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**Review: *Why Do You Trouble This Woman?*  
*Women and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*  
by Anne Arabome, SSS**

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Anna Arabome, SSS. *Why Do You Trouble This Woman? Women and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*. Paulist Press, 2022. 160 pages. \$19.95 paperback; \$13.37 ebook.

Nearly five centuries after their initial composition, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola remain a classic of spirituality—a work whose impact and meaning extends far beyond its original cultural and historical context. Offering insights into the human mind and spirit long before the advent of modern psychology, Ignatius is often hailed as a man ahead of his time. Yet there are ways in which he was also a man very much of his time. Some of Ignatius’s original images and analogies are so bound by their historical and cultural context, they can become stumbling blocks for modern practitioners, occluding rather than illuminating the divine.

This is especially true for women, who may be disturbed to find in the Spiritual Exercises dimensions of a misogynistic worldview. Ignatius’s suggestion that Satan “conducts himself like a woman”<sup>1</sup> is the most egregious example, but the entire text is saturated with what Anne Arabome calls “patently male-dominated penchant, stereotypes, imagery, and biases” (xix). Rather than dismissing the Exercises as hopelessly misogynistic, Arabome draws from her years of experience as a spiritual practitioner and director to invite readers into the richness of Ignatian spirituality, naming and jettisoning the contextual sexism that will not serve contemporary spiritual seekers.

Arabome’s book joins a small but strong bibliography of 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist approaches to the Spiritual Exercises, the most comprehensive being the 2001 book *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* by Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert. A second edition by Liebert and Annemarie Paulin-Campbell which came out in

2022 expanded the insights of the original by engaging with more diverse cultures and contexts. *Why Do You Trouble This Woman?* is now an integral part of this conversation, described by the publisher’s website as “the first by a woman of color on Ignatian spirituality in a multicultural and intercultural setting.”<sup>2</sup>

While Arabome is clearly in conversation with this earlier feminist literature, she does not seek to replicate the more systematic approach of these works that chronologically adapt Ignatius’s Exercises for a contemporary practitioner. This slim volume is more anecdotal, relying on the author’s experience as a director to imaginatively explore themes that women might encounter in Ignatian spirituality. Rather than follow the order of Ignatius’s exercises, Arabome clusters each chapter around these different themes. Chapter One, “In the Beginning Were Women,” describes the women who impacted Ignatius’s life, invoking the African tradition of reverence for one’s ancestors to creatively retrieve these foremothers of Ignatian spirituality. Chapter Two, “Finding God in All Things,” turns to women’s daily lives as a source for spiritual reflection, while Chapter Three focuses on women’s embodiment. While the entire book emphasizes the grace of imagination and story-telling, these themes are more explicitly reflected upon in Chapter Four, “The Gift and the God of Imagination,” and Five, “The God-Place of Storytelling.” The sixth and final chapter, “Contemplative Awakening, Awareness, and Action,” applies these earlier themes to contemplation and the process of discernment.

The book defies clear classification in a genre. Arabome herself describes it as “part storytelling,

part journaling, part prayer, and part theology” (xx). This creative and experimental format was, I found, most captivating in the first chapter, where Arabome writes a short narrative in the voices of women integral to Ignatius’s life—his nanny Maria de Garin, his sister-in-law Magdalena de Araoz, and women who served as his spiritual companions and confidants, Inez Pascual, Isabel Roser, and the secretly-vowed one-time Jesuit, Princess Juana of Spain. In these imagined monologues, Arabome brings these women to life, rescuing them from the footnotes of history and foregrounding them as potential spiritual companions for women who today seek wisdom in Ignatian spirituality. Anchoring this creative and prayerful exercise in the African tradition of honoring ancestors, Arabome’s unique insight from her own context demonstrates how much richer this field is made by a diversity of voices and perspectives.

While at times this genre-bending narrative is illuminating, it also creates challenges. Arabome states early in the book that she intentionally conflates her audience of women, the women she has accompanied in direction, and her own self into “the woman of the *Exercises*,” a singular composite entity that nonetheless contains “stunning diversity and intriguing variety” (xxix). This approach is occasionally confusing, as Arabome herself acknowledges that she alternates between the first, second, and third person voice in telling this woman’s story. At times I wondered if this conflation of all women into one woman was functionally essentialist, especially as Arabome invokes uncritically the notion of “feminine genius” (43), seen by many feminist theologians as

a way to dismiss women by conflating their experiences and placing them on pedestals. Yet at other times Arabome explicitly heads off such a critique, acknowledging that for each of her directees, “it is important not to see her as a specimen representative of all women... part of my calling as a spiritual companion is to honor her uniqueness” (39).

This book made me realize how difficult it is to render one’s own prayer intelligible to the imagination of another. Occasionally I found myself jarred by an invitation to prayer that would crop up in each chapter, as the book suddenly shifted away from theology or descriptive narrative. But even as I found my own imagination resisting some of Arabome’s invitations, I appreciated that her approach is very in line with Ignatius’s. In the sixteenth century, Ignatius used his own imaginative prayer experiences as the basis to craft exercises for others to engage; Arabome is doing the same thing, drawing both from Ignatius’s text and from her own experience. Perhaps this is exactly what is needed to shake off the sexism of the sixteenth century and bring Ignatius’s spiritual wisdom into the twenty-first century.

Practitioners of Ignatian spirituality, particularly spiritual directors and campus ministers, will find in this book a creative exploration of Scripture and of Ignatius’s own texts that might spark further engagement with this spiritual tradition. It is a welcome contribution to the ongoing conversation of retrieving Ignatius for modern contexts very different from his own, but just as much in need of spiritual wisdom. HJE

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises & Selected Works*, ed. George E. Ganss (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 204.

<sup>2</sup> Paulist Press, *Why Do you Trouble This Woman?*, accessed April 11, 2024, <https://www.paulistpress.com/Products/5616-0/why-do-you-trouble-this-woman.aspx>.