

The Trickster Quality in *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*

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Stephen Adly Guirgis's *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* speaks to the innateness of religion in every last one of us. This play attempts a religious profundity that reaches the commonality of religion we all hold. It is successful in doing so; however, it could not be successful without the utilization of profanity. In order for this play to reach every last one, it must represent every last one. While the title can deceive a potential audience member into thinking that they will witness a play with all the candor of a church sermon, it is just that deception that necessitates the purpose of this play through the use of profanity.

If I were to argue the existence of commonality of religion and that you cannot complete a thorough analysis of any event without some theological element, I would also argue that a truly religious play can only exist when it transcends religious factions. If religion is *in* everyone, it must be *for* everyone. Guirgis's work offers just that by incorporating the profane in both content and vernacular in order to reach everyone.

To demonstrate this reasoning, I turn to the text *Trickster Makes This World* by Lewis Hyde. In the text, Hyde speaks of the mythical being of the trickster and exemplifies his definition through mythological and current characters. Hyde notes that it is impossible to point to any current character and define it as trickster in its absolute definition; however, being trickster-like is one of many qualities that can be found in contemporary characters. For simplicity sake, Hyde defines a trickster as a boundary-crosser. Trickster holds a complexity far beyond that; however, all other offshoots of trickster begin in the foundational definition of a boundary crosser.

More specifically, Hyde writes the following about the boundary-crosser. He states, "Those who work the edge between what can and can't be said do not escape from shame but turn toward it and engage with it."¹ It is with the fervor of a shameless boundary-crosser that this play operates. Essentially, the characters in *Judas* are constantly working with boundary of silence. The attempt to destroy the imaginary binary presented to the court comes through Guirgis's refusal to allow the silence that supports concrete answers. Rather, it provides questions in the clearest way possible that break silence. Questions that are asked every day, and have been asked for hundreds of years, are stated word for word in this script. In our daily life, these questions are not met with reception. Rather, it is through these questions that we see silence, and through this silence we create our shame and guilt, the essential themes of the play.

After debate over where this boundary should be placed, we find this particular line exists only with Judas, who chooses to surround himself with that line, unable to cross his self-made, guilt ridden boundary. The structure echoes Satan's sentiment that we only respond to fear and threat, and that we may leave such fear anytime we want. In breaking shameful silence by asking such questions, Guirgis breaks fear. He forces us to recognize the Judas moment in all of us. If we are all like Judas, how can we justify blame?

As this play centers on blame and guilt, we must not go against that very concept by assigning binaries- 'these' people and 'those' people, Cunninghams and Fayoumys, Judas and the rest of us. Instead, we break that fear where the binary first collapses- in the notion that our similarities far outweigh our differences. This similarity is found in the innateness of religion.

¹ Hyde, Lewis. (1998). *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Both ‘sides’ are trying to preserve what is held as sacred. As Hyde demonstrates, you can preserve the silence that gives social space its order, thereby preserving what you believe as sacred, or you can continue to shift that structure as contingency demands, preserving what you believe as sacred. Guirgis writes his characters in a way that they are constantly shifting that structure, the conflict only existing in the differentiation of methods.

Regardless of the end goal, a trickster points to what is actually happening- refusing to ignore the muddiness, the profane, that is effecting the now. Through this recognition, however, the trickster neither has to destroy the structure nor domesticate itself to it, but rather exist for the sake of reapportionment.² By doing so, the trickster builds or rebuilds community. A trickster seeks a community in its purest form, as Hyde defines as such. “A group does not become a group until its members have an ongoing sense of mutual indebtedness, gratitude and obligation.”³ When hierarchy develops, the community breaks and the ugly ignored. Through engaging with the play as audience, we then are opened up to the possibility of being a community, no longer silencing the shameful or ignoring the ugly that is the very matter that binds us.

The play is not destroying structure, just reminding us that we have a part in forming it. Hyde says, “We forget we participate in the shaping of this world and become enslaved to the shaping left to us by the dead. When the shape of culture becomes a trap, the spirit of trickster leads us into shape shifting.”⁴ By the end of this play, our structure should shift and our line should move.

In shifting the trap of culture, the play deals with our inability to deal with our exclusions. That is the main purpose of shifting the line- to recognize that there exists exclusions in our current structure. The trickster opens the pore to change it and reminds us when it is time to do so. He reminds us that we are nothing more than an appendage of what we oppose- being constantly defined by what we exclude or what excludes us. This play acts with a trickster spirit in that it takes the blinders off to the profane, allows us to appreciate the sacred, remake our structure and recognize our similarities. The play inspires itself. As with the “Judas moment” in which every character realizes that they have done something similar to Judas, the profane is exposed, leaving us no other choice but to bind ourselves as present in this religious experience.

In regards to humor, Hyde says the following: “Humor oils the joints where contradictions meet.”⁵ This comment relates back to building a community and also to engaging in a religious experience. This process handles the trickster-like relationship of sacred and profane in a step-by-step process. (1) This play has humor. (2) The humor grabs our attention and directs us to the themes. Simultaneously, humor comforts us, helping us to process the themes. Since we are then experiencing humor and serious themes concurrently, we are thereby participating in the full gamut of a religious experience, a human experience. Only once we have opened ourselves up to the humorous side can we fully appreciate and understand the themes. Finally, when we reach the last scene of the play, humor has left us. The dance between humor

² Hyde, Lewis.

³ Hyde, Lewis.

⁴ Hyde, Lewis.

⁵ Hyde, Lewis.

and topical questioning has prepared us for this moment. In the final scene, the job of the trickster is complete. He finishes moving the line and hands us the power to do so. By recognizing the trickster work of moving the line, we then are open to what comes next- the community being built. The structure that the trickster works so hard to disassemble comes back together, only different than before through the consciousness of all involved.

Father James Martin, the priest who advised the first production of *Judas*, would agree. In his book *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor and Laughter are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life*, he recognizes that laughter should not be shamed, but embraced in a spiritual life. Without it, as he states, “one cannot have a healthy spiritual life, a healthy any life.”⁶

In order to satisfy the driving force behind this production, the acceptance of profane language is a necessity. When Guirgis was asked if he could have made the same points without the offensive language in the play, his response was a simple “Maybe.” My response, however, is a resounding “absolutely not.” To confirm everything about the structure of this play, in order for any of it to work, you have to meet people where they are. They cannot be reached, build a community, accept their own faults and connect with similarities in each other if you do not first reach them. Through the humor and the profane language, Guirgis meets people where they are. He does not expect people to sit through a sermon, but rather expects his play to come to them, presenting itself as they would if they chose to use their voice. If, as an audience, we see characters that speak and act and ask the same questions just like we do, we are far more likely to be receptive to what the characters are saying.

A play such as this one will, without question, come under direct scrutiny. Guirgis knew that. He knew it so instinctively that he wrote the characters he did without a second thought. Had he changed the language and behavior of his characters, the play would no longer be sitting on the boundary, prepared to assist us in remaking our structure. It would be another play lost in its alienations and difficult subject matter.

⁶ Martin, James. (2011). *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor and Laughter are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.