

Ryan D. Giles. *The Laughter of the Saints: Parodies of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain*.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. 197 pp. + 12 b/w pls. index. illus. bibl. \$55. ISBN: 978-0-8020-9952-5.

This short but very dense tome is a pleasure to read and a valuable contribution to Renaissance studies. Bawdy and irreverent, at times tending toward the scabrous, occasionally it degenerates into bloody, savage mayhem. This book is not for weak

stomachs. What any medievalist will tell you — but what many early modern types nevertheless do not know — is that in the Middle Ages, saints were believed to have the power to both bless and curse. In this highly suggestive study, Giles demonstrates some extremely close connections between picaresque and hagiography that have never been exploited.

After a brief introduction, chapter 1 (“Christ and His Cross”) looks at parodies of Jesus and the crucifix as symbols of impotence in the *Carajicomedia* and the *Libro de buen amor*. Chapter 2, “Holy Men in the Wilderness,” considers Saints Emeterius and Hilarion in the contexts of necrophilia and pseudo-pilgrimage. The third chapter, “Virgins and Harlots,” studies Saint Quiteria in the *Libro de buen amor* and Mary Magdalene in the *Celestina* as emblematic of the *beata peccatrix*. Chapter 4, “Picaresque Saints,” offers Saint Martha in *Lozana andaluza* and John the Baptist in the *Lazarillo* as parodic role models for procuresses and beverage peddlers. Finally, in chapter 5, “Rivalries and Reconciliations,” Giles shows how Mateo Alemán and Cervantes both invoked specific saints’ curses to figuratively kill off their literary rivals and unauthorized imitators. The book ends with a short conclusion which falls almost immediately after a series of extremely interesting (not to mention titillating) illustrative plates.

In this study, Giles brings “outlying” humor back toward the center of early modern Spanish culture, showing how not just *converso* authors — like Rojas, Delicado, and Alemán — but also mainstream writers (such as Miguel de Cervantes) could incorporate religious parody into their texts. This scholar refuses the easy way out of ascribing or attributing textual indeterminacy to an author’s *converso* status. Some of his findings are surprising, not least of all because they show that the Inquisition was perhaps somewhat looser in its textual scrutiny than we thought (a possible weakness of the book is that it does not address the question of Inquisitorial censorship directly). This book casts fresh light on old texts: for example, it goes against the scholarly grain to argue that *Don Quijote* could be considered medievalizing; but the argument that “Cervantes rejects the modernizing, Tridentine vision of holiness and instead demonstrates a deeply ironic familiarity with saints that harks back to earlier, less pristine approaches to sanctity” (117) is utterly convincing. One possible drawback is its fairly heavy reliance on somewhat outdated theorists such as Bakhtin and Girard, although classics of criticism — and particularly theory — are always ripe for resurrection. Page 47 contains an important caveat, applicable to the entire study, that these readings of saintly figures are not anachronistic, post-Freudian projections. Instead, Giles argues, their carnivalesque “queerness” was “in fact, transcribed centuries ago” in dusty tomes of hagiography too often ignored by literary scholars (47). I do get nervous when I read such potentially reductive, essentializing phrases as “her festive meaning” (66) and “the meaning of the saint” (67, emphasis mine), but thankfully such oversimplifications are few and far between.

At worst (which is still very, very good), this book can read like a much-amplified list of specific saints invoked in the *Celestina*, *Lozana andaluza*, *Lazarillo*, and other picaresque literary works. It would have benefitted from a consideration

of the late Anthony Close's *Cervantes and the Comic Mind of His Age* (2000), especially chapter 6, "Evolution of Spanish Attitudes to Comedy, 1500–1600," particularly when Giles makes such broad generalizations as his description of "Cervantes' characteristically reversible humour" (109). That assertion is not wrong, but it could have been more fully contextualized. Similarly, Giles seems unaware of William Egginton's influential *How the World Became a Stage* (2003) when he discusses the legend of Saint Genesius and Lope de Vega's hagiographical drama based upon it. Finally, what is most missing here is a direct consideration of Cervantes' explicit combination of these two genres, hagiography and picaresque, in his hagiographical drama *El rufián dichoso*, a play about the ruffian-turned-saintly figure Cristóbal de la Cruz. These rather egregious omissions are the only signs that might indicate the inexperience of this brilliant young writer.

HILAIRE KALLENORF  
Texas A&M University