

EPISODE 2: OLIVER NOBLE WOOD

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:02

Ever wondered what it would be like studying Spanish at the University of Oxford? Sit in on my conversations with Spanish tutors to find out what's so fascinating about the literature they teach, why they love teaching it, and why they think you might love it too.

[MUSIC ENDS]

[KNOCK ON DOOR]

Oliver Noble Wood 0:17

Hello.

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:17

Hi Oli. How are you?

Oliver Noble Wood 0:18

Hi Christy.

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:18

Good to see you.

Oliver Noble Wood 0:20

Come on in.

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:20

Thank you.

[CONVERSATION FADES OUT]

Oliver Noble Wood 0:21

My name's Oliver. I'm a Lecturer at Hertford college in Oxford and I specialise in 16th and 17th century Spanish literature. So it's the period that's known as the Golden Age of Spain, where there's a wonderful flourishing of all the arts, broadly understood.

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:36

Great. So what's the name of the text that we're going to be speaking about today?

Oliver Noble Wood 0:41

The full title is quite long and it is *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades*, but it's often referred to just as *Lazarillo de Tormes*, or even shorter, more simply, The or *El Lazarillo*.

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:59

And when might students be able to study this text on course?

Oliver Noble Wood 1:03

Here in Oxford, it's a text that's very popular amongst second and fourth year students who choose to specialise in the literature of the Golden Age. At other universities, it might be on a survey course, either in the second year or in the first year. And I think it's also quite widely studied at A-level on particular syllabuses.

Christy Callaway-Gale 1:23

So tell me a bit about the form of the text. Is it poetry, or is it prose? What is it?

Oliver Noble Wood 1:29

It's prose. It's a fairly short prose work, written from the perspective of somebody who is, it's not entirely clear, mid-twenties, perhaps as old as late thirties. Somebody who's living in Toledo, married, a town crier, not a particularly reputable profession. And he's looking back over his life, going back to the moment of his birth, and telling his life story from birth to the present day, and it seems as if it's written as a letter, a form of confession, directed to a mysterious figure known as 'vuestra merced'.

Christy Callaway-Gale 2:10

So why did you want to speak about this text specifically?

Oliver Noble Wood 2:14

The short answer, I think, is it's one of my favourite works of Spanish literature. I read it quite early on and the fact that it's short means you can re-read it on a regular basis. And it's a wonderfully multi-layered, ambiguous, enigmatic work, dripping in irony, and there's just a lot you can get your teeth into. And I think it's a wonderful introduction to the literature of the period, and particularly to something that I love which is the interplay between the comic and the serious.

Christy Callaway-Gale 2:44

Great. So before we delve into a bit more information or detail on the text itself, let's talk a bit about the historical and literary context in which this text was written. So when and where was it written?

Oliver Noble Wood 2:58

Tricky...tricky question. Not easy to answer. And I guess I'd start in response by answering a different question...

Christy Callaway-Gale 3:07

Sure.

Oliver Noble Wood 3:08

...which is, when did the text first appear? When was it first published? That again, we don't really know the answer. The earliest surviving editions are from 1554, but one of them is a second edition, so it's assumed that there's a lost first edition, perhaps from 1553. We don't know who it's by, so that makes it difficult to date the text, and there are very few, if any, references before 1554 to the work. So it's sort of educated guesswork about when it was written. Let's say early 1550s.

Christy Callaway-Gale 3:45

So what was happening in Spain at the time?

Oliver Noble Wood 3:48

Mid-16th century, it is the point I guess it'd be associated with the height of the Spanish Empire. So this is the time of the Habsburg Monarchy. At this particular moment in the early 1550s, it's the last few years of Charles V's reign, the Holy Roman Emperor. So it's a time when Spain is at the centre of this empire on which the sun supposedly never set. But in terms of Western Europe, it's a...difficult moment in terms of religious divide, these religious wars between the Catholic faith in Spain, and then, of course, the rise of Protestantism in Northern Europe. So the Spanish Empire is quite precariously placed. It's massive, but it's fighting to protect its boundaries and extend them on multiple fronts. So there's quite a lot going on in terms of the historical context, but also a lot going on in terms of the defence of the Catholic

faith, the role played by the Spanish Inquisition, so on and so forth. They needed lots and lots of money to do all of these different things. And there were only a certain number of places that money could come from: New World...riches, but also taxes levied on the poor, for instance. So you have this growing divide, I think, between the rich and the rather less fortunate. So if you look at the middle of 16th century, there are huge problems with the growth of urban centres: massive rise in beggars, vagrants, vagabonds, laws trying to eradicate some of these issues. So it's quite a finely poised period in terms of Spanish history.

Christy Callaway-Gale 5:45

And the fact that we don't know definitively who the author of this text is, is that related to the context in any way or has it just been that the name of the author has been lost over time?

Oliver Noble Wood 5:58

Going back to the early editions, so all of those editions from 1554—there are four of them, three published in Spain and one in Antwerp, which was a big centre of printing in the middle of the 16th century—none of them feature the name of the author. None of them give any impression of who might be behind this particular work. So it seems that it was a conscious decision to publish it anonymously. And the best guess as to why that was the case is because it contains quite a lot of religious satire, quite a lot of anti-clerical satire, which would of, or could of, got the author into fairly hot water with the Catholic Church.

Christy Callaway-Gale 6:45

And what sort of other literature was being written at the time?

Oliver Noble Wood 6:49

So we're still a few decades away from the publication of Don Quixote in 1605 and 1615. So we often think of that as the first modern novel, so we're dealing with slightly different kinds of prose fiction. We're still some way off from the development of the short story in Spain, again, associated with Cervantes and his Tales, Exemplary Tales, from 1613. We're still some way off from fully-fledged drama, or the *comedia nueva*. So the forms of literature that we're dealing with in the middle of the 16th century are quite different from what we might now read today. A wide range of poetry, some of it Italianate—so derived from the sonnet tradition, for instance—some of it popular Spanish poetry, going back into the 15th century and beyond. There are also all sorts of bizarre things that we probably wouldn't want to read today, so miscellanies, or collections of letters, or accounts of experiences from the New World. So it's quite a wide range of different forms of literary production. In terms of prose fiction—and this is where *Lazarillo* is very different—most of the works are what we might think of as being romance. So instead of holding up a mirror to the real world, they are reflections of an extraordinarily idealised, fantastic, fantastical world.

Christy Callaway-Gale 8:22

Is there anything in particular that you want to pull out at this point as something that is rather different about this particular text?

Oliver Noble Wood 8:31

One of the most curious things is this focus on the life story, the autobiography of a marginalised member of society. So instead of literature that focuses on knights and their wonderful deeds, killing 100,000 enemy troops or a massive giant, and dedicating all of these feats to their lady, we have here a focus on the lower, or lowest, echelons of society. And it is a story where you have an extreme focus on seemingly trivial details. And so that's a wonderful shift from these high-flown, highly idealised narratives that were popular at the time.

Christy Callaway-Gale 9:18

And when this text is talked about the term 'picaresque' often comes up. So what is the picaresque?

Oliver Noble Wood 9:27

Another...thorny question, shall we say. Huge critical debate about precisely what the picaresque is. Broadly speaking, it is the following. It's the life story, preferably told in the first person, of a marginalised *pícaro* (i.e. a young, rogue or delinquent), and it tends to be episodic, so it focuses on the life story of the *pícaro* as he moves through a series of masters, from birth to the present day. There are some other things that we associate with the best picaresque works and they tend to be: the figure of the ambiguous narrator, or unreliable narrator; the presence of irony; social satire; again, this blend between the comic and the serious.

Christy Callaway-Gale 10:27

Let's talk a bit more detail now about the text. So how is the text structured?

Oliver Noble Wood 10:34

The text has a relatively simple, straightforward structure. It is divided into a prologue and then seven chapters, or as they're known here, *tratados*. It's not entirely clear whether that division into chapters was the work of the anonymous author or an intermediary, perhaps a printer, involved in an early stage, but let's assume that it's intentional and the work of the author. The prologue, oddly, is actually written from the perspective of the figure, the protagonist, *Lazarillo*. So it's something, again, that makes it very difficult for us to get any handle on who the author is or what their intentions may be. The seven chapters deal with Lázaro's life, chronologically from birth through to the time when he's living with his wife in Toledo, and they deal more or less with one master at a time. So it's work where the protagonist has to fight his way up the bottom rungs of the social ladder by working for a series of masters. And so the first chapter is dedicated to his birth, his parents, and then his time working for a blind man as his 'lazarillo', his 'guide dog'. And then the second chapter is dedicated to his time with a miserly cleric who does not live by the virtue of charity. A lot of these early experiences are about Lázaro's struggle for food, for basic survival. The third chapter deals with his time with a sham squire, an 'escudero', somebody who pretends to be noble, but actually, isn't. So somebody who has no money, no food, who actually has to be fed by his servant, but who swanks up and down the street pretending that he's well connected and rich. And so that's the general trajectory that the *tratados* go through, various masters, and then at the end of the seventh *tratado*, we find the adult Lázaro living with his new wife in the house next door to a man who is...in the church...who appears to be having an affair with Lázaro's wife.

Christy Callaway-Gale 13:03

You mentioned before that the reliability of the narrator was something to look out for in texts like this one, so how does that fit in with the narrator of *Lazarillo*?

Oliver Noble Wood 13:15

So the narrator is living on the wrong end of a love triangle. He's married to the former maid of the religious chap living next door. So at the end of the tale, you work out that he is a cuckold, but he's happy to live in this relationship because he gets all sorts of material gains from the relationship that's going on. And it's only at the very end of the tale, you discover the context for him writing his life story, because it seems, going back to the prologue, as if somebody higher up in the church has asked him to give an account of what's going on. So when you read the tale first time, you see all of these quite pertinent, quite trenchant pieces of social criticism; very good at pointing out the failings in others. And then at the end, you get this hammer blow where you realise that the narrator is a hypocrite, and that they are very keen to draw your attention to the failings of others, but probably quite keen to hide their own

to mask elements of the truth. So when you go back and read the story, you respond very differently.

Christy Callaway-Gale 14:35

And before, we spoke a bit about the religious context around this text. So how is religion treated in the text?

Oliver Noble Wood 14:42

Religion is hard to escape in the text. Many of Lazarillo's masters work in some kind of office related to the Church. So his second master is a priest who is unbelievably miserly, unbelievably tight-fisted, and practically starves Lazarillo to death. A later master is a friar and we get a very brief snapshot of his life, but he seems to have various forms of illicit relationships with women. And then there are other religious figures involved, culminating in this Archpriest of San Salvador, who's the man living next door in Toledo. So all of the religious figures behave questionably, and that's a bit of an understatement. Religion also comes in, I guess, in Lazarillo's own name. So Lazarillo, the diminutive of Lázaro, which takes us to Lazarus in English, and the two instances of that figure in the Bible—so Lazarus of Bethany who was raised from the dead, but also the figure of Lazarus who begged at the gate of the rich man in a particular parable. So there are some obvious engagements with religion. But there are also lots of more subtle engagements through the use of religious imagery, or biblical allusion or biblical quotation. So the second master, for instance, the priest who starves him, keeps all of the bread for mass in a box, and most of the chapter's dedicated to Lazarillo's attempts to extract the bread from the box. And he uses, very often, seemingly quite blasphemous language to describe the bread as he does or doesn't manage to extract it. Wonderful, wonderful passage.

Christy Callaway-Gale 14:46

And so with this social, religious commentary, is there one, or a few, overriding things that the text is trying to do?

Oliver Noble Wood 16:56

I think, first and foremost, it's trying to make us laugh. I think it's very easy to lose sight of the fact that it is, fundamentally, a comic work and the humour works on multiple different levels. But there are these quite profound, serious morals lurking not too far beneath that surface. One of the...morals, rather general, is this attack on failure to adhere with basic religious principles and virtues. And that's most clearly seen in the accounts of what some of these people who work in, or for, the church get up to. We also see through the third chapter and the figure of the squire, an attack on a whole class of people who are obsessed with the appearance, or creating the appearance, of wealth and honour and ability, but where that's actually just a false pretense. I guess it's worth pointing out at this stage that most of, in fact all of, Lazarillo's masters, they don't have actual names, so they're just referred to by character type. So the blind man is just 'el ciego', and then the priest is the 'clérigo', and the squire in chapter three is the 'escudero'. So they are portraits of individuals, but they stand for types or particular classes, and that's particularly damning in the case of the priest and the squire, who stand for...rather larger groups of people than just the individuals that Lazarillo has the misfortune to encounter.

Christy Callaway-Gale 18:47

So I suppose humour can change over time and also depending on different cultures. Do we have any sense of what was funny in Spain at this time?

Oliver Noble Wood 18:56

Very difficult to work out exactly, but there are a couple of obvious differences, I think, and here we have to turn off some of our modern-day sensitivities. They quite liked the mixture between violence and humour. They, it seems, found violence rather more palatable than we

do. And attacks on minorities were also compatible with humour and very often actually at the core of jokes. In terms of the kinds of humour we see, and this again is one of the things I love about the text, you have an extraordinary range of forms of humour, so you have everything from almost knockabout slapstick, to very subtle irony, and then you have this biting satire at the same time as what seems to be empty witticisms or idle wordplay. So you always have to be on your toes and it's this wonderful shifting of gear throughout the narrative, which is, again, one of the things I love about it.

Christy Callaway-Gale 20:13

Ok, so if I was going to read this text for the first time, what sorts of things would you recommend that I look out for?

Oliver Noble Wood 20:20

My first piece of advice would be: enjoy reading it and try to resist the temptation to gallop through it. As ever, if there are bits that...it's difficult, the language is hard, so there are bits that are...tricky, but try and unpick them as you go. What would I look out for? I think I'd suggest that you pay close attention to some of the narrative strategies that are used. I have quite a cynical view on what the adult narrator is doing. I think he's trying to manipulate the reader's response to ensure that we look on his life with greater sympathy than we might otherwise. So I'd have a think about those moments where he perhaps obscures or omits as much as he reveals. I'd also say, pay careful attention in the last chapter and a bit, and look out for echoes of previous details from, say, the first couple of chapters. See if you can get to about ten echoes at the end of moments from earlier on, and then think carefully about what function they may have in the text.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 21:52

A big part of studying Spanish at Oxford is looking at literary texts in detail. So I'm asking Oli to pick out a quotation from the text so we can analyse it more closely.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Oliver Noble Wood 22:04

So I've chosen a couple of seemingly innocuous sentences from very early on in the first chapter. And it's where Lazarillo, or Lázaro, the adult narrator, is talking about his father. And it's the following. His dad has just been arrested for theft and we're told that he: 'padeció persecución por justicia'. That's the end of one sentence. And then he goes on with the following statement: 'Espero en Dios que está en la Gloria, pues el Evangelio los llama bienaventurados'.

Christy Callaway-Gale 22:41

Can you paraphrase this quotation's meaning in English, by any chance?

Oliver Noble Wood 22:46

There's a little bit of rather mischievous wordplay in the first part, in the idea of 'padecer persecución por justicia', and the play is on a particular bit of the Bible. A loose translation would be something along the lines of, 'that his dad suffered persecution at the hands of the forces of law and order'. That I think is code for: he was publicly shamed by being whipped through the streets, having been arrested for theft, and having coughed up and admitted that that's what he'd done. And then the second sentence is Lázaro saying: I reckon, I expect my dad's up in heaven because, according to the Bible, people who 'padecer persecución por justicia' are 'bienaventurados', are blessed. So he makes this rather odd link or leap.

Christy Callaway-Gale 23:53

So you mentioned there's this wordplay based on a particular part of the Bible, can you go into a bit more detail about that?

Oliver Noble Wood 24:01

So the bit of the Bible that we need to know here—and it's definitely not a bit of the Bible I knew until it was pointed out to me when I was looking at this text early on—is the following. It's a bit from Matthew, specifically Matthew 5.10. So it's one of the, what are known as the, Beatitudes from Christ's Sermon on the Mount. And it's the following statement: 'Blessed are those who suffer persecution for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven'. So that verse is split across the idea of 'padeció persecución por justicia', and the play is that...it's on 'por justicia', which doesn't mean 'for righteousness' sake', but here, actually, by or persecution by the forces of law and order. So you go from the idea of people who suffer 'for righteousness' sake'—they endure this hardship, but they're rewarded with their place in heaven—to Lázaro's statement that his thieving father must be up in heaven because he has also suffered persecution 'por justicia'.

Christy Callaway-Gale 25:36

So does this feed into the comic element that we were talking about before, this sort of wordplay?

Oliver Noble Wood 25:43

Very much so. I think if you recognise what the author is doing with that particular biblical reference, it's funny but it's slightly uncomfortably funny, it's incongruous, that you take a biblical verse, and then apply it in a rather odd manner. This bringing together of 'for righteousness' sake', but then his dad who's just been arrested and publicly whipped for being a criminal. So I don't think it's an example of...surface wordplay, witticism, of the light type; this is rather more hard-hitting wordplay that starts to really eat away at any faith that we have in...what the adult narrator is up to, I think.

Christy Callaway-Gale 26:49

And is that significant then, the fact that this "eating away at faith of the narrator" and this "hard-hitting...reference to religion" comes quite early in the text?

Oliver Noble Wood 27:03

I think one of the beauties of this quotation is that it comes so early on. And, precisely that, that the first time you read it, it's very easy just to pass over it, it seems so innocuous. And it's only when you go back and probably using a good edition with some helpful footnotes...sort of think: I think there might be something else going on there. And it's when you go back and really start to unpick the detail, you soon see that it's nowhere near as simple or as straightforward as you might have initially thought.

Christy Callaway-Gale 27:38

The more subtle allusions...how do you go about spotting those if there's no, maybe, overt reference to God, for example?

Oliver Noble Wood 27:46

Again, one of the things I love about it is that it's racy, and it's colloquial, it is...or it seems to be spontaneous, so it has this quality of spontaneous oral discourse. But actually, it's very, very carefully constructed and very carefully controlled, and there are all sorts of rhetorical devices that are used. Because you have this quite colloquial style, some bits stick out. So there are some proverbs or *refranes*, or popular sayings, and some biblical quotations that you wouldn't necessarily immediately spot them as one or the other. But you might get the sense that they're not quite in keeping with the narrator's colloquial style.

Christy Callaway-Gale 28:35

And how does this particular quotation compare to other biblical references in the text?

Oliver Noble Wood 28:44

One of the things that the author does with this particular quotation, I think, going back to that use of 'padecer persecución por justicia'. That's actually a phrase that comes back again in the final chapter when one of the adult Lázaro's roles as town crier is to accompany those who are being whipped and shamed in the streets as they go. So I think this is an example of where, perhaps a better known bit of the Bible is used to flag up a detail that the careful reader will benefit from remembering. And it's an instance of those echoes that I was talking about earlier.

Christy Callaway-Gale 29:31

When we look at a quotation more closely like this one, does it help us to understand anything more broadly about the text as a whole?

Oliver Noble Wood 29:41

I think one of the most interesting bits about this particular quotation is actually one of the most immediately recognisable words in it. And that's going back to '[e]spero en Dios que *está* en la Gloria'. So it's a question of whether it's 'hope' or 'expect'. And I think when you look at that question, that's where that little detail can really open up that question of what the narrator is or isn't up to and how honest they may or may not...be. Because, some people translate it as, 'I hope he's in heaven'. But because you've got the indicative, 'espero que *está*', it must be closer to 'I expect' or 'I guess' he's up in heaven, which seems much more ironic. And the question I would have there is, is that knowingly ironic? Does the narrator know that it is preposterous, or is it more naive and self-deceiving? And so it's an example of where you get a very local problem, but it speaks to that much broader question of whether you do or don't feel sorry, or how sorry you do or don't feel, for both the adult narrator and the younger child experiencing these problems for the first time.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 31:16

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[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 31:29

You might also like to take a look at our Modern Languages blog, 'Adventures on the Bookshelf'.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 31:37

This podcast was created by Professor Ben Bollig, produced by me Christy Callaway-Gale, and brought to you by the Sub-faculty of Spanish at the University of Oxford. Special thanks goes to the tutors that participated and the Taylor Institution Library.

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