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Microhistory and the Picaresque Novel: A First Exploration into Commensurable Perspectives

Binne De Haan

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In the sixteenth century, the picaresque novel introduced marginal figures (wanderers, beggars and thieves) as the protagonists of elaborate prose narratives, thus appearing to give a voice to hitherto unrepresented social types. This raises several questions as to the referentiality of the picaresque text, pertinent both to historians and literary scholars alike. Microhistory can help investigate this referentiality of the picaresque text, by revealing how particular historical agents perceived marginals and marginality, and juxtaposing these agent perspectives to the literary representation. Microhistory and the Picaresque Novel is the first publication to combine scholarship on the picaresque novel and the practice of microhistory. This innovative volume argues that the approach of microhistorical studies, such as The Cheese and the Worms by Carlo Ginzburg, Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist by Giovanni Levi and The Return of Martin Guerre by Natalie Zemon Davis, can be used to shed new light on classic picaresque novels such as Guzman de Alfarache, Gil Blas, Grimmelshausen, and their many epigones. The volume brings together expert scholars on the picaresque novel such as Professor Robert Folger, on the one hand, and established microhistorians such as Professor Giovanni Levi, on the other. This exploration is further enriched with contributions by Professor Matti Peltonen, an expert on history theory, and Professor Hans Renders, an expert on biography studies, as well as providing case studies from recent research by the editors Binne de Haan and Dr Konstantin Mierau.

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