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Review of: Fabio López Lázaro, *The Misfortunes of Alonso Ramírez: The True Adventures of a Spanish American with 17th-Century Pirates*

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Fabio López Lázaro. *The Misfortunes of Alonso Ramírez: The True Adventures of a Spanish American with 17th-Century Pirates*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. 240 pp.

In this fine little book, which consists of an annotated translation of an enigmatic, but well known mid-colonial Mexican text plus a thorough and deeply researched introduction, historian Fabio López Lázaro presents us with a mystery: was the “unfortunate” Alonso Ramírez a fabrication of the polymath Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, as many literary scholars have long assumed, or was he a real person, a shipwrecked former captive of English buccaneers? In a tour-de-force of historical sleuthing, López Lázaro not only discovers the real Ramírez, a Puerto Rican carpenter caught in the tangled web of early globalization, but he also casts considerable doubt on the protagonist's claims of steadfast loyalty and pious victimhood. Rather than Sigüenza y Góngora's hapless saint, López Lázaro suspects in Ramírez a pícaro, a victim of pirates turned pirate.

An odd, but brief and accessible text, Sigüenza y Góngora's 1690 *Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez* has long generated debate among literary scholars. Some have called it the first Mexican novel. Rather like García Márquez's favorite castaway, Luis Alejandro Velasco, Ramírez served Sigüenza y Góngora to illustrate political concerns far bigger than his own misfortunes. According to López Lázaro, Ramírez's tale, poignant and simple, somehow encapsulated a critical mood, not of dissatisfaction with an inept or corrupt state, but with an imperial bureaucracy – or a powerful faction within it – unwilling to face the continued hypocrisy of its longtime enemies, most especially the English. In a word, they were still pirates despite a new wave of treaties and alliances. In one of the book's biggest surprises, the English enemy is embodied by none other than William Dampier, England's best circumnavigator, but possibly its worst pirate. His great feat, like Ramírez's, was living to tell the tale.

The basic story is this: Born and raised poor in Puerto Rico, young Alonso Ramírez set sail in search of work. His carpentry skills, learned from his father, won him marginal employment in Mexico, but before long he was widowed, broke, and on his way to the Philippines, perhaps as a convict or indentured servant. While ferrying rice and sailcloth for the Manila Galleon from northern Luzon, Ramírez and his mates were captured by English buccaneers led by Charles Swan and William Dampier. During a year-long captivity, Ramírez witnessed numerous acts of deception, pillage, rape, and wanton cruelty, but he

was eventually set loose on Madagascar with a stolen vessel, which he managed to sail all the way to Yucatan with a few fellow ex-captives. Caught in a storm and desperately short of supplies, the ship hit a reef on the Bacalar coast just north of Belize. Ramírez and some of his tiny crew of Spanish Filipinos and Chinese Christians were rescued and taken to Mexico City. Ramírez recounted his incredible tale to the viceroy, Count of Galve, who ordered it written up and published by Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora.

López Lázaro does a fine job of showing how Ramírez's story served the interests of the viceroy, explaining for the first time why the text was composed by Sigüenza y Góngora in the first place. The author has much to say about the “polysynody” of Spanish imperial politics. But readers will likely be most fascinated by López Lázaro's careful disentangling of the story itself, especially the heavy pirate action centered on Southeast Asia. Here, the reminiscences of Dampier come under close scrutiny, along with other sources, showing by artful juxtaposition and cross-examination how each conceals and reveals key facts. López Lázaro has worked very hard to retrace poor Ramírez's accursed voyage, and it more than justifies this book. The introduction falls just short of being truly global in perspective, a very tall order considering the diverse and often little-studied regions involved, but it comes close.

As for the translated text of Sigüenza y Góngora's *Infortunios*, which takes up only about fifty pages, it reads wonderfully. The style is baroque but not opaque, lively but not ornamented. The nautical jargon seems natural rather than forced, and Ramírez emerges as a more likeable if less complex figure than similar characters, including, some might say, Dampier, or Raveneau de Lussan. Sigüenza y Góngora's Ramírez is presented as a lone hero, and he lacks some of the swagger of Gregorio de Robles, a contemporary with a similar story, but he is largely believable. Ramírez's severe powder burns bring to mind Lionel Wafer, another real-life contemporary and buccaneer. It takes López Lázaro's keen sense of doubt to find the holes in the tale of relentless “goodness” and suffering. Ramírez did not arrive on the coast of Yucatan with an empty hold; he had stolen goods to offer.

For historians of piracy, Ramírez's tale is especially revealing in that he claims to have spent much of his captivity engaged in drudgery, swabbing decks, braiding cables, cleaning guns, hulling rice, and so on. It is evident that Dampier's buccaneers wanted captives not for ransom or even information, but rather for their brute labor power. There are claims of pirate cannibalism and forced coprophagy, but these seem unlikely. That Ramírez might have joined the pirates as a partner seems not only likely, but logical given his personal circumstances. But such could never be admitted to Spanish authorities, so Sigüenza y Góngora's

job was to make sure Ramírez came out looking like the perfect victim. He had to “spin” the story, but he keeps it interesting by developing the character of a pirate hero who helps Ramírez survive, as well as a Seville-born villain who sells his services to the pirate devils.

On the whole one might say this book is a sandwich with more bread than meat, and there are sections of the introduction that seem off-topic or excessively detailed. Still, it is a work of considerable value to historians of the early modern world, the Spanish empire, and of piracy.

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