

Theodore Beza's Fruitful Poetry
By Deanna Smid

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Characters:

Students of Beza:

Heinrich

Thomas

William

Johan

Theodore Beza

Housekeeper

Setting: Back in England, we saw Agnes Foxe encouraging her husband to record stories of martyrdom so that people would “hear, see, and remember” what had happened. In Geneva, Switzerland, Dr. Theodore Beza is also encouraging Christians to “hear, see, and remember,” both by versifying the Psalms and by writing plays. His four students are assisting him in both endeavours, but they are up to some hijinks of their own at the same time. The audience never meets the wife of Theodore Beza, but they find out that she is of great importance to Beza, as are Idelette de Bure to John Calvin and Anna Reinhard to Ulrich Zwingli.

Scene 1: The library. Heinrich, Thomas, and William are sitting quietly, reading and taking notes.

Johan: [*entering and brandishing a piece of paper*] Fellow students!

Heinrich: What is it now, Johan?

Johan: I have the newly revised Psalm from Dr. Beza.

Thomas: Another?

William: How does he write them so quickly?

Heinrich: You know Dr. Beza. He considers this his duty, so he does it immediately, and well.

Thomas: Has he asked us to give it a trial?

William: Of course! That is one of our tasks, is it not? Let's take a look, Johan.

Johan: Not so fast! I think we should play a little game.

Heinrich: Not another game. The last one almost broke my collarbone.

Johan: There are 150 of these Psalms. Don't you think we should make each one interesting?

Thomas: Each one of them is interesting already, Johan.

William: True, true, but let's hear him out, Thomas.

Johan: I propose this: we sing the Psalm, and at the end of the last verse, we hold the last note for as long as we can. The first one to take a breath loses.

Heinrich: Sounds simple. Shall we begin?

Thomas: Wait! What is the punishment for the loser?

William: We can figure that out after we play the game.

[They sing Psalm 128 from the Anglo-Genevan Psalter]:

Blest is the man who always
reveres and serves the LORD,
who, walking in his pathways,
obeys and keeps his word.
The fruit of all your labour
you as reward will eat;
you, blest by his great favour,
will have what you may need.

Your wife a vine resembles,
fruitful within your house.
Like olive shoots assemble
the children God allows.
Around your table sitting,
they are a rich reward,
a blessing great and fitting
for him who fears the LORD.

From Zion come your blessing;
may you see Salem's peace
and happiness progressing
until your days will cease.
May you through life's duration
know that your seed is well
and see their generations.

Peace be on Israel. [*they hold the last note for as long as possible. The first one to falter is William*]

William: [*gasping*] That's it! I couldn't hold it any longer.

[*The other three students cheer*].

Heinrich: Johan, what shall be his punishment?

Johan: Heinrich, Thomas, come here and we will decide. [*Johan, Heinrich, and Thomas whisper together. William looks on, apprehensive*].

Thomas: [*emerging from the huddle*] William, we have decided.

William: What is it? [*cringing*]

Thomas: For the rest of the day, the only words you can speak aloud are the names of fruits and vegetables.

William: What? That's outrageous!

Heinrich: Now, now, William. Those words are forbidden.

William: But, but, what if Dr. Beza calls us to his study?

Johan: Even then, William, only the names of fruits and vegetables.

William: Oh, oh, ...squash!

[*Housekeeper enters*]

Housekeeper: Gentlemen, Dr. Beza asks that you join him in his study. [*exits*]

Heinrich: Oh Thomas, Have you ever *bean* this frightened?

Johan: *Olive* us will be rooting, er, *rutabagaing* for you, William.

Thomas: You may have to stay *mum* all day. Get it? Mum? Chrysanthemum?

Heinrich: Ah, Thomas, that's the name of a flower.

William [*looking panicked*]: Beets! Beets!

Johan: What's that, William?

William: Beet!

Heinrich: I think he's worried that Dr. Beza will beat him.

Thomas: Haha! That's what you get for losing the game!

Johan: Maybe we had better help him out when we can, fellows.

Thomas: But he lost the bet, and now he must accept the consequences.

Heinrich: Let's consider this situation a challenge for all of us. If we can keep Dr. Beza from determining what we are doing, we all win.

Thomas: I guess.

William: [*looking relieved*] Olive...

Thomas, Heinrich, Johan [*in unison*]: ...us together. [*Exeunt*]

Scene 2: [*Beza in his study, solus. He is working on writing a play. He is holding a quill and a parchment, pacing back and forth as he writes the prologue*].

Beza: Let's see:

“God save you every one both great and small
Of all degree: right welcome be you all.”

Hmm, that's a good start. Very Welcoming.

“Would God we might each week through all the year
See such resort in Churches as is here.”

That adds weight, definitely...

“Ye Gentlemen and Ladies, I ye pray
Give ear and harken ...”

Harken? Yes, I like that. But what next? “Harken to my play?” No, no, too direct.
“Harken every day?” No, I don't think I want them to see this play *every* day. And “every day” doesn't contain enough syllables. “Hearken and call out, yay!” Too light-hearted, I think. Maybe simple is best:

“Ye Gentlemen and Ladies, I ye pray
Give ear and harken to what I have to say.”

There it is! Now, I need to give more direction to the audience. What should they be doing during the play? Listening, I guess:

“To hold your peace only I require.”

No, not enough syllables. How about, “to hold your peace alone I require?” Not enough syllables there, either. “To hold your peace alonely I require.” There it is! But is “alonely” a word? It doesn’t matter. The mark of a great playwright is inventing new words.

But they will want to know why. Hmm. I will anticipate the question for them:

“What win you (some will say) by that desire?
We neither can nor will away with that.”

And my answer:

“But yet you must, or else I tell you flat,
That both of us our labour lose together,
In speaking I, and you in coming hither.”

That should satisfy them! And a final reminder about silence. There is nothing worse than a rowdy audience.

“Wherefore I crave but silence at your hand,
My words with patience for to understand.”

Patience, patience, we all need plenty of that. Speaking of patience, where are my students? I sent my housekeeper to summon them a long time ago.

[The four students enter noisily]

Thomas: Dr. Beza, you asked for us?

Johan: We were practicing your psalm for you.

William: Endive...

Heinrich: Never heard something so beautifully rhymed.

Beza: Ah, Psalm 128. What a lovely chapter in the Bible. What did you think of my versification?

Heinrich: Lovely!

Thomas: Beautiful!

Johan: Wonderful!

[*They all turn to look at William*].

Beza: And you, William, what did you think?

William: Grape!

Beza: Thank you all for your kind words. I still remember the first time that I heard a Psalm put to music. When I was a young man—only 29—after I first converted to the Reformed faith, I attended a public worship service in Geneva for the first time. I heard the congregation sing a psalm, and it was so moving that I wanted to assist with the formidable task of versifying the rest. I started with Psalm 16. Once I had finished it, I snuck into the home of John Calvin and hid it among the papers on his desk.

Johan: What did he do when he found it?

Beza: He asked me to do the rest.

Heinrich: What an immense task!

Beza: It is my duty. God has given me talents, and I will use them to his honour.

Thomas: Did you summon us here to ask us our opinion on the new Psalm, Dr. Beza?

Beza: Partly, yes, but I am working on something new, and I need your help. I need you to read through and act out the play that I am writing. I am finished with most of it, but I need to hear it read out loud.

William: [*Loudly*] Sweet! [*followed by a stage whisper*] Potato.

Johan: Dr. Beza, is there anything you don't write? We already know of your Psalms and sermons, but you've also written dramas, satires, polemical treatises, Greek and French grammars, biographies, political treatises, and you even edited an annotated text of the Greek New Testament.¹

Thomas: What is the play about?

Beza: The play is about the Colloquy of Poissy, which occurred nearly two decades ago, in France.

Heinrich: Was that when the Protestants and Catholics met with the king of France to negotiate a truce?

¹ Steinmetz, David Curtis. *Reformers In The Wings : From Geiler Von Kaysersberg To Theodore Beza*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 4 Jan. 2017.

Beza: Exactly. It was in 1561.

Thomas: Were you there?

Beza: I led the delegation of the Protestants.

Johan: Because you were trained as a lawyer?

Beza: I think so, and also because my family has certain connections with the nobility. But let us look at the play. I wrote it so that people will remember what happened to the church.

Thomas: Sounds fair enough. What do you need us to do, Dr. Beza?

Beza: There are only a few characters in the play:

Catherine de Medici,
Henry III,
Ted Bezor, and
Cardinal de Tournon

Which ones would you students like to be?

Heinrich: I recognize the other names, but who is this Ted Bezor?

Johan: Is that you, Dr. Beza?

Beza: It is. It didn't feel right to feature myself as a main character. What do you think?

Thomas: You were there, weren't you? And besides, your participation in the Colloquy of Poissy is fairly well known, I think.

Beza: Alright, I'll make the change. So, the characters are now the following: Catherine de Medici, Henry III, Theodore Beza, and the Cardinal de Tournon. Who do you all choose?

[Johan, William, Thomas, and Heinrich are all silent, and clearly avoid eye contact with Beza].

Beza: Who will read the part of Catherine de Medici, the mother of Henry III, and the woman who organized the Colloquy?

Thomas: Not me!

Johan: No thanks.

Heinrich: Nope.

[*William shakes his head vehemently when the other characters on stage look at him.*]

Beza: Why not?

Thomas, Johan, and Heinrich [*in unison*]: She's a woman! [*William nods vehemently*]

Beza: What about Henry III?

Thomas: Wasn't he merely a child at this point? No thanks.

Beza: And the Cardinal de Tournon?

Johan: He's Roman Catholic!

Beza: And the role of Theodore Beza?

Heinrich: It hardly seems fitting to act like you when you're right here, Dr. Beza.

Beza: [*sigh*] I see that I shall have to assign the roles. Thomas, you shall read the part of Catherine de Medici, Johan, you can be Theodore Beza, Heinrich, you are the Cardinal de Tournon, and William is Henry III. Henry III doesn't have very many lines, William. Are you alright with a largely silent role?

[*William nods*]

Beza: We will start right in the middle. The play is following the Protestant delegation as they make their way to Poissy. They are excited to attend, as they will be able to defend and explain the Reformed faith in front of the King of France, Henry III. The Roman Catholic clergy have been delaying the meeting because they do not want the King to hear the truth of Reformation theology.

Johan: Wait, wasn't there a large delegation of Protestants?

Beza: Yes, there were eleven ministers from France, as well as theologians from Switzerland, Germany and England. The King and Queen of Navarre were in attendance as well.

Heinrich: So why such a small delegation in the play, then? Are you trying to keep the stage from being overcrowded and confusing?

Beza: Ah, yes, I thought that someone would wonder that. I even wrote something about it in the preface to the play. What were my exact words? [*He rummages around through his papers until he finds the preface*]. Ah. [*Reading from the paper*]: "As touching the manner of dealing, I have altered some small circumstances of the story, to apply myself to the company. Moreover I have followed the ground as near the text as I could, according to such conjectures as I thought most convenient for the matter and persons. And although the affections be very great, yet have I abstained from words and speeches too far estranged from the common ordinary."

Johan: I've heard something like that before. "So then the best of the Historian is subject to the Poet, for whatsoever action or faction, whatsoever counsel, policy, or war, stratagem, the Historian is bound to recite, that may the Poet if he list with his imitation make his own..." How does it end?

Thomas: I think, "beautifying it both for further teaching, and more delighting as it please him: having all from Dante his heaven to his hell, under the authority of his pen."

Heinrich: That sounds so familiar! But who wrote it?

Beza: The sentiment is similar to mine, but I don't know who wrote that.

[Johan and Thomas shake their heads and look puzzled. William clearly knows the author. He raises his hand, and opens his mouth to speak, but each time he is about to say the name, he realizes that he can't because he can only speak using the names of fruits and vegetables. The others realize that he knows, but that he can't say it].

Beza: Well, William, if you know it, why don't you tell us the name?

[William looks aghast, but doesn't want to admit his predicament. Instead, he fakes a coughing fit and losing his voice].

Heinrich: It looks like he won't be able to tell us, Dr. Beza. William, can you act it out?

[William feigns being in a battle].

Johan: He's batting mosquitos!

Thomas: He's playing pin the tail on the donkey.

Heinrich: He's in a battle.

[William gestures in agreement, pretends to be mortally wounded, and then falls down and pretends to be dying].

Johan: He's sleepy.

Thomas: He's wounded.

[William indicates agreement].

Heinrich: He's dying.

[William indicates agreement. William then acts out giving his water to another soldier].

Johan: He's giving something to someone else.

[*William nods*].

Thomas: But what is it?

[*William pretends to drink, then shakes his head and gives the imaginary drink to an imaginary other soldier*].

Heinrich: I have no idea.

Johan: Is it a drink of some sort?

[*William nods*].

Thomas: So, he's giving his drink,

Johan: As he lays dying,

Heinrich: On the battlefield.

[*William nods agreement*].

Thomas, Johan, and Heinrich, [*together*]: Sir Philip Sidney!

Beza: Of course! The man who died on the battlefield and gave his water to another soldier, saying, "Thy need is greater than mine." I know him, of course. Before he died, he was in the process of versifying the Psalms into English. I think his sister is working on the rest, now.

[*William gets up off of the floor*]

Beza: [*to William*] Well, William, you can certainly act. Your coughing has ended, I see. Has your voice returned to you? Are you able to assist your fellow students and I with the play?

William: Yam. [*He tries to make "yam" sound like "I am."*]

Beza: Then let us take our places. [*He arranges three chairs: two side-by-side, facing the audience, and one perpendicular to those chairs, facing the side of the stage*]. Thomas and William, you sit here [*he gestures to the chairs facing the audience*] and Heinrich, you sit here [*he gestures to the other chair*]. Johan, you exit the room and then re-enter. And begin!

Back of Stage

Thomas William

Heinrich

Audience

[*All of the characters take their places, and once they are seated, Johan re-enters the room*]

Heinrich: [*reading from the play text*] Ah, the Huguenots have finally arrived.

Beza: Heinrich, you should be sneering as you say that. I'll add the stage direction [*he scribbles on his page*] and you read the line again.

Heinrich: [*sneeringly*] Ah, the Huguenots have finally arrived.

Johan: [*reading from the script*] Is this not the time and the place? After you delayed this vital colloquy so many times, it is hardly likely that we would be late when you finally deigned to meet with us.

Thomas: [*reading from the script*] You must be Dr. Beza. Welcome to the Colloquy.

Johan: [*reading from the script*] Thank you, queen mother, for meeting with us, and taking your son, King Henry. [*He bows to Henry III. William nods his head in return*]

Thomas: [*reading from the script*] We look forward to hearing from you, Dr. Beza, and from the Cardinal de Tournon.

Johan: [*reading from the script*] I see that you are all sitting already. Where shall I take my seat?

Heinrich: [*reading from the script*] We have no chairs for you Huguenots. If you are so eager to speak, you can stand. [*Heinrich looks up from the script and addresses Beza*] Did that really happen? Did they provide you with no chairs?

Beza: Yes, yes, but don't interrupt the play. Just keep reading.

Johan: [*reading from the script*] Surely you cannot ask us to stand for the entire Colloquy! It may last days, even weeks!

Heinrich: [*reading from the script*] If you are truly committed to your cause, you will stand.

Thomas: [*reading from the script*] Take your place, Dr. Beza. [*Johan stands opposite the Cardinal*]

Johan: [*reading from the script*] May I begin?

Heinrich: [*reading from the script*] Absolutely not! Your majesty, before we begin the hearings, I must again protest about the presence of King Henry. Surely his majesty is too young and tender to hear the wranglings of a confused theologian.

Thomas: [*reading from the script*] You have already registered your objections, Cardinal, and I have already answered them. His Majesty shall stay.

Heinrich: [*reading from the script, and addressing William*] Your Majesty, what say you to this?

Thomas: [*reading from the script*] You will address me, Cardinal, not his young Majesty. I am the regent of France.

Heinrich: [*reading from the script*] Of course, my queen.

Thomas: [*reading from the script*] Now, Dr. Beza, I understand that you and the Cardinal will be debating the nature of the Mass.

Johan: [*reading from the script*] The Holy Supper, yes.

Thomas: [*reading from the script*] You may begin your remarks. When you are finished speaking, the Cardinal will deliver his address.

Johan: [*reading from the script*] Thank you, your majesty. Madame, first calling upon the name of our Lord God, that it may please him to assist us with his especial grace in a matter of so great consequence, that we may be utterly void of all particular opinions and passions, and that there might be planted in our hearts instead thereof a right knowledge of his verity with an earnest desire to set it forth to the honour of his holy name, and to the advancement of your majesty and the quietness of all Christendom, and namely of this realm.

Thomas: [*reading from the script*] You are well spoken, Doctor.

Heinrich: [*reading from the script*] Get on with it!

Johan: [*reading from the script*] Madam, we say unto you that our Lord Jesus Christ is in the use of the Holy Supper in the which he presents, gives, and exhibits verily unto us his body and blood by the operation of his holy Spirit, and that we receive and eat spiritually, and by faith his own body which died for us, for to be bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh that we may thereby be quickened and receive all that which is necessary for our salvation.

Heinrich: [*reading from the script, and standing up in mock rage*] Spiritually? Spiritually? I refuse to hear more of this heresy. Your majesty, you must banish Dr. Beza and his companions at once! The King cannot hear this blasphemy.

Thomas: [*reading from the script*] Sit down, Sir Cardinal. Your unruly behavior does not become you. [*To Beza*] Did that really happen, Dr. Beza?

Beza: It did indeed. Johan, it's your line next.

Johan: *[reading from the script]* Madame, we are here present for two principal ends, the one is to render a reason to God, and to you, and to all the world of our faith, the other is to do service to God and to the King, and to you in all possible means to appease and mitigate the troubles that be risen in the cause of religion...

[The Housekeeper enters]

Housekeeper: Dr. Beza, could I speak with you for a moment? *[She and Beza speak quietly on one side of the stage While they do so, the four students move to the other side of the stage to stand together].*

Johan: Excellent work so far, William.

Heinrich: I don't think Dr. Beza has any idea!

William: Fig!

Thomas: We are all doing so well.

Housekeeper: *[sadly]* Students!

[Johan, Thomas, William, and Heinrich rush to her side].

Housekeeper: Dr. Beza's wife, Claudine, who has been quite ill of late, has just gone to be with her Lord.

[The students soberly turn to look at Beza]

Beza: She was a woman endowed with all the virtues of a wife, with whom I spent 39 years, 5 months, and 28 days in utter harmony. She never undertook formal studies, but she possessed so many remarkable virtues that I found it easy to endure this lack. Nothing more bitter in this life could have happened to me, and I have never craved the comfort of friends more. Just when I am most in need of help—soon to be 70 years old, if the Lord wills it—I have lost an incredibly devoted wife. Yet blessed be the name of the Lord our God.

Housekeeper: Sir, before I came to tell you the news, I went and found the letter that you received years ago from John Calvin, after the death of his wife. I hope that it can comfort you. *[She takes the paper from her pocket and reads]* "Idelette was the excellent companion of my life, the ever faithful assistant of my ministry. Whosoever finds a wife, finds a good thing and obtains favour from the Lord. I have lost her who would never have quitted me either in exile, or misery, or death. She was a precious help to me, and never occupied with self. The best of partners has been taken from me. How painful and burning are the wounds which the death of an excellent wife causes. How hard it is to become master of my sorrows."

Thomas: I am reminded, too, of the last words between Ulrich Zwingli and his wife. A Catholic army made a surprise attack on the city of Zurich. Zwingli joined the inhabitants of Zurich as a soldier against a force of twice their size. The battle lasted for less than an hour, and Zurich was defeated. Zwingli was one of the 500 soldiers killed on the battlefield. Zwingli's wife, Anna Reinhard, lost much more than a husband. Her eldest son, a son-in-law, and a brother-in-law also died in battle. As Zwingli left their home to join the battle, apparently he said to her, "The hour is come that separates us. Let it be so. The Lord wills." She replied, "We shall see each other again if the Lord wills. His will be done. And what will you bring back when you come?" His answer: "Blessing after dark night."

William: Mangoes...

Heinrich: ...Through valleys of the shadows of death.

Johan: Shall we leave you alone, sir?

Beza: Not just yet. I should tell you about the rest of the Colloquy.

Heinrich: We noticed that the play is exceedingly long.

Beza: That's because I debated with the Roman Catholic clergy for days on end.

Thomas: And what happened as a result of the meeting?

Beza: The results were not immediately positive. No one at the Colloquy changed their minds about faith and the Lord's supper, and the wars of religion started soon after. However, we did plead our case before the French King and his mother, and the Queen of Navarre, Jeanne D'Albret, became a mighty champion of the Huguenot cause.

Heinrich: And how could you remember so clearly what you said at the Colloquy?

Beza: My speech was written down and immediately published in many countries in Europe. I hope that it had some effect on its readers. But one more question about the play: Should I add a conclusion, do you think, reminding the audience of what it has learned?

Heinrich: Something about "the mighty power of earnest faith?"

Johan: Or "what reward the true obedience payeth"?

Beza: Perfect! I shall write those down, and I shall compose an epilogue for the play. And now, students, you had best go back to your studies. Thank you for your assistance, both with the Psalm and the play.

Heinrich: Are you sure?

Beza: Yes. Thank you. [*The students exit, somberly*]

Beza: [*to the audience*]

“Ye Lords and Ladies, I you pray,
When you from hence shall go again away,
Let not this fine and noble story part
Out of the mind and tables of your heart.
For who doth unfeignedly endeavor
To keep God’s sayings ever,
And (notwithstanding all the reasons which)
His mind allegeth backward him to twitch)
Doth still refer himself and all his deeds
To God: with much more happy issue speeds,
That he can wish: for come here storms or winds,
Come grief, come death, come cares of sundry kinds,
Let earthquake come, let heaven and skies down fall;
Let dark confusion overcover all:
The faithful heart so steadfastly is grounded,
As it abideth ever unconfounded.”

Exit.