Ignatian Discernment as seen in Shakespearean Tragedy

Abstract:
William Shakespeare is hailed as the greatest playwright of all time and is the most widely known author in all of English literature. Saint Ignatius Loyola was a sixteenth century soldier-turned-saint who founded of the Society of Jesus, a Catholic religious order, also known as the Jesuits. This thesis examines two plays of William Shakespeare through the lens of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola to determine the influence that the Exercises may have had on Shakespeare. Concretely our question is, "Are there instances of Ignatian discernment in the plays of William Shakespeare?"

First, I present the story of St. Ignatius's conversion and explain how he developed the Spiritual Exercises. Second, I trace the history of the early Jesuits in London and focus specifically on Jesuit saint and martyr Edmund Campion. Then I describe what historians tell us about William Shakespeare's early life in Stratford-upon-Avon and the few years after he left school at the age of fifteen or sixteen. Finally, using The Tragedy of Macbeth and Julius Caesar as case studies, we look at characters in these two plays who use, I contend, the Ignatian process of discernment of spirits in making their decisions.

My research establishes that William Shakespeare was rooted in Catholicism early on through the families of both his mother and father. Furthermore, he had Catholic connections through his schoolmasters at the King's New School in Stratford-upon-Avon, and it is quite possible that a young Shakespeare met Edmund Campion. Shakespeare was very likely himself a schoolmaster for the wealthy Catholic families in Lancashire from 1579-81 which coincides with the time that Campion was in the England countryside as a missionary from 1580-81.

The Ignatian process of the "discernment of spirits" is still used widely today among religious and lay people alike. It makes us aware of our feelings of desolation and consolation and guides us in our decision-making processes. The value of reflecting on discernment in Shakespeare's plays is the graphic way in which they parallel the discernments and decisions we make in our own everyday lives.

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