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Focus On... The Prodigal Son in Literature

Media of all kinds find the story of the Prodigal Son and his family (Luke 15:11-32) a compelling touchstone for storylines involving the leaving and returning of disgraced offspring and siblings. In April 2019, BBC Radio 4's long-running series, *The Archers*, appropriated the theme in the return of Freddie from prison, prompting Lily, his sister, to mutter darkly about having to eat fatted calf sandwiches. In *Borgen* writer Adam Price's recent Danish TV drama, *Ride Upon the Storm*, the flawed priest's son, Christian, returns from a life-changing trip to Nepal and the Prodigal Son references are explicit when the family sits down to a celebration meal. All is well until, alone with his son, the priest tells Christian he is aware of his true motives and warns Christian that he should never ask anything from him again (Series 1, episode 8). The moment is shocking because it is unexpected, jolting the easy certainties of familiarity with the plot. Whether appealing to the stereotypes of a surly stay-at-home sibling or undermining the expected reaction of the loving father, modern appropriations of the parable depend on a recognition of the trope.

In my recently published book, *The Prodigal Son in English and American Literature: Five Hundred Years of Literary Homecomings* (Jack 2019), many of the texts considered make explicit reference to the parable. Often the tag is the word "prodigal" itself, sometimes even in the title, as in some of the texts from the American short story tradition (Bret Harte's "Mr Thompson's Prodigal" [1870]; Thomas Wolfe's "The Return of the Prodigal" [1934]). Sometimes characters refer to themselves as characters from the parable, as John Ames does in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*: "I was the good son, so to speak, the one who never left his father's house" (2006, p. 272). Alternatively, the narrator or a character may label another in terms which clearly associate them with a figure in the parable: In Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the newly-crowned king asks, "Can no man tell of my unthrifty son | Tis full three months since I did see him last" (5.3.1-2), setting up the connection between Hal and the Prodigal Son which will extend through *Henry IV* Parts 1 and 2 and *Henry V*.

"Riotous living" is another tag which offers great imaginative potential as well as a clear interpretative steer towards the parable. The Elizabethan Prodigal Plays of John Lyly (such as *Euphues* [1581]) and others take delight in fully embodying "riotous living" in the lives of their protagonists, far beyond the passing reference made by the older brother to his father. This element of the story can take up over half of the play, offering a comic interlude or a warning to those watching who might be tempted to stray.

The "swine" in the Prodigal's lowest moment also function as markers in later texts. They make an appearance in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, when Cordelia refers to her father having being "hovel[led]... with swine" (4.7.39) during his self-imposed exile, although this was not part of the scene presented to the audience. Elizabeth Bishop's poem sets "The Prodigal" of its title in a literal pig-sty, his ambivalent relationship with the pigs, both homely ("The pigs stuck out their little feet and snored") and horrific ("the sow that always ate her young"), both pushes him towards and pulls him back from the decision to go home.

The parable, particularly in its AV translation, seeps its way through the centuries into multiple literary texts. Such clear allusions raise expectations about the direction of the narrative which may or may not be met in a conventional way. The homeward-bound

characters in the American short story tradition often find that while they may long to return, there is no place for them at home any more: their exile has changed them inexorably. Robinson's John Ames must discover what it means to understand himself not just as the older brother but also as the Prodigal Son, and as the waiting father, in order to come home to himself. Lear is Cordelia's "Poor perdu" (4.7.35), the "child-changed father" (4.7.17): here the daughter takes on the role of the father. And so her perspective and character, with its strong Christ-like echoes, is established as the one which brings peace in the land. Edgar has the last word, asserting the universal significance of Cordelia's original response to her father:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. (5.3.323-4)

Direct references to the parable of the Prodigal Son in literary texts establish a fleeting moment of familiarity, often only to move in a different direction entirely.

Victorian novelists such as George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell refer to aspects of the parable explicitly and also more obliquely reflect on its narrative trajectory. Stephen Marx, in his *Shakespeare and the Bible* (2000), would refer to the latter relationship between the biblical and literary texts as midrashic. The whole story is retold in a new way for a new context. George Eliot uses a pictorial representation of the scenes of the parable as an ironic commentary on the fate of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). The narrator records Maggie seeing a set of prints depicting the story of the Prodigal Son when, as a child, she had returned to the house in despair at having killed her brother's rabbits by neglect. While there is a comic element to the scene (the parable family are in the costume of the characters in Samuel Richardson's novel *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* [1753]), Maggie's expressed regret that the subsequent story of the Prodigal Son is untold is presented with some sympathy. It invites the reader to read the rest of the novel, and Maggie's story in particular, as the continuation of the parable. However, the adult Maggie, returning as an apparent Prodigal after an ill-judged but innocent running away with a suitor, is not welcomed back into the family home. It is only after her tragic death that she is exonerated. Eliot offers an interpretation of the parable in the novel which operates as a critique of the sexual and social mores of her time, highlighting the human consequences of judging others, and the contingent nature of the judgemental attitudes in the first place.

Similarly, Mrs Gaskell's *North and South* (1854) signals an interest in the parable in Margaret's assertion she will take on her rightful position in the house, in nursing her mother, in "something of the spirit of the Elder Brother" (p. 146). There is a son who has left home and returns, under suspicion of mutiny which the family and he dispute. And there are contrasting maternal figures: one, Mrs Thornton, who idolises her son; the other, Margaret's mother, who feared she had lost her daughter when she was sent away to live with wealthy relatives. In the spirit of Mrs Gaskell's Unitarian, social Gospel beliefs, the novel suggests it is in interacting positively with the community in which you are called that a sense of home is achieved. The central characters, Margaret Hale and John Thornton, discover this in different ways: Margaret discovers a way to be at home in the alien "North" with her family, while John must assert his independence from his mother in order to make a home with Margaret. The identification of the father figure in the parable with God is

resisted, and the parable operates as a metaphor for right living in a changing society, for those with ears to hear and a willingness work things out for themselves.

The modern novelist, James Robertson, offers a rather more bleak, yet still midrashic reading of the parable in *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006). Here there are no direct references to the parable at all, but home as a place to leave and a place to be longed for is a central theme of the novel. Gideon's father is as controlling as the father in the parable, deliberately taking on himself the attributes of God which are often transferred onto that figure: he is the dominant figure in the household and in the church where he is minister, demanding respect, even fear, and making the rules for others to obey. Even as a child, Gideon understands home to be a waiting room from which to escape. The contrast between being lost and found, dead and alive, haunts Gideon in his restless search for a place to belong. He trains as a minister but his lack of belief leads to a psychologically damaging chasm between appearance and reality. When he falls into the Black Gorge, he is assumed to be dead but on his return to "life", he describes an experience of communion with a figure who claims to be the devil, himself thoroughly disillusioned with modern life. Persuaded by this figure to return to the real world to make a connection with his mother, Gideon finds only emptiness in his mother's eyes, as dementia has robbed her of memory or understanding. And so Gideon believes he must instead return to be with the one whom he believes has shown him both truth and understanding. The novel suggests, by obliquely implying the homecoming offered by the devil figure is illusory, isolating and ultimately deadly, that the parable offers little hope for the modern person. Few alternatives are offered in a society which finds the notion of God as an authority figure unconvincing. The existence of the devil figure is left open to doubt by the structure of the novel, in parallel with its other intertextual predecessor, James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1832). The quest for a supernatural solution to the human longing to be found seems to lead nowhere in the modern world of the text. The interaction between the parable and the novel highlights that longing as part of the human condition, and leaves Gideon and the reader with little hope of a positive answer. As Leah Hadomi (1992, p. 19) concludes, in her exploration of the homecoming theme in mid-twentieth century American drama:

There is no escape. The relationship to the family and its expression in literature is so powerful that it continues to assert itself even if there is no 'father', no 'mother', no family to return to... Modern drama deconstructs the archi-pattern of the prodigal son only to restate the eternal truth of the desire of man to return.

Whether the parable of the Prodigal Son operates as a quarry for direct quotation or as an archi-pattern inviting midrashic re-telling, its appropriation in literature reflects the context of the appropriator. It might be argued that it has been the negative, unspoken elements of the parable which modern readers have focused on, rather than any theological message of hope or critique of judgmentalism which the parable's setting in Luke's Gospel presupposes. And yet this message also persists, and its rejection still has the power to shock as it does to some effect in Adam Price's TV drama, *Ride Upon the Storm*. It persists too in other media, such as Margaret Adams Parker's sculpture of a scene from the parable. The sculpture was commissioned to mark the work of Duke Divinity School in the field of reconciliation,

including the building of a Centre for Reconciliation in 2005 (http://www.ecva.org/wordimage/articles/parker_reconciliation/reconciliation_1.htm). In the sculpture, the father extends his arms to both the younger son who is kneeling at his feet and clutching him, and the older son who is standing stiffly beside him, his head turned away and his arms folded. Parker has described the father as the bridge between the two, in this scene reconstructed from the conflation of the two final scenes in the parable. The father, the smallest, weakest figure of the three, rests a hand on each son, a living yet fragile connection between them. The scene suggests that reconciliation between the brothers, rather than reconciliation between each brother and the father individually, is what will bring the narrative to a resolution.

Parker describes how she mounted the finished statue on a “lazy Susan” contraption, in its chosen spot in campus, and invited staff and students to comment on different orientations of the sculpture. As it was turned this way and that, a different face came into view, depending on where you were standing. And eventually, an orientation was agreed, and the lazy Susan was removed so the piece could be fixed in position. Sightings of the parable of the Prodigal Son in literature offer a multitude of perspectives, depending in part on whose face is the focus: the younger or older son or the father himself; and on whose back is turned, unavailable for comment or interpretation. In literature the viewer and the viewed are free to move around and explore the many contours of the parable. The sculpture, however, finally speaks of something fixed and stable, with the father at the apex of the action, connecting the strengths and failings of the brothers through a touch of the hand rather than grasped force. This in many ways is a “reconstruction” rather than a “deconstruction” of the archi-pattern. Perhaps both are needed to maintain the currency of the parable in the literary, visual and theological imagination.

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