

# FOUR THEMES OF THE *SPIRITUAL EXERCISES* THROUGH SHAKESPEARE

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IN THE INTRODUCTION to *Finding God in the Dark*, John Pungente and Monty Williams write, ‘God communicates through our imagination. Everything that is a human construct is a product of the imagination, and so manifests some trace of the divine creativity.’<sup>1</sup> Pungente and Williams are referring to cinema, but their insight can equally be applied to literature. The plays of Shakespeare are works of the imagination which call those who view the stage into a different reality. Their spiritual themes challenge the audience to experience the drama so as to become part of the narrative as it unfolds. Shakespeare’s ability to evoke feelings of love and compassion reminds the audience of their shared humanity. The divine creativity that emanates from the stage helps them to reflect on their own lives, their own strengths and weaknesses, and their own mortality.

The *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius also relies on people’s affective movements. Ignatius believed that what occurs in the interior life of exercitants helps to reveal God’s will for them. In the introductory Annotations he instructs: ‘In all the following Spiritual Exercises we use acts of the intellect in reasoning and of the will in eliciting acts of the affections’ (Exx 3). The feelings and emotions of the individual are important because, according to Ignatius, the Spirit works through one’s interior desires. Working with each creature individually, the Creator communicates God’s will for that individual. The individual can discern God’s will through reflecting on his or her experiences of consolation and desolation.

<sup>1</sup> John Pungente and Monty Williams, ‘Introduction’, in *Finding God in the Dark* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004), 20.

In what follows I do not attempt to moralise Shakespeare, or to make christological comparisons. Rather, I would like to show how the drama of certain Shakespeare plays reflects the spiritual development that someone undergoing a retreat may experience. For it is also important to remember the individual character of the Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius did not expect everyone to have the same experiences. On the contrary, he believed that the Creator works with the gifts and talents of each individual; the Exercises are adaptable to an individual's own life and circumstances. But there are some experiences that Ignatius hoped the exercitant might undergo. I should like to help explain and illuminate these common experiences through the lens of Shakespearean drama.

### ***Prince Harry as the Loved Sinner Called to Kingship***

While much of the First Week of the Exercises focuses on sin, the Principle and Foundation begins the retreat by calling to mind the love that God has for creation: 'The human person is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord' (Exx 23). Implicit in this statement is the idea that creation is not a static event, but a continuing process. The Creator has not left the world, but continues to create in conjunction with the creature. The phrase 'to praise, reverence and serve' is not meant to invoke ideas of servitude, but rather a giving of one's self back to God because of the love God has demonstrated through creation. In the Principle and Foundation, Ignatius depicts creation as a gift from God that is given, not because creatures deserve it, but because they are loved by God.

The meditations that follow the Principle and Foundation then turn to the question of sin. Exercitants are invited to recall their own sins. Ignatius instructs, 'I will call to memory all the sins of my life, looking at them year by year or period by period' (Exx 56). As the exercitants reflect on their sins, they are invited to reflect also on those aspects of their existential histories that have not been life-giving. The balance between the sinfulness of the creature and the love and mercy of the Creator is apparent in the climactic colloquy addressed to God at the end of the meditation on one's sins. Ignatius writes, 'I will conclude with a colloquy of mercy—speaking and giving thanks to God our Lord for giving me life until now, and proposing, with his grace, amendment for the future' (Exx 61). The thankfulness that the exercitants should

have towards God for God's mercy, which is unmerited, encapsulates the tension of the First Week.

One play which exemplifies the movement of the First Week is *1 Henry IV*. As the play opens, King Henry is struggling with rebellion; and he laments that his son, Prince Harry, is not growing up to be the kind of strong ruler that the country will need. The play revolves around Prince Harry's coming to terms with his place in the kingdom as the king quells the rebellion that threatens his rule. Prince Harry's disordered way of life reveals itself as early as the second scene of act one. He



*Prince Harry and his friends rob Falstaff*

is spending his time with drunkards, idlers and even criminals. In this scene he is readily persuaded first to join in robbing a group of wealthy pilgrims, and then to turn upon and rob his own friends.

But just as exercitants are called to rise out of their sinfulness, so is Prince Harry. When Harry answers King Henry's summons to the court on the eve of battle, the king rebukes him for his behaviour. Henry tells his son that the people will not respect him because of the company he keeps, and asserts that their enemy, Henry Percy, known as Hotspur, has a more legitimate right to the throne because of his courage and honour in battle. The king even insinuates that Harry will turn against him, 'To fight against me under Percy's pay, To dog his heels, and curtsy at his frowns, To show how much thou art degenerate'.<sup>2</sup> The rumours about

<sup>2</sup> *1 Henry IV* (III.ii.126–128). All plays are from *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997).

Harry's lifestyle have had a profound impact on the king, making him doubt his son's loyalty.

Wounded by his father's words, Harry replies that he will confront those who have planted seeds of doubt in his father's heart, and that he will crush Hotspur, proving both his fidelity and his resoluteness:

I will redeem all this on Percy's head ...  
 And stain my favours in a bloody mask,  
 Which, wash'd away, shall scour my shame with it ....  
 This, in the name of God I promise here;  
 The which if He be pleas'd I shall perform  
 I do beseech your majesty may salve  
 The long-grown wounds of my intemperance.  
 (III. ii. 132–156)

King Henry is moved by his son's speech and decides to give Harry the chance to make good on his vow, granting him the military command that will allow him the opportunity to defeat Hotspur and achieve glory. This support is what Harry needs, and he leaves his father to begin preparations.

The focus of Week One is the exercitant's attainment of the grace to know that he or she is a loved sinner, called to discipleship. Prince Harry is a loved sinner called to kingship. The love of God, which allows sinners to rise out of their sinful environment even if they do not merit the gift, is similar to King Henry's gift of trust to Harry. Trust that is given, not out of obligation, but out of love, allows the sinner to go beyond a habituated, sinful way of life. The opportunity given to Harry is like the opportunity given to sinners, not just during the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises, but every day of their lives.

The conflict between father and son portrayed in *1 Henry IV* also reflects a common set of issues faced by exercitants. In the course of the Exercises some come to the realisation that their relationship with their parents was never one of love, or perhaps that the relationship involved lofty expectations that were never met. Other exercitants carry the burden of never having told their parents how much they loved them before their deaths. Many people come to the Exercises with a need for healing in their family relationships.

A popular reading for reflection during the First Week is Luke 15:11–32. The story of the prodigal son tells of a wasteful son who squanders his father's wealth, given to him generously and free of

obligation. The son, however, comes to realise his folly when it leads to destitution, and he decides to return humbly to his father as a mere servant rather than a son. The father waits for his son and sees him approaching from far away. Jesus describes their encounter: 'But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him' (15:20). This beautiful moment encapsulates the love of a father for his son—the love of King Henry for Prince Harry, and of the Creator for the creature. The son is not just forgiven, but given fine robes, a ring and sandals for his feet, just as Prince Harry is given his own division to command.

When, in the parable, the elder son complains to his father that rewarding the younger son is unfair, he replies: 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found' (15:32). Every person is loved by God, despite his or her sins, and this is the truth that is communicated by the meditations of the First Week. We are all loved sinners, called to discipleship.

### **King Lear's *Insight into True Kingship***

The Second Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* focuses on the humanity of Christ. Ignatius describes the grace of Week Two in these terms: 'Here it will be to ask for an interior knowledge of our Lord, who became human for me, that I may love him more intensely and follow him more closely' (Exx 104).

Two meditations that help exercitants accomplish the task of coming to know Christ more fully are the Kingdom Meditation (Exx 91–100) and the Two Standards (Exx 136–148). During the Kingdom Meditation, exercitants are asked to imagine Christ as the true king, addressing his subjects and calling them to action. The Two Standards, built upon similar knightly imagery, asks them to imagine two banners: the first is the banner of Satan, the second that of Christ. Through meditation and reflection upon these standards, the exercitants must make a choice about which strategy of life they will follow, the demanding but true life offered by Christ's way or the worldly wise but ultimately deceptive path of Satan. Are they more pulled towards Satan, who promises riches, honours and pride, or towards Christ, who offers poverty, contempt and humility? Shakespeare's *King Lear* centres upon a similar tension between worldly and true kingship.

*King Lear* opens with an aged king dividing his kingdom among his three daughters:

... 'tis our fast intent  
To shake all cares and business from our age,  
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we  
Unburthened crawl towards death.  
(I.i. 37–39)

Lear's decision is questionable, but his method of division is difficult to comprehend. Calling in his daughters, one by one, he asks them to declare their love for him. His two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, accede to the king's request and heap him with false praises. But Cordelia, the youngest, refuses to participate in the game. The daughter who truly respects Lear will not praise him. For this she is banished. As the play unfolds, Lear loses his kingdom as Goneril and Regan and their husbands plot against him.

King Lear begins as a worldly king who rules a worldly kingdom, but by the end of the play he is transformed into a true king, though he has lost both his kingdom and his mind. As they are led away to prison by



King Lear Weeping over the Dead Body of Cordelia, by James Barry

their enemies he turns to Cordelia:

Come, let's away to prison.  
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage;  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,  
And ask of thee forgiveness.  
(V.iii.8–11)

In prison they will create their own kingdom, where Lear will kneel to Cordelia rather than demanding her flattery. Lear has discovered what it means to be king through service and love rather than power and corruption.

The Kingdom Meditation and the Two Standards call exercitants to realise what Lear has realised. The movement for which Ignatius hoped is a new insight into what it means to be a follower of Christ. Christ's kingship is not the kingship of the world, and he calls us to be poor, humiliated and humble. At the beginning of Shakespeare's play Lear preferred the trappings of power, but he comes, gradually and through personal suffering, to understand that people are more important than things. The banner of Satan challenges its adherents to accumulate riches in this world, but the banner of Christ calls us to eschew these temptations, also placing people before things.

One scriptural passage that an exercitant might be asked to pray over here is Luke 13:10–17. In this passage, Jesus heals a woman on the Sabbath. When the leader of the synagogue sees what Jesus has done he is outraged, because Jesus has broken the Sabbath. Jesus replies that those attending the synagogue also work on the Sabbath when their animals require it: 'Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?' (13:15) However, the heart of his critique is that those in the synagogue have placed observing the law over the wounded humanity of the woman. In their eyes, choosing to cure the woman was a crime that broke the law, but to Jesus it was about restoring the fullness of human dignity to someone who had suffered for so many years. Jesus is asserting that people are more valuable than laws. The Second Week, with its message of new insight, reinforces the importance of seeing the dignity of every person. The banner of Christ, and the banner of King Lear, represent kingship as a call towards poverty and humiliation, which values humanity over power.

### ***Unimaginable Suffering and Titus Andronicus***

The focus of the Third Week meditations is the passion and death of Christ. Ignatius writes of the grace of the Third Week: 'Here is what is proper for the Passion; sorrow with Christ in sorrow; a broken spirit with Christ so broken; tears; and interior suffering because of the great suffering which Christ endured for me' (Exx 203). The Ignatian insight offered by experiencing the Third Week is compassion. As exercitants pray the passion and contemplate the innocent Christ, they are moved to compassion through the realisation that Christ died for us all. Christ experienced all the evils that a human being would fear to undergo, enduring both brutality and a sense of abandonment. However, Christ never became like the enemy. He never wanted revenge. Ignatius says, 'Consider how his divinity hides itself; that is, how he could destroy his enemies but does not, and how he allows his most holy humanity to suffer so cruelly' (Exx 196). Christ's sufferings move the exercitants to sorrow and shame at a fallen and unredeemed world, and that links the movement of Week Three with the dominant movement of *Titus Andronicus*.

*Titus Andronicus* is one of Shakespeare's least popular plays. It is dark, violent, savage and, in many ways, lacks a clear hero figure. The setting is an ancient Roman world where power and cruelty are dominant.



Titus Andronicus, Act IV scene i, by Thomas Kirk

*Titus Andronicus* is far from Christ-like. His decision in Act I to sacrifice the eldest son of the barbarian queen Tamora, who has been captured in battle, sets in motion a violent cycle of retribution. As the tragedy unfolds, Titus suffers the loss of his family and personal mutilation. Two of his sons are decapitated; his innocent daughter is raped and disfigured; another son is banished;



and he is tricked into severing his own hand. In the final scene, Titus cooks Tamora's sons and feeds them to her in a pie. Once she has experienced the horror of eating her own sons, Titus kills her.

Though cruel and unheroic, Titus' experiences engender compassion in the audience. Titus is betrayed by Rome and its leaders, having lived his entire life to protect them. The afflictions suffered by the only innocent character in the play, his daughter Lavinia, are even more moving and difficult for the audience to watch. Her rape and mutilation by Tamora's surviving sons, Chiron and Demetrius, leave the audience feeling cold and disturbed. She is attacked because of her father's actions, and simply because of her beauty.

Such an alienating feeling may also be evoked by reading the story of the passion. Jesus has been abandoned by his friends and betrayed by those in power, and he suffers physical brutality as he is led to his death. Power and cruelty rule in the world where Christ lived and died, as in the world of Titus. The underlying fear of the one meditating on the passion and the one viewing the play are similar: pain and death could also happen to me. If I have answered the call of Week Two and have responded to the election, it is possible that faith in Christ could result in a call to give my own life. This call is not for everyone, but openness to be called to humiliation, subjugation and dehumanisation, the experiences of Christ and of Titus, is always a reality for a Christian.

As the Third Week comes to a close, Ignatius does not want exercitants to jump forward to the resurrection. The overwhelming realisation that Christ suffered these afflictions for them should continue to resonate through the contemplations. Christian faith tells us that the tomb will be empty, but the disciples did not know this as Christ hung on the cross. The fear arising from their unfulfilled hope is also a powerful emotion of the Third Week. The end of *Titus Andronicus* is similarly uncertain. Titus' son Lucius has led a victorious army into Rome, but the play closes with pitilessness and vengeance. Sentenced to die by starvation, Tamora's accomplice Aaron declares: 'If one good deed in all my life I did, I do repent it from my very soul' (V.iii.189–190). This is not an ending promising hope and transformation, but expressing uncertainty about the future of Rome and the power of restoration. The disturbing conclusion of *Titus Andronicus* and the frustrated hopes of the disciples are reminders of a world yet to be fully redeemed. This world is one



*Malvolio and the Countess, by Daniel Maclise*

where power and cruelty rule, where the innocent suffer, and where hope can end in despair. Fortunately, there is a resurrection, and with it a sense of hope and the power in a Christ restored to new life.

#### ***Restoration, Reunification and Love in Twelfth Night***

The dominant movement of the Fourth Week is consolation through transformation. Ignatius describes the experience of Christ in a way that contrasts strongly with that of the Third Week: 'Consider how the divinity, which seemed hidden during the passion, now appears and manifests itself so miraculously in this holy Resurrection, through its true and most holy effects' (Exx 223). The divinity manifests itself by offering consolation to the disciples who had feared that their hope had been misplaced in following Jesus. Week Four of the Spiritual Exercises emphasizes this consolation. Unlike Titus Andronicus, Christ does not exact revenge on those who caused him to suffer. There is no record in the Gospels that Christ appeared to Pilate or the Jewish leaders who plotted to put him to death. Rather, he appears on the road to Emmaus, on the shore and in the locked room. During each appearance he offers a message of peace. Christ is reunited with those who loved him and Ignatius invites exercitants to contemplate these consoling encounters during the final week.

A Shakespeare play that also emphasizes restoration and consolation is *Twelfth Night*. In the final scene the twins Viola and Sebastian are reunited. While the audience are aware that both have survived the shipwreck that separated them, Viola and Sebastian themselves each assume that the other has died. They do not recognise each other at first because Viola has disguised herself as a boy. Seeing her, Sebastian proclaims,

Were you a woman, as the rest goes even,  
I should my tears let fall upon your cheek  
And say 'Thrice welcome, drowned Viola'.  
(V.i. 232–234)

Their reunion is not only a happy moment for them, but becomes a celebration of two marriages. Viola wins the heart of the Duke Orsino, and Sebastian and the Countess Olivia proclaim their love as a celebration of life closes the play.

The Fourth Week emphasizes the joy found in friendship. Howard Gray describes this experience:

Ignatian joy is the psycho-religious energy that desires to bring others happiness, harmony of heart, insight, peace and reconciliation—whatever makes them experience a compatibility between their lives and what they see, or feel, or intuit as God's desires for them.<sup>3</sup>

Ignatius hopes that this joy will last beyond the final days of a retreat and stay with the exercitant. Such harmony of heart and experiences of peace and insight can redirect a person's life. The election at the end of Week Two, which was strengthened by being present to the suffering Christ during Week Three, begins to bear fruit through the feelings of joy that are manifest at the close of the retreat. Remembering the consolation that Christ brings to the disciples—and the reunion of loved ones in *Twelfth Night*—can bring continuing consolation.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Gray, 'Joy and Friendship in the Fourth Week', *The Way Supplement*, 99 (2000), 20.

***Imagination and Spirituality***

Using works of literature to unpack the themes of the *Spiritual Exercises* is helpful because Ignatius believed that God communicates through feelings and emotions. Much writing about the *Spiritual Exercises* focuses on the textual exegesis, historical analysis, and theological reflection found in the text, but the heart of the experience of undergoing a retreat is not based on rational analysis alone. Rather, the experience invites exercitants to look within in order to discern the way that affectivity is moving their consciences. The benefit of using drama to explore these movements is that it can sometimes be easier to analyze how one feels watching a drama unfold than to interpret a spiritual call. However, in both cases individuals must rely on their own experience, imagination and recollection to bring life and growth. When we apply our imagination, we can find in literature the voice of God speaking to us through our own experience.

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