

December 2022

## Of Crowns, Pilgrims, and Non-Asinine Mules

Moshe Gold

Fordham University, [mgold@fordham.edu](mailto:mgold@fordham.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gold, Moshe (2022) "Of Crowns, Pilgrims, and Non-Asinine Mules," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 11: No. 2, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53309/2164-7666.1419>

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol11/iss2/14>

This Praxis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed Journals at ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact [epublications@regis.edu](mailto:epublications@regis.edu).

## Of Crowns, Pilgrims, and Non-Asinine Mules

Moshe Gold  
Associate Professor of English  
Fordham University  
[mgold@fordham.edu](mailto:mgold@fordham.edu)

### Abstract

John O'Malley, S.J.'s emphasis on rhetoric challenges students to reconsider not only the significance of the history of rhetoric in relation to St. Ignatius' texts, but also the importance of rhetoric in their own discourses. In this essay, I focus on one specific event in Ignatius' *Acts*, an event replete with rhetorical, textual, biblical (both the New Testament and Tanakh, the Hebrew scriptures), and historical considerations, but which, surprisingly, does not appear as a major focus in John O'Malley, S.J.'s voluminous books: *Ignatius on a mule*, encountering "the Moor" (un moro). I outline a method of guiding students through this event that emphasizes important intertextual resonances beyond *Acts*, Tanakh and the New Testament, to the Talmud, paintings, and even Greek and Western literary and theoretical history. This strategy invites students to bring their own interdisciplinary knowledge to reading this passage, to ask how an ostensibly small scene in Ignatius' life can inspire us to craft clear intertextual understandings of mules throughout different religious traditions, and to engage with O'Malley's emphasis on rhetorical and historical analysis, but in ways that encourage them to go beyond the explicit expositions of O'Malley to address their own unique interests and histories from a range of Jesuit pedagogical approaches.

I have been teaching Jesuit Pedagogy seminars to graduate and undergraduate students at Fordham University for over 15 years, and I have yet to find a more student-friendly author on the history of Ignatius and the Jesuits than John O'Malley. In particular, O'Malley's emphasis on rhetoric challenges students to reconsider not only the significance of the history of rhetoric in relation to Ignatius' texts, but also the importance of rhetoric in their own discourses as students, scholars, and citizens. In this essay, I focus on one specific event in the *Acts*, commonly called the Autobiography,<sup>1</sup> of Ignatius, an event replete with rhetorical, textual, biblical (both the New Testament and Tanakh, the Hebrew scriptures), and historical considerations, but which, surprisingly, does not appear as a major focus in O'Malley's voluminous books: *Ignatius on a mule*, encountering "the Moor" (un moro).<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, I outline a method of guiding students through this event that emphasizes important intertextual resonances beyond *Acts*, Tanakh and the New Testament, to the Talmud, paintings, and even Greek and Western literary and theoretical history.<sup>3</sup> This strategy invites students to bring their own interdisciplinary knowledge to reading this passage. The passage's concern with the identities of Ignatius, the

"Moor," and the donkey also underscore urgent concerns about histories of race, religion, and empire that make this text (continuously) timely and relevant to students from all backgrounds. In so doing, students engage with O'Malley's emphasis on rhetorical and historical analysis, but in ways that encourage them to go beyond the explicit expositions of O'Malley to address their own unique interests and histories from a range of Jesuit pedagogical approaches. My reflections will unfold in different stages, represented by my section headings.

### Advantages and Disadvantages of Mules, or How to Start Rereading Ignatius' Story of the Mule

A two-part guiding question that will lead me through the sections of my essay is the following: (a) First, how does Ignatius' 1553 rule regarding the ownership or non-ownership of mules relate to Ignatius' own use of a mule as recounted in *Acts*? (b) Second, and more significantly, how can an ostensibly small scene in Ignatius' life inspire us all to craft clear intertextual understandings of mules throughout different religious traditions? I argue for significant pedagogical lessons that can be drawn from mules. In O'Malley's great *The First Jesuits*, the only reference to mules at all does not

even mention the scene in *Acts*: “In 1553 Ignatius wrote to the provincials of Spain and Portugal that they were not to have a mule reserved exclusively for their own use. Nadal modified the order by allowing them temporarily, and he also said that some colleges could have ‘their own mule.’ His travels in the Iberian peninsula forced him into buying, selling, and trading mules, transactions about which he sometimes suffered scruples.”<sup>4</sup> How might the proscription of “hav[ing] a mule reserved exclusively for their own use” reasonably relate to readers’ understandings of Ignatius’ own use of a mule?

Before answering my guiding question, I should note that in *Saints or Devils Incarnate? Studies in Jesuit History*, O’Malley clarifies the historical problems with a designation of the *Acts* as what we would today call an autobiography:

Ignatius...[told] at the very end of his life an account up to the year 1538 that is sometimes called his autobiography. The account was not put into print but circulated in manuscript within the Society. In it, Ignatius depicted himself as a person moved to action for “the help of souls” by a series of profound religious experiences... Nadal, Ignatius’s peripatetic and plenipotentiary agent to Jesuit communities across Europe, used this account for almost twenty years to tell Jesuits what it meant to be a Jesuit.<sup>5</sup>

Hundreds of pages later in the same volume, O’Malley tells us that this “account, sometimes called Ignatius’s autobiography, is in fact without title. Nadal called it simply ‘The Acts of Father Ignatius,’ or *Acta*. Ignatius throughout this narrative refers to himself in the third person as ‘the pilgrim,’ and therefore the work is sometimes called ‘the pilgrim’s story.’”<sup>6</sup> O’Malley proceeds to identify and describe the critical problems of the *Acta*: “Goncalves da Camara listened as Ignatius dictated.” The listener then went to his room to write down, from memory, notes. “Some time later—days or weeks?” he added to the notes and “dictated the results to a Spanish scribe.”<sup>7</sup> In addition, Ignatius, “a Spaniard, told his story to a Portuguese auditor, who in turn dictated the results of his notes first to a Spaniard, and then to an Italian...[the] final product was translated into

Latin by a French Jesuit.”<sup>8</sup> This textual odyssey contains multiple people’s memories, almost always after the factual events occurred. Moreover, when Ignatius first dictated events, he did so from his own memory without notes.<sup>9</sup>

Although the rhetorical crafting and revising of the *Acts* has become well known, O’Malley summarizes the narrative as “‘the story of a soul,’ that is, the story of his relationship with God and, more particularly, how God guided him from a superficial grasp of what the relationship entailed to something far deeper.”<sup>10</sup> While accurate, this general portrayal of the narrative demands a more thorough reading. *Acts* is indeed the story of the pilgrim on a pilgrimage and the story of a soul. However, as O’Malley commented earlier, the narrative is also a series of profound religious experiences, which thus invite us to consider the specific events surrounding Ignatius’ excursion when he “went off alone on his mule from Navarrete to Montserrat.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Ronald Modras calls the event “one of the most intriguing incidents in all his memoirs.” Modras, though, also claims that Ignatius “told the story of his encounter with the Moor...so that we could understand how God dealt with his soul.”<sup>12</sup> A rigorous rhetoric analysis of the scene, I argue, can enlarge our reading experience of the *Acts* to include how God deals with natural, animate (non-human) beings—in this case, mules, and Ignatius’ retrospective understanding (or perhaps even discernment) of a mule’s potentially prophetic purpose. Students across religious backgrounds understand the need to interpret how the divine relates to all existence, particularly in such a rhetorically rich text.

When I address this passage with students, we begin by reading a small section of McManamon to help facilitate a discussion of the peculiarity of Ignatius on a mule. McManamon notes that “Oddly enough...Ignatius set[s] out with his brother and servants, on a mule [since it] was not a mode of travel typical of pilgrims.” For McManamon, the “detail of the mule seems intended to reveal a larger issue for Ignatius; he identifies himself too closely with the Lord.”<sup>13</sup> We need to remember that when Jesus triumphantly enters Jerusalem, he rides a donkey, symbolizing Zechariah’s prophecy (9:9) from Hebrew scripture—“Your king is coming to you; righteous



**Figure 1.** Peter Paul Rubens, *Ignatius and the Moor*, 1622<sup>14</sup>

and victorious is he, yet humble, riding on a donkey.<sup>15</sup> Crucially, Jesus and the donkey<sup>16</sup> also echo the famous scene in Genesis 22, when God tells Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Abraham himself rises early and saddles his own donkey. On the third day, when he sees the designated location, Abraham tells the accompanying servants, “You stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go up there” (22:5).<sup>17</sup>

To identify “himself too closely with the Lord,” as McManamon puts it, means that Ignatius displays a vainglorious moment reminiscent of his earlier knightly/military ethos. Actually, irony abounds in a scene revealing a pilgrim riding with pride on a donkey, as the animal itself symbolizes great humility! Indeed, unlike the overly general summaries of the *Acts*, McManamon claims that “Ignatius uses the encounter to depict the ways in which societal values continue to motivate him and cloud his interior discretion.” In fact, the “characterization ‘Moor’ was surely demeaning and may not even be accurate.”<sup>18</sup> I have found that the challenges inherent in this historically complex depiction of race and interfaith encounters (as well as forms of imperialism) inspire students on their own to research the use of this term in history.<sup>19</sup> In Ignatius’ encounter

with an “other,” *Acts* provides readers an opportunity to pause over the relationship between identity, religion, race, and nation—concerns that are at the forefront of many students and teachers alike. As a group, we discuss how, from this perspective, we are witnessing a brutally honest depiction of Ignatius’ problematic early moments in his pedagogical and spiritual development: “Ignatius chooses that insidious term [Moor] to indicate his prejudicial contempt for a fellow traveler.”<sup>20</sup> Here, too, is an important opportunity for a faculty moderator and students to discuss the history and rhetorical uses of the word “Moor.”

To prepare students for such a discussion, I assign a small section of Boyle’s rhetorical analysis of this scene in her *Loyola’s Acts*, particularly pages 60-64 (along with her accompanying notes). Students find that Boyle lucidly explains the more-than-derogatory use of “Moro” here: the “epithet with which Loyola dubs his antagonist is socially shameful . . . Historically there were no Moors in Spain at this date . . . [the] terminology [of ‘new’ Christian] demeaned the converts . . . [who were considered] still aliens and heretics.”<sup>21</sup>

The values associated with a chivalric knight inform Ignatius’ reaction to the “Moor’s” comments about Mary possibly losing her virginity when giving birth to Jesus. Not knowing whether to kill the “Moor” or not, Ignatius “leaves the decision to God through the agency of the mule.”<sup>22</sup> Again, though nuanced and accurate, this phrasing does not quite express the even more subtle texture of *Acts*:

[He] decided on this: namely, to let the mule go on a loose rein up to the point where the roads divided. And if the mule went along the town road, he would look for the Moor and stab him; and if it didn’t go towards the town but went along the main road, he’d leave him be. He acted in accord with this thought, and Our Lord willed that . . . the mule took the main road.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, Ignatius lets the mule decide and, for any future interfaith dialogue, retrospectively, God willed the mule, thank goodness. Here, it is useful to pause with students and ask them to

discuss the ethics of Ignatius' decision, and how that might affect our understanding of Ignatius, faith, and even one's own relationship with the divine. According to McManamon, "Jesuits should also see the encounter with the Moor as a mirror of improper ministry to marginal groups."<sup>24</sup> Readers experience the event pedagogically (as well as theologically) as to what not to do (improper ministry). Note how Modras clearly places direct accountability to Ignatius and the mule: "Inigo decided to leave the reins slack and let the mule choose...Fortunately on many counts, the mule took the highway, saving the Moor from death and Inigo from spending the rest of his life as a prisoner in the galleys."<sup>25</sup> Modras' language provides yet another pedagogical moment to discuss the importance of rhetorical positioning within a discourse.

### **A Battle of Desires, Interdisciplinary and Interspecies Exchanges, Prophecies, and Balaam's Donkey**

This passage in *Acts* is also exceptionally powerful for interdisciplinary conversations, which include social sciences and psychoanalysis as well as history and literary studies. Pedagogically, because the word "Moor" appears explicitly in *Acts*, students enter the classroom confident in their understanding of the problematic use. However, to move from what is stated to what is implied, I encourage students to reflect upon and research very particular moments in historical depictions of Ignatius that, at first glance, may not appear explicitly in a given text.

When Meissner discusses Ignatius' "battle of desires last[ing] for some time with the pilgrim,"<sup>26</sup> he, like many other exegetes, describes Ignatius' reaction to the "Moor" as one resembling "that of a chivalrous knight who feels that he must fight to defend the honor of his queen. Inigo was still very much a proud hidalgo." Here, the battle of desires engages two conflicting codes or value systems: the "code of the chivalrous Inigo urged action with the dagger, but the code of the pilgrim would not permit this course." Translating the knightly code into psychoanalytic terms, Meissner argues that "value system of the earlier phallic narcissistic ego ideal...would have allowed immediate retaliatory action...[Ignatius'] solution seems clever, but we have the feeling that, if the mule

had decided otherwise, the impassioned Inigo might well have given the unfortunate Moor a taste of his dagger." The narcissism mentioned will be discussed below, but here I will note that Meissner's analysis adds at least two insightful observations: 1) the dispute between Ignatius and the "Moor" was about sexuality. In fact, Meissner discusses "Inigo's repressed and conflicted libidinal impulses" and claims that we "are forced to conclude that, however repressed, Inigo's sexual wishes remained a vital force in his psychic economy and a source of continuing conflict." 2) It is in the midst of this (embattled) encounter that "Ignatius identifies himself as this stage of his career as 'the pilgrim.' The designation is apt, since a pilgrim is first of all one who is going to some religious destination and who, moreover, is doing penance for his past life." We should recall that Ignatius wears a gentleman's rich clothes as he rides his mule toward Montserrat. The *Acts* displays Ignatius battle over impulses and prior narcissistic values.

The textual, rhetorical, and religious histories, though, are far from over. For a person educated in biblical and prophetic traditions, the mules being discussed allude, in part, to the in/famous story in the Hebrew scriptures about Balaam and the talking mule.

Echoing Abraham rising early to saddle his own donkey, Balaam rises in the morning and saddles his donkey. The donkey famously sees the angel of God with his sword in his hand. Balaam cruelly hits the animal more than once. The donkey and Balaam then engage in a conversation, as if one should not be surprised by this colloquy! The donkey asks, "what have I done to you that you have hit me these three times?" (Numbers 22:28). This "prophet" cannot see what the donkey witnesses. Unlike Ignatius, when faced with a decision (to go forward to curse an entire people/a religious nation, or to reflect and better understand what God wills), Balaam decides to strike his beast of burden.



**Figure 2:** Rembrandt Harmensz Van Rijn, *L'Anesse du prophète Balaam*, 1626, oil on wood, (63 x 46.5 cm), 1626, Musée Cognacq-Jay, Paris<sup>27</sup>

This prophet (of sorts!), a narcissistic pilgrim on a discerning donkey, goes on a pilgrimage to help himself and Balak (king of Moab) drive the Jewish people far away by opening his mouth to articulate a powerful curse. Before returning to Ignatius and the mule, we need to attend to the Hebrew rhetoric and intertextual tapestry before us. When Abraham saddles his mule to obey the spoken word of God (a prophecy), the animal in Hebrew is a chamor (חמור), a “he-ass”; when Balaam saddles his donkey, the animal in Hebrew is an ahson (אֲחֹסֹן), a “she-ass.” Whereas Abraham humbles himself to open himself to God’s will, Balaam prides himself to intensify his narcissism. Though art history pictures a beast of burden, we need to be rigorously vigilant when reading the Hebrew. When rereading Zechariah’s prophecy (9:9), let us note that the English translation I use above does not adequately interpret the Hebrew words: “Your king is coming to you; righteous and victorious is he, yet humble, riding on a donkey.” Not exactly. A more accurate translation would be “yet humble, riding on a chamor (חמור) [a “he-ass”], on a donkey foaled by an ahson (אֲחֹסֹן)<sup>28</sup> [a

“she-ass”].” Here, I ask students before class to research these animals. Once in class, we discuss the potential ramifications inherent in such challenges of translation.<sup>29</sup>

When Jesus rides a “donkey” to Jerusalem, the textual and rhetorical history take us back not only to Zeharia’s prophecy (and “mule”), Abraham’s prophecy (and “mule”), Balaam’s prophecy (and “mule”), but also to the destination of the pilgrimage: Jerusalem. How is this location announced in the story of Balaam? Balaam’s wise mule uses an unusual Hebrew phrase for “three times.” The more familiar phrase would be something like “shalosh pe’amim,” but here, the mule uses the phrase “shalosh regalim,” literally the three pilgrimage festivals. Three times a year one makes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to rejoice with family, the stranger, and the widow.<sup>30</sup> The prophetic articulation of the mule undermines Balaam’s pilgrimage and narcissistic desires. When Jesus rides his beast of burden to Jerusalem, these intertextual echoes resound with selfless (non-narcissistic) humility and a pilgrim on a religious journey, bound for sacrifice.

Balaam’s name can mean literally “be – lo – am,” without being part of any nation.<sup>31</sup> A man without ties to others, only reflecting his own self, a narcissist. Unaware of this textual tapestry (or perhaps moving it aside to open space for his work’s focus), Meissner, let us recall, analyzes Ignatius on the mule in a way that addresses both “Inigo’s repressed and conflicted libidinal impulses,” and the fact that we (for Meissner) “are forced to conclude that, however repressed, Inigo’s sexual wishes remained a vital force in his psychic economy and a source of continuing conflict.”<sup>32</sup> If we keep oscillating our readings of the biblical texts, we find out that Balaam, the self without ties or obligations to others, opens his mouth to articulate a method (rather than a curse, which did not succeed) to have the Jewish people betray God (Numbers 31:15-16). Rather than focusing on proper joy, proper responsibilities, proper pilgrimage, and loving sexuality between spouses, Balaam advises using the Midianite daughters to entice the Jewish men to act out their lascivious, prurient, sexual wishes and libidinal impulses. Indeed, many people die because of this advice.<sup>33</sup>

### Narcissism as an Interpretive Thread

As my students discuss this section of the text, I suggest we juxtapose traditions to better understand narcissism in our constellation of texts



**Figure 3.** Caravaggio, *Narcissus*, 1597-1598, oil on canvas, (113.3 x 94 cm), Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, Roma (MiC)—Bibliotheca Hertziana, Istituto Max Planck per la storia Dell'arte/Enrico Fontolan<sup>34</sup>

and histories. Meissner presents a psychoanalytically sophisticated understanding of narcissism, its pathology, conflicts, appearances in youth, persistence in an individual, and relations between narcissism and leadership, and between narcissism and the ego ideal.<sup>35</sup> Rather than go off the trail into such nuanced detail, I would like to focus on one trajectory in Meissner's account, namely "Phallic narcissism":

The phallic narcissistic personality demonstrates... characteristics that include exhibitionism, pride in prowess, and often counterphobic competitiveness and a willingness to take risks or court danger in the service of self-display. Such individuals are frequently quite self-centered but invariably have an intense need for approval and especially admiration from others... This [phallic

assertiveness] may even be accompanied by feelings of omnipotence and invulnerability that allow such individuals to take risks continually, believing that some miraculous fate or good luck will carry them through.<sup>36</sup>

Inigo, for Meissner, "seems to fit quite well" with "this profile." I would claim that that it fits Balaam better. Balaam asserts himself against his mule, against God's will, and against others. He takes risks "in the service of self-display," and he clearly believes that some divine fate or luck will permit (and even empower) him to curse an entire people. His pride in his prowess is precisely the opposite of his beaten mule's humility and prophetic wisdom and (in)sight. Abraham, rising early to personally saddle his mule in preparation for sacrifice, also displays a self-negation and humility that allow him to be open to God's will and correct decisions. Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a mule also subverts the self-centered attitude of Balaam riding on his mule. Bringing forth the intertextual resonances of this incident gives important nuance to Ignatius' ethos, and more importantly, to the uniqueness of the mule as both figure and agent.

"Narcissus" is the name of not just a male character but also a flower. In Greek, "narke" means being or feeling numb (as in "narcotic"). Several kinds of narcissus flowers give off what, for some, smell like a narcotic/numbing fragrance. In the ancient Greek myth, let us recall that Narcissus is also associated with a prophecy, since Tiresias (a prophet) announced that Narcissus would have a long life, "as long as he did not come to know himself." When trying to decide what to do with the "Moor," Ignatius, ironically, does not come to know himself (yet—that is, in the moment), because he had yet to exhibit proper discernment by emptying himself, his ego, his self-interest, to open himself to the divine will. As Meissner explains the scene with Ignatius, his mule, and the "Moor," the knightly/chivalric code, which was pre-"pilgrim" encoded in Inigo, was a "value system of [Ignatius'] earlier phallic narcissistic ego ideal, which would have allowed immediate retaliatory action."<sup>37</sup>

There are different versions of the Narcissus myth, but in most he views his reflection in water

and basically falls in love with this (liquid) representation of his self-image. Within one Jewish tradition, rabbinic exegetes associate the scene of a young man overcome with his self-image in water (which incites pride) with the biblical “Nazir” (one who takes the oath of a nazirite). Although Numbers chapter six details several of the laws of “Nazir,” I will focus on only one: nazirites are not to cut their hair. A Nazir’s hair (Numbers 6:7) is set apart for, consecrated to, God. A fascinating rhetorical interpretation of this verse reverberates with significance for our focus. Ibn Ezra, one of the greatest Jewish grammarians and biblical commentators of the Middle Ages, comments on our verse:

Some say that the word *nazir* (a Nazirite) is connected to the word *nezer* (a crown). [The verse states] since his consecration (nezer) unto God *is upon his head* [the Ibn Ezra is translating our verse as “since the nezer / the crown of his God is on his head”] is evidence of this. This interpretation is not improbable [meaning, it is not a figurative / midrashic account] And know that most people are slaves to worldly lusts. The true king, the one who has a crown, the one who wears the royal crown, is the person who is free from this lust. [So “nazir” means the individual who wears the crown.]

Though most of my students are familiar with the deeds and death of Samson, one of the more famous Nazir figures, and a few even articulate persuasive parallels between Samson and Jesus, it is rare for any of my students to reflect on this verse in Numbers with the precision and rigor involved the kind of rhetorical analysis enacted by the Ibn Ezra (within a Jewish tradition).<sup>38</sup> That is, once I bring in rabbinic accounts of the nazir, the crown of God, hair, and narcissism, students engage in discussions of the degree and depth different traditions on narcissism can be juxtaposed to the more well-known Greek tradition. The true king who wears the crown<sup>39</sup> is the one who is free from lust, not one who is a slave to libidinal desires. We can extrapolate from the Ibn Ezra’s explanation that adhering to Balaam’s advice, which is taken and causes people

to die, makes men slaves to their phallic narcissism.

The Babylonian Talmud, in tractate *Nedarim* 9b, recounts a different response to such narcissistic desires:

Rabbi Shimon HaTzaddik said: In all my days [as a priest], I never ate the Asham (guilt offering) of a tamei [ritually impure] nazirite except [for] one time, [when] a particular man who was a nazirite came from the South and I saw that he had beautiful eyes and was good looking, and the locks of his hair were arranged in curls. I said to him: My son, what did you see [that caused you to decide] to destroy this beautiful hair of yours [since a nazir must shave off his hair at the end of his time as a Nazir. Indeed, if he becomes impure before the end of his time as a Nazir, he must shave off his hair and start his time as a nazir again].

He replied: I was a shepherd for [my] father in my city; I went to draw water from the spring, and I gazed at my reflection [*babanna*] [in the water] and my [evil] inclination quickly overcame me and sought to exile me from the world [by seducing me to use my good looks, my pulchritude, to engage in sin]. I said to [myself]: Wicked one! Why do you pride yourself in a world that is not yours? [That is, why are you proud] of someone who will eventually be [a body of food in the grave] for worms and maggots? I swear by the Temple service that I shall shave you for the sake of Heaven [to vanquish vanity].

I [Shimon HaTzaddik] immediately arose and kissed him on his head. I said to him: My son, may there be more who take vows of naziriteship like you among the Jewish people. About you the verse states: “When either a man or a woman shall clearly utter a vow, the vow of a nazirite, to consecrate himself to the Lord” (Numbers 6:2).



The Talmud here records a moment in Shimon HaTzaddik's life when he witnessed a person who voluntarily became a Nazir with pure intentions (shaving his hair for the sake of Heaven) unlike all those people who made a vow to become a Nazir based on a decision made while angry. The vanquishing of vainglorious narcissism requires a form of disinterestedness, a reflective discernment, that opens one to a value beyond one's self-image.

Unlike the traits of self-love, improper self-reflection, pride, and acting on one's libidinal desires based on pulchritude, the righteous person humbles his material self—removing his hair, not being seduced by his self-image in the water, not acting out of phallic narcissism—to better serve God and others. Then, instead of beautiful locks of hair, one will be wearing a crown (see Ibn Ezra above).<sup>40</sup>

Let us now return to the mule, in Hebrew, a chamor. But, the word “chamor” (what Abraham saddled) means—or can be the same word as—“chomer,” which means material matter. Balaam does not ride a “chamor” because he never becomes righteous or humble; he is never victorious over his baser material matter. With wit and irony, the biblical text records that Balaam's donkey, though physically closer to the ground and often called a beast of burden, is more elevated, more discerning of true joy (the three festivals), closer to the will of heaven, than Balaam, the phallic narcissistic rider. At this point in class, I ask students to recall when, precisely, Jesus rode to Jerusalem on a donkey. At least one student in each class remembers that, indeed, it was one of the three festivals: Passover. True joy in relation to the will of heaven becomes concretized (and sometimes disrupted) in these pilgrims on donkeys/mules.

### Returning to Ignatius and the Mule

I submit that we now have a more nuanced understanding of Zechariah's prophecy, the one clearly alluded to in the gospels when Jesus rides on a mule to Jerusalem (to instruct people to desire and act upon true joy, to engage in proper service to God, etc.): “Your king is coming to you; righteous and victorious is he, yet humble, riding on a donkey.” With this historical, textual, and

rhetorical background, we can now reread the scene recounting the encounter among Ignatius, his mule, and the “Moor.” In *Revelations* 2:14, we read, “I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.” This verse does not simply refer to the incidents in Numbers. It connects Balaam, his advice, his pedagogy (“the teaching of Balaam”) to idolatry and sexual immorality. The pride, the vainglorious desires, the misplaced reliance on pulchritude, all are embodied in the material matter, the body, of Balaam. And what figure represents moral discernment, proper prophecy, and religious festivity? The lowly, but elevated, “chamor.”

In his *Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, James Martin reveals a keen sense of humor when he narrates the moment in *Acts*. In his chapter on Discernment, he includes a tiny passage entitled “The Discerning Mule”:

In his autobiography Ignatius tells the **hair-raising** story of one of his earliest, and **most misguided**, discernments. Soon after his conversion, Ignatius met a man<sup>41</sup> traveling along the road, who insults the Virgin Mary. The **hotheaded** Ignatius is **furious** and begins to decide whether or not to kill him. He comes to a fork in the road, and reasons that if his mule follows the same path as the blasphemous man, that will be a sign from God, and he will kill the man. “He felt inclined,” writes Ignatius of himself, “to stab him with his dagger.” Fortunately for everyone involved, the mule picks the other road. When telling this story to a group of young Jesuits, one provincial drew laughs by saying, “And ever since then, asses have been making decisions in the Society of Jesus!”<sup>42</sup>


Martin, the provincial, and the group of young Jesuits all reveal a good sense of humor. However, as I have argued throughout this essay, there is much history in any narrative retelling of Ignatius and his mule. Unintentionally, Martin uses descriptive details (hair, misguided, hotheaded, furious) that reflect a rhetorical pilgrimage back to

Jesus and a mule, back to Balaam and a mule, back to Abraham and a mule, and then back (or forward?) yet again to the crown of the king, the crown of righteousness, the Nazir, Zechariah's prophecy, and Revelations.

### Conclusion: O'Malley as Jesuit Pedagogue

In his *Four Cultures*, O'Malley articulates what I have been inspired by him to attempt reaching: "Style...is in reality the ultimate expression of meaning...If we are to get at the deep reality of those texts, we must recognize their styles as constitutive of them."<sup>43</sup> O'Malley's analysis of "four cultures" presents different discourses, different styles, different rhetorics that are, in fact, associated with each culture. Yet, in his wonderful "Introduction," O'Malley clearly informs readers that although he has created four categories, a classification system of sorts, the four cultures are not mutually exclusive or collectively exhaustive: "I do not call them *the* four cultures. They are capacious and not all-inclusive... I do not find an obvious place among the cultures, for instance, for Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of my own religious order."<sup>44</sup> What a powerfully discerning and honest sentence. O'Malley's categories are not places of containment, but places of generativity, flexibility, and inclusion: exactly the model we can aim for our students and teachers-in-training to emulate as they work with and expand their own ideas and pedagogical practices. As I read it, O'Malley's short phrase not only displays honesty, but actually becomes an invitation for us all to continue the important work of discerning

complex rhetorical maneuvers, eclectic traditions, and multiple cultures. The great historian, the clear classifier, has difficulty finding "an obvious place for Ignatius."

The history of Ignatius in the *Acts* is not an objective, neutral list of facts. The craft of the *Acts*, as I hope to have shown in this essay, engages Jesuit Pedagogy epideictically. The text challenges readers to question what a historical account can mean, and which textual and religious traditions—retrospectively and proleptically—can interconnect and shimmer with significance by way of such juxtapositions. When faced with the task of giving meaning to his encounter with the mule, Ignatius looks for a sign, an indicator to both protagonist and audience, that they open themselves to learn from their own self-narratives. Historically, the term rhetoric has been categorized as a pejorative term, one that delimits thinking and often fosters misinformation. As O'Malley continues to teach us, though, rhetorical fluency works to support modes of thinking that can resist disinformation and that can bring us to better places and positions. A reader becomes a pilgrim, a creature of God, on a life-long pilgrimage to be humble by elevating what might appear to be base materiality. Perhaps, a historian, an exegete, a member of a religion, an essayist, all need to be open to mobility, to ongoing educational pilgrimages that take us to places we misperceived as obviously fixed and totally knowable. 

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ignatius did not sit down to write the *Acts* the way contemporary writers write their own autobiographies. As will be clear in what follows, I prefer the word *Acts* since the term connotes a performative, rhetorical, and crafted, series of events.

<sup>2</sup> The most comprehensive rhetorical analysis of the *Acts* remains Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Loyola's Acts: The Rhetoric of the Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). All references and page numbers to the English translation of *Acts* refer to the following edition: *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, eds. Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean, S.J. (London: Penguin Books, 2002). I will discuss the problematic use of the "Moor" below. Since this essay addresses

pedagogical concerns, I should add that over the course of any semester, all my students read O'Malley's fabulously lucid and short history: John W. O'Malley, S.J., *The Jesuits: A History from Ignatius to the Present* (Lanham, Rowan & Littlefield, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> I use this pedagogical strategy with both undergraduate and graduate students. The students come from different majors, disciplines, and religious backgrounds. In addition, since the graduate students are instructors themselves, this strategy (potentially) enlarges and enriches their presuppositions regarding what Jesuit pedagogy might entail in their own classes.

<sup>4</sup> John W. O'Malley, S.J., *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 350.

---

<sup>5</sup> John W. O'Malley, S.J., *Saints or Devils Incarnate? Studies in Jesuit History* (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2013), 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> O'Malley, S.J., *Saints or Devils Incarnate?*, 267.

<sup>7</sup> O'Malley, S.J., *Saints or Devils Incarnate?*, 268.

<sup>8</sup> O'Malley, S.J., *Saints or Devils Incarnate?*, 268.

<sup>9</sup> Meissner also acknowledges the inherent historical problems with reading the *Autobiography / Memoir / Acts / Reminiscences*: "First, [it] was dictated years after the event, and we have no reason to believe that Ignatius' memory was any better than yours or mine. At many points he is honest enough to say that his recollection is shaky or uncertain, or that he simply does not remember—but there were undoubtedly many more instances when his memory may have been faulty but he was not aware of it. Next, we cannot be sure how much retrospective distortion entered into the account... Lastly, we can only guess at what was omitted from the account." See W. W. Meissner, S.J., M.D., *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), xxiv.

<sup>10</sup> O'Malley, S.J., *Saints or Devils Incarnate?*, 269.

<sup>11</sup> *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Modras, *Ignatian Humanism: A Dynamic Spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), 10-11.

<sup>13</sup> John M. McManamon, S.J., *The Text and Contexts of Ignatius Loyola's "Autobiography"* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 21.

<sup>14</sup> *Vita beati P. Ignatii Loiolae Societatis Iesu fundatoris* (Rome: publisher not identified, 1622), available at Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/gpl\\_5569271/page/n25/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/gpl_5569271/page/n25/mode/2up).

<sup>15</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Hebrew (and the Talmud) are my own. Although the Hebrew word "ani" can mean one who is "poor," it is quite clear, as I will discuss below, that in this context the word refers to one who is exceedingly humble. It is interesting to point out that Ignatius devoted so much of his life to addressing poverty.

<sup>16</sup> Several students often mention, from what might be called a cultural studies perspective, the animated special that features Nestor, the Long-Eared Christmas donkey (who, in the time of the Roman empire, travels to Bethlehem). Prepared for such a reference, I usually

play the Gene Autry song, which inspired the animated special.

<sup>17</sup> Note how seeing / approaching a Mountain appears in both scenes.

<sup>18</sup> The so-called "Moor" may have been a "baptized New Christian." McManamon, S.J., *The Text and Contexts*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, some of the best pieces of student writing on this topic display an extremely complicated constellation of questions and values, quite similar in rigor and rhetorical complexity to the pedagogical strategy I discuss in class and in this essay.

<sup>20</sup> McManamon, S.J., *The Text and Contexts*, 23. I also provide students with texts that bypass the word by using other words so the class can discuss the ethical implication of selected diction. For example, in Margo J. Heydt and Sarah J. Melcher, "Mary, the Hidden Catalyst: Reflections from an Ignatian Pilgrimage to Spain and Rome" in *Jesuit & Feminist Education: Intersections in Teaching and Learning for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Jocelyn M. Boryczka and Elizabeth A. Petrino, 45, the co-authors present a wonderful and eloquent account of the importance of Mary for Ignatius. That said, students are quick to point out that when the co-authors summarize our scene, they do not use the word "Moor": "On the road to his next stop in Montserrat, Ignatius seriously disagreed with a Muslim who questioned the virginity of Mary. After the encounter, Ignatius apparently experienced an intense internal battle, feeling that he had not done his duty toward Mary." Their footnote refers to page 19 of Penguin Classics edition of *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings* (the same edition I am using in this essay), but page 19 actually uses the word "Moor."

<sup>21</sup> Boyle, *Loyola's Acts*, 61.

<sup>22</sup> McManamon, S.J., *The Text and Contexts*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> McManamon, S.J., *The Text and Contexts*, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Modras, *Ignatian Humanism*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> All references to Meissner in this paragraph refer to Meissner, S.J., *Ignatius of Loyola*, 61-63.

<sup>27</sup> The digital image is available at the Paris Musées website, <https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/fr/musee-cognacq-jay/oeuvres/l-anesse-du-prophete-balaam#infos-principales>.

<sup>28</sup> The form of the word here is actually תַּתְּנֶה [with the etymological root being an ahson (תָּתַן), a “she-ass”].

<sup>29</sup> Students enter the class with an abundance of English words associated with mules: jack, mare, stallion, jennet, hinny, jule, donkule, hule, male mule, john mule, female mule, mare mule, molly. In class, I ask students to translate these words into other languages (students collectively know many languages!), and then to explain to those of us who do not know the mentioned language, the distinctions in value and associations that are expressed in that language’s diction.

<sup>30</sup> See Deuteronomy chapter 16. Also, see Maimonides’ *Code (Laws of Chagigah 2:14)* for halakhic (Jewish legal) rulings on the matter.

<sup>31</sup> An interpretation given in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Sanhedrin* 105a.

<sup>32</sup> Meissner, S.J., *Ignatius of Loyola*, 62.

<sup>33</sup> In addition to reviewing key passages in Tanakh here (Numbers 31, Deuteronomy 23, Joshua 24, Micah 6, Nehemiah 13) we also analyze as a class James 4 (which expands our conversations about being humble and being full of pride), 2 Peter 2:12-20 (which, in the context of false prophets, licentiousness, and irrational animals, talks about Balaam’s madness, straying sinners, and our wise donkey), Revelations 2:14 (which speaks of the teaching of Balaam which placed a stumbling block before people—to eat food sacrificed to idols and to practice fornication), Jude verse 11 (on Balaam’s error for the sake of gain). All of these passages persuade students of the importance of pride/humility and Balaam for a robust reading of Ignatius and the mule.

<sup>34</sup> The digital image is available at the Barberini Gallerie Corsini Nazionali website, <https://www.barberinicorsini.org/en/opera/narcissus/>

<sup>35</sup> His sophisticated account appears to be mostly Freudian. It would be fascinating to read a clear Lacanian account of narcissism and Ignatius.

<sup>36</sup> Meissner, S.J., *Ignatius of Loyola*, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Meissner, S.J., *Ignatius of Loyola*, 62. See Meissner’s robust discussion of, and notes on, phallic narcissism and Ignatius. A short passage on page 77 of his huge volume illustrates Meissner’s position: “The psychological and spiritual crisis through which Inigo de Loyola passed in Manresa was an extension of the conversion process begun on his sickbed at the castle

of Loyola. The hypothesis we have been following here is that the strong, courageous, and fearless identity the young Inigo had shaped, in the image of the chivalrous knight who feared no danger and sought glory and conquest on all sides, whether libidinal or aggressive, was formed around a phallic, narcissistic core that left him vulnerable to certain kinds of aggressive stress.”

<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, in the first chapter of Luke, when the angel speaks to Zechariah (concerning Elizabeth bearing a son, John), the annunciation scene explicitly includes the admonition that John (yet to be born) “must never drink wine or strong drink” (1:15). The entire scene (and rhetoric) echoes the story of Samson, and by doing so, invokes Numbers chapter 6 (the laws of the Nazir).

<sup>39</sup> Once I translate this rabbinic reading, many students suddenly realize the significance of this heuristic strategy to their own understanding of a multitude of verses in the New Testament. They start to reflect on the permutations of the “crown of righteousness,” which takes them beyond their familiarity with the iconography of Jesus and the crown of thorns. To provide just a few examples: “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial...he will receive the crown of life” (James 1:12); “be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelations 2:10); “when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:4); and perhaps most evocatively, “Henceforth there is laid up for me **the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me**” (2 Timothy 4:8).

<sup>40</sup> When I include short selections from Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass (Asinus Aureus or Metamorphoses)* the students are delighted by the “ass” figure, but when they encounter the last chapter/episode they suddenly witness (in their reading) not only a serious initiation into a religion (so it turns out the “Ass” was on a kind of pilgrimage), but a shaving of the hair on the protagonist’s head! His baldness at the narrative ending suggests another depiction of humility rather than pride, one learned from the experiences of an “Ass.”

<sup>41</sup> The diction here is quite arresting. Does the author use “man” to generalize the incident? To defer discussion of the inflammatory use of the word “Moor”? To wait for another time with the group of Jesuits to discuss Ignatius and Islam? To revise prose to teach readers not to assume that members of a religious order do not have a sense of humor?

<sup>42</sup> James Martin, S.J., *The Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 325.

---

<sup>43</sup> John W. O'Malley, S.J., *Four Cultures of the West* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 30-31.

<sup>44</sup> O'Malley, S.J., *Four Cultures*, 5-6.