain. The subsequent abuses of the blind man and the final revenge on the part of Lázaro are comic only on the basis of these characters' misfortune, and our *superiority* in being removed from it as observers and not

participators. Even the clever jockeying of words in Lázaro's expression, "Holgábame a mí de quebrar un ojo por quebrar dos al que ninguno tenía,"¹⁴ is dependent for its humor upon the misfortunes of the blind man.

Lázaro's revenge may seem comic to us because we feel justice has been done, but this is brutal justice. An element of pathos, however feeble, is extant in all of this type of humor. This mild sympathy is perhaps the note we sound to justify laughing at misfortune. There is a comic situation, almost slapstick in nature, which involves very little sympathy; that is the situation into which the blind man plunges himself in thrusting his "long, sharp nose" into Lázaro's mouth in order to detect the odor of the *longaniza*. A rustic, but impeccable choice of words describes the result to rather revolting perfection: "Con el destiento de la complidissima nariz medio quasi ahogándome, todas estas cosas se juntaron y fueron causa que el hecho y golosina se manifestasse y lo suyo fuesse buelto a su dueño" (pp. 40–42).¹⁵

Another brutal slapstick situation is the miserly priest's vicious clubbing of the sleeping Lázaro. There is a combination of rather dubious justice with stupidity involved here justice executed for Lázaro's theft and the display of stupidity on the part of the priest in thinking that he was killing a snake. Examples of this sort abound.

The blind man, Lázaro's first master, introduces to the reader one of the major elements of comic amusement in the narrative, *i.e.*, the humor which springs from admiration of cleverness. The example already cited of his joke on Lázaro in smashing the latter's head against the stone bull more or less sets the tone of clever brutality which is apparent throughout the rest of the story, though not all of the cleverness is brutal.

Lázaro's cleverness in obtaining food from the blind man is not comic in contrast to stupidity or naïveté, as are most of the examples of cleverness, but indeed is only possible because the blind man, far from being stupid, is deprived of visual perception—actually a physical handicap and not a lack of initiation or mental acuteness. The cleverness he displays in obtaining alms and in perceiving Lázaro's schemes is indicative of a very sharp mentality, and actually arouses admiration. The episode of the cluster of grapes is a case in point. But Lázaro is likewise admirable in this respect, particularly considering his youth. His inventiveness in procuring food, and particularly in filching wine from the old beggar, demonstrates an acuteness born of necessity which does adequate justice to the old man's tutelage.

The prime example of Lázaro's cleverness is contrasted to the stupidity of the priest, his second master. The only evidence of perspicacity on the part of the latter is his tenacious vigilance over his meagre possessions and the offerings he receives from his flock. Lázaro is able to get around this with nimble mental dexterity. The priest's ludicrous belief in the "phantom"

snake is almost as comic as his exaggerated avarice. He finally discovers Lázaro's craft only by accident, not through any admirable mental agility of his own.

Lázaro provides some quite delightful humor with his naïveté, regarding the fine points of honor as professed by his third master, the *escudero*, and thus exposes the ridiculousness and complete lack of practicality in such exaggerated obeisance to the demands of society. The *escudero* maintains "... ni su-friré a hombre del mundo, de el rey abaxo, que: 'mantengaos Dios', me diga."¹⁶ Lázaro's response is, "Pecador de mí, por esso tiene tan poco cuydado de mantenerte, pues no sufres que nadie se lo ruegue" (p. 122).¹⁷

The cleverness of Lázaro's fourth master, the *buldero* (peddler of indulgences), provokes some amusement in contrast to the stupidity of his duped victims. This type of cleverness we have already seen in the old *ciego*. It is the type most common in the person of Pedro de Segovia in Quevedo's *El Buscón*, and quite common in Mateo Aleman's *Guzmán de Alfarache*, though the *buldero* is more malicious, more in earnest, and less mischievous. Most of *El Buscón*'s antics at the University of Alcalá are done in fun, in a spirit similar to that of the German *Till Eulenspiegel*.

Lázaro's idea of religion is delightfully naïve, and sometimes borders on a quibble on the deeper contrasts of life. His idea that God is personally interested in his desire for revenge on the *ciego* is comically naïve. "Dios le cegó . . . el entendi-miento . . . por darme de él venganza" (p. 48).¹⁸ Later, his thought that God was interested in him and his prayers for the sick—prayers *not* for their recovery, but for their death—is likewise a comic naïveté. It is a prime example of what Henri Bergson calls an "inversion of common sense."¹⁹

Irony is no doubt the most common of the equivocal circumstances which provoke laughter. In an ironic situation, the ostensible meaning of the language involved veils thinly a deeper significance, which the initiated will not fail to apprehend. The following satirical remark is fraught with irony: "No nos marauillemos de vn clérigo ni frayle, porque el vno hurta de los pobres y el otro de casa para sus deuotas y para ayuda de otro tanto, quando a vn pobre esclauo el amor le animaua a esto" (p. 14).²⁰ Feigning benevolence, Lázaro manages a subtle thrust at some of the priestly excesses of his epoch.

His statement, speaking to his master the priest concerning the snake which was haunting their domain, "Plega a Dios que no me muerda, que harto miedo le tengo" (p. 74),²¹ is pure irony, and when he subsequently calls the priest a "matador de culebras,"²² the irony is mixed with a note of bitterness.

His meaning is not the ostensible one when he speaks to the *escudero* of how little food he requires for satisfaction. The latter's concern for thieves

cannot be taken seriously; his only reason for not wishing that anyone enter his quarters can only be to hide his misery, for he has nothing to steal. There is a pathetic note of irony in his promise to Lázaro that when the month is out, he will leave the house they are presently in because it is “de mal suelo.” He would not stay there, he asserts, if they were to give it to him. It is true that he does not stay, but it is an arrangement not of his choosing.

There are frequent quips from Lázaro, such as “el bueno de mi amo”²³ (speaking of the *ciego*), which are obviously ironic.

Dramatic irony also bounds. It differs only slightly from verbal irony. It occurs when the spectators, or readers in this case, are aware of elements in a situation of which one or more of the characters are ignorant. Lázaro’s *asides* (the “dije entre mi” speeches) represent this type of irony, since the one to whom he is silently directing them is unable to hear them, and we—the “spectators”—are able to “hear” them. His silent retort to the *escudero*’s theory that longevity is a result of extremely moderate eating is: “Si por essa vía es . . . nunca yo moriré, que siempre he guardado essa regla por fuerca y aun espero en mi desdicha tenella toda mi vida” (p. 94).²⁴ An identical situation occurs when the *escudero*, insisting that he has already eaten, watches Lázaro devouring the morsels he has won by solicitation, and declares that no one eats with more *gracia* than he. “Nadie te lo verá hacer que no le pongas gana aunque no la tiene,”²⁵ to which Lázaro retorts, silently of course, “La muy buena que tú tienes te hace parecer la mía hermosa” (p. 106).²⁶ Other delightful examples of this variety are numerous.

A device closely related to irony in its equivocal nature is implication, and particularly implication through understatement. A noteworthy example of this type occurs on the occasion when the *escudero* offers the wine bottle to Lázaro. Since we are already familiar with the latter’s affinity for this bacchic nectar, his disappointment is more than apparent when he discovers it is water. His statement, “Entonces tomé el jarro y beví. No mucho, por que de sed no era mi congosa” (p. 92),²⁷ is much less than his disappointment would justify. It is what is left unsaid here that makes it comic. There is likewise much more implied than expressed in the statement regarding the two “rebozadas mujeres”²⁸ with whom the *escudero* is conversing on one occasion, when Lázaro says that they are “al parecer de las que no hazen falta” (p. 100).²⁹

Subsequently, the reason he gives for leaving his master the *alguacil* is “por parecerme el oficio peligroso” (p. 164).³⁰ In light of what is further explained, this comment blandly understates the facts.

Lázaro’s views on religion are decidedly those of the uninitiated, though it is evident that the author was familiar with scripture as well as dogma. Lázaro’s naïve statement regarding his father, “Espero en Dios que está en la gloria, pues el Evangelio los llama bienaventurados,”³¹ is for the reader

full of implication, and the evangelist's idea is probably completely opposite to Lázaro's, considering his father's previous activity and the reason for his persecution.

There is a somewhat crude implication that may be considered humorous in the *ciego's* prognostications concerning Lázaro's future, especially in the portion which appears in italic type in the edition used for this study, a part obviously added after the first editing. The *ciego*, among other things, predicts that the horn Lázaro has in his hand "algún día te dar . . . alguna mala comida y cena" (p. 36).³² The implication later proves to be legitimate prophecy.

An author's basic tool in writing a humorous narrative is, of course, words, and a quibble on words represents a great many of the humorous situations to which allusion has already been made. But there is a possible essence to a word beyond its commonplace meaning. A change of the conventional function of a word may serve to tap this essence and give it greater descriptive power, and hence, greater humor (Lázaro's *parayso panal*, pp. 60–62), or it may communicate something beyond its ostensible meaning through the phonics of the word, such as Lázaro's lament, "Lacerado de mí!" (p. 40).³³

Incongruity is an element mentioned by almost all authorities as being one of the principal causes of humor. Following the beating he receives for stealing the *longaniza*,³⁴ Lázaro gives an account of his master's description of the event, and maintains that he described it so well that although he was beaten and still crying, it almost seemed an injustice not to laugh with him.

The priest's hypocrisy in telling Lázaro he has a better life than the pope is based on incongruity. Likewise his "benevolence" in giving to Lázaro the portions of bread that had been eaten by "rats." "Ratón cosa limpia es,"³⁵ he says—a slight incongruity considering the actual truth of the matter, and considering what one should be able to expect from his priestly demeanor. It would not be impossible, by changing the attack on the problem, to ascribe almost all of the foregoing elements of humor to surprise, though they fit much more comfortably in the categories in which they are placed. But there are a few cases where surprise is the best, if not the only reason for the humor. Lázaro's surprise and ours forms the comic element in the situation with the *escudero* when he refuses the bottle of "wine," and is quickly reassured: "Agua es . . . Bien puedes beber" (p. 90).³⁶

Predicament is also a principal element. Lázaro's hunger and his master's stinginess represent an unpleasant predicament which causes frequent laughter. The predicament in which he finds himself after the *escudero* leaves him also gives rise to a brief moment of humor.

If the author of *Lazarillo de Tormes* was not able to achieve pertinence in our modern society through his lofty style and his treatment of life's

insoluble problems, he was certainly a master in the art of humor, even though occasionally crude and even a little grim in his approach. His masterful use of many varieties of humor attests to this assertion. We can enjoy the humor of *Lazarillo de Tormes* today as readers undoubtedly enjoyed it during the epoch of the book's apex in popularity.

Dr. Moon is assistant professor of languages at Brigham Young University.

1. J. Y. T. Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1923), p. 77.

2. Robert S. Woodworth, *Psychology, A Study of Mental Life* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1923), p. 157.

3. Stephen S. Colvin, "The Educational Value of Humor," *Pedagogical Seminary*, XIV, p. 517.

4. *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911), p. 4.

5. *Intelligence and Mental Growth* (New York: Norton and Co., 1928), p. 72.

6. *Social Psychology* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924), p. 252.

7. *Experimental Social Psychology* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1931), p. 276.

8. Bergson, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

9. Knight Dunlap, *Old and New View Points in Psychology* (St. Louis: C. V. Mosby Co., 1925), p. 36.

10. Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes* (London: J. Bohn, 1840), IV, pp. 45–46.

11. From *The Leacock Roundabout*, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1956), p. 3.

12. Claremont, *op. cit.*, p. 517.

13. Dunlap, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

14. Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sopena Argentina, 1958), p. 30. Subsequent references will be from this source and will appear in the text, between parentheses. Page numbers only will be given.

"I was obliged to lose an eye in order to put out two for him who had none." Where the language supplies a large measure of the comic impact, much of the humor is sacrificed in translation. Such is the case here. "Quebrar un ojo por quebrar dos" is a common Spanish idiom, for which there is no direct counterpart in English.

15. "With the probing of that fully extended nose half choking me all these things joined together and were the cause that my crime and the delicacy were at once manifest, and the latter was returned to its owner."

16. ". . . nor shall I suffer any man, from king to peasant, to say to me 'may God bless you.'" For a person of "quality," such a salutation would represent a crass lack of respect.

17. "Bless me, that's why He takes so little care in keeping you. You won't allow anyone to ask it of Him."

18. "God blinded his understanding to give me my revenge."

19. Bergson, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

20. "Let us not wonder at a priest or friar, one robbing from the poor, the other from home for his female devotees and to help another like himself, when love is capable of exciting a poor slave to such action as this."

21. "God grant that it doesn't bite me, for I'm most fearful of it."

22. "Killer of snakes."
23. "My good old master."
24. "If that's the way it is, I'll live forever, for that's a rule I've always kept out of necessity, and I expect, in my ill fortune, to keep it all my life."
25. "No one can look upon you eating without it inspiring a desire to join you, even though he has no such desire."
26. "The big fat one that you have makes mine seem beautiful."
27. "So I took the jug and drank, Not much, for thirst was not my major affliction."
28. "well-rounded women." Phonically, and even semantically, there is a double meaning suggested by "rebozadas mujeres." The full breadth of implication need not be discussed, however.
29. "seemingly of that type of which there are many."
30. "because the position seemed dangerous to me."
31. "I trust in God that he is in heaven, for the Gospel calls them blessed." His concept of the Lord's intent in pronouncing this beatitude is decidedly a tergiversated one.
32. "will someday give you a bad meal." The horn is the symbol of cuckoldry.
33. "Lacerated me."
34. *longaniza*: a type of sausage
35. "A rat is a very clean animal."
36. "It's water. Go ahead and drink."