

The expedition for a trustworthy deity in Peter Shaffer's The Royal Hunt of the Sun

Kalpesh Dilipchandra Kansara

Assistant Professor, HOD, Department of English, Udhna Citizen Commerce College & SPBCBA & SDHGBCBA & IT,
Affiliated to Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat, Gujarat, India

Abstract

Shaffer's first epic play *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* chiefly presents the encounter between Pizarro, the Spanish conquistador, and Atahualpa, the Sovereign Inca of Peru. Pizarro makes an imperial expedition to Peru in search of gold and fame. This search ultimately turns into a search for immortality as Pizarro loses faith in himself as well as Christian religion. Pizarro and his Spanish army deceive and slaughter almost three thousand Incas. Pizarro meets the pagan king Atahualpa and makes him his captive. He learns about the differences between primitive pagan religion of the Incas and Christianity, the religion he follows. Gradually, a strange bond develops between Pizarro and Atahualpa, which later creates a dilemma for Pizarro – should he keep his promise to free Atahualpa or kill him to save the Spaniards' lives? Then Atahualpa is sentenced to death but he promises his resurrection after death to Pizarro, his believer. However, when Atahualpa fails to resurrect, Pizarro is disillusioned. Further, Pizarro admits the futility of his search for a dependable god on earth. But then in the final moments of the play, Pizarro's character undergoes a progressive transformation. Pizarro's hunt for gold and reputation turn out to be equally deceptive motives. Yet, at the end of the play, he realizes that he has gone hunting for a god and has caught one.

Keywords: Pizarro's expedition, conquest of Peru, search for immortality, trustworthy god

Introduction

The theatrically adventurous Peter Shaffer we recognize today appears for the first time in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. He abandons here the contemporary settings and domestic realism of his earlier plays, creating instead a work that is epic in scope, highly stylized in production, opulent in its spectacle and ambitious in its themes. Thus, Shaffer's penchant for „big, sweeping theatre' in the epic tradition led him to create *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* – A play concerning the conquest of Peru (TRHOTS 1).

Like historians before him, Shaffer was staggered by the amazing events that had unfolded in the sixteenth century, when the representatives of the European Holy Empire took on the Inca Empire in a fight to death. Unbelievably, through guile and betrayal just 167 Spanish warriors succeeded in vanquishing and subjugating the gigantic Inca realm. The two acts of the play, „The Hunt" and „The Kill", contain twelve sections each, marked by Roman numerals. Apart from the two early scenes in Spain (I, I) and Panama (I, II), the play is set in the Upper province of the Inca Empire; what is now south Ecuador and northwestern Peru. The whole of act two takes place in the town of Cajamarca in Peru. The historical time span in the play is from June 1529 to August 1533.

The play begins with the narration of Old Martin, former page of Francisco Pizarro. Pizarro, the Commander of the expedition, made his journey to Peru in search of gold and fame in 1529. In act one, „The Hunt", Pizarro recruits soldiers from rural Spain. He promises gold, while Val Verde, the Chaplain to the expedition, promises to Christianize and save the heathens' souls. They set out for Peru and the kingdom of the Incas ruled over by Atahualpa. Believing Pizarro to be the

White God, Atahualpa, the King of the Incas and the Sun god's representative on earth, allows Spanish troops to approach the holy city of Cajamarca in Peru. The Spaniards endure the forest, then climb up the Andes, and await the appearance of the Incan man-god Atahualpa. The unarmed Incas meet them in great ceremony, but the Spaniards mercilessly slaughter the Incas and take Atahualpa prisoner. In act two, „The Kill", Old Martin recounts the developing relationship between Pizarro, a 63-year-old atheist, and Atahualpa, his 33-year-old captive, who even now retains the impeccable dignity of a king. Notwithstanding the objections of De Soto, Second-in-Command, Pizarro promises Atahualpa his freedom if the large sunroom of his temple is filled with a ransom of gold. For two months, the Incas bring rare treasures, which the Spaniards will melt down into portable gold bars. Meanwhile the priests try to convert Atahualpa to Christianity. But he prefers his own god and 'father', the sun. While growing greed causes tension among the soldiers, Pizarro becomes increasingly engaged with his prisoner, in whom he hopes, to find a solution for his metaphysical doubts.

The room is filled gradually with coveted gold. But Pizarro fails to gain assurance from Atahualpa that the Spaniards will be spared by the Incas, despite the earlier massacre of the Incas by the Spaniards. Pizarro must then break his word of releasing Atahualpa and kill him for the sake of the Spaniards. But Atahualpa assures Pizarro that he cannot be killed, that he will rise again with the rays of the rising sun, a myth that Pizarro wants desperately to believe. Atahualpa is tried and convicted. And quite contrary to his own confidence, he is garroted by the soldiers. The play ends as the Indians

finally despair when their dead king fails to rise with the rays of the rising sun. Pizarro is left holding, and weeping over, Atahualpa's body.

Discussion

In *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, all the three major characters – Martin, Pizarro and Atahualpa – are preoccupied by the need for and nature of worship as well as the consequences of its absence. Shaffer himself declares this in *Plays and Players* with reference to *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*:

And the theme which lies behind their relationship is the search for god – that is why it is called „The Royal Hunt of the Sun’ – the search for a definition of the idea of god. In fact the play is an attempt to define the concept of god: a nice, modest little theme for any play to tackle! (Cooke and Page 24)

Pizarro, the protagonist of the play, is appointed as the Commander of the Expedition by King Carlos the fifth, Emperor of Spain and Austria. Pizarro is the one who has initiated the search for gold and fame. But that is not the only role he has in the play. He is also in search of an immortal deity, the source of life, a god. He has had this quest ever since his boyhood. His life originated in ruins. He was an illegitimate swineherd born in a drab Spanish village. This denied him the respect of men and the love of any woman he would consider for marriage. Subsequently, his life has been a struggle for achieving fame and respectability:

For twenty-two years I drove pigs... without one single day of hope.... I got nothing and I gave nothing, and though I groaned for that once I'm glad with it now. Because I owe nothing... Oh, yes, I amuse you, Cavalier de Soto. The old pigherd lumbering after fame. You inherited honour – I had to root for mine like the pigs. It's amusing. (TRHOTS 19)

Pizarro had already made two trips to the New World, and now over sixty years old he is back in Trujillo, his birth town in Spain, to recruit men for a third expedition. At this old age, Pizarro is not motivated only by gold. His real motive is to achieve an immortal name that will be remembered in legends for centuries to come:

If I live this next year I'm going to get me a name that won't ever be forgotten! A name to be sung here for centuries in your ballads, out there under cork trees where I sat as a boy with bandages for shoes. I amuse you. (TRHOTS 19)

One of Pizarro's recruits is the literate Young Martin, who idolizes him. Pizarro promises Young Martin nothing in return for his services except disillusionment about chivalry and boy's noble ideals. Pizarro tries to dispel Martin's illusions of chivalry saying that you “deal in deaths when you are a soldier” (TRHOTS 22). Honour and glory are dung balls for Pizarro and he further adds: “Soldiers are for killing: that's their reason” (TRHOTS 22).

Despite all of Pizarro's down-to-earth realism, Young Martin

remains an idealist and a chivalrous spirit. He is determined to serve Pizarro, whom he calls his „lord’. Earlier, Pizarro even tries to destroy Young Martin's faith in him. Pizarro insists that he is a man not to be trusted and that Young Martin is a target for disillusionment because he is a worshipper.

Besides, Pizarro is the empty shell of a man who is given to pondering over the big issues like Religion, Time, and Immortality. In ‘Behind the Scenes’, Shaffer declares about Pizarro that he is “a man who explores what and who he is” and further adds that Pizarro has a feeling of the meaninglessness of life that results in the quest for strength and stability (Cooke and Page 25).

Though this spiritual quest operates at personal level for Pizarro, he promises his men, at practical level, gold as a reward for enduring, and surviving those hardships, more gold than they could ever imagine, and slaves who will be theirs for the taking. Nevertheless, Pizarro warns his men to have no illusions about the impending journey. In the journey ‘swamps’ and ‘The mouths of insects’ would be rampant, and ‘black men...that eat each other’ would be all around them, but, at the same time, “gold is as common as wood is here!” (TRHOTS 16).

Pizarro's cynicism about war and religion cannot allow him to divert from his appointed role of a conquistador. He is also a no-nonsense soldier, with the ability to command his men's loyalty and obedience, but with a subtle understanding of the hypocrisy of his own words and actions. He orders his men to march and look like gods to deceive Atahualpa, otherwise all of them will be killed. The Spaniards follow this advice of Pizarro and march forward with great glory and power of gods.

Pizarro's strategy works. Atahualpa orders the Indians to lay down their arms and welcome the new god as a friend because “you don't approach a god with weapons” (TRHOTS 47). But then Atahualpa refuses to yield himself as a vassal to Christ. Val Verde, the Chaplain to the Expedition, attempts, in vain, to convince Atahualpa of the superiority of Spanish Catholicism. He, with his religious authority, instructs Pizarro to dispense a fierce sermon. The Spaniards, under Pizarro's command, massacre almost three thousand unarmed Indians for insulting Christ. Atahualpa is taken prisoner to Pizarro.

Young Martin, Pizarro's page, worships him. Martin also serves as Pizarro's translator as a replacement of Felipillo, an Indian, who distorts what Pizarro and Atahualpa are saying in order to serve his own selfish ends. Young Martin's responses to Pizarro are a subtle device to judge Pizarro's values, decisions, and actions. So far as Young Martin is concerned, his search for a god' ends with Pizarro, the great conquistador. The discomforts of traveling through the forest in the New World do not diminish Young Martin's reverence for Pizarro, to whom he claims to belong, to whom he can declare: “You are all I ever want to be” (TRHOTS 29). But Young Martin's „ever’ is short-lived: he loses his respect for the conquistador, when Pizarro fails to keep his word to Atahualpa, a man who trusts him. Martin, disillusioned by the immorality, treachery, ruthlessness, and excesses of the expedition, acknowledges at this juncture:

I went out into the night... and dropped my first tears as a man. My first and last. That was my first and last worship

too. Devotion never came again. (TRHOTS 74)

Old Martin's narration does not deify Pizarro, or anything else. He says that the play is about ruin; and the ruin is personal as well as national (TRHOTS 13). Thus, Martin gets totally disillusioned at the end of the play. His trust, faith and respect for Pizarro as a god shatters to pieces when Pizarro breaks his word.

As the play proceeds, Pizarro too becomes disillusioned as a result of the ferocity and bigotry of the expedition's Dominican Chaplain. He not only sanctions taking away gold from the natives which they do not value and giving them instead „the priceless mercy of heaven', but also willingly absolves the soldiers of all crimes they „ever committed' or may commit in accomplishing their goals (TRHOTS 17). Further, Pizarro's disillusionment in life extends to women, in whom he no longer has any real interest. As everything else, women have served to be only one more disappointment in his life of shattered dreams. He blames his loss of love for women on Time, the culprit guilty of all failure in his life.

Thus Pizarro – Shaffer's everyman – complains bitterly of man's unfair status in the physical world. Now and then, he reveals his concerns about Time. While arguing with De Soto, Second-in-Command, he says: “Time cheats us all the way” (TRHOTS 42). He further adds that everything they feel is made of Time and all the beauties of life are shaped by it. Later it is Atahualpa who manifests answers to Pizarro's metaphysical riddles regarding Time.

Atahualpa, sovereign Inca of Peru, masked, crowned and dressed in gold, appears in the medallion of the sun in the third scene of act one. His priests warn him that Pizarro is a troublemaker but Atahualpa is determined to meet the White God. Atahualpa is the illegitimate son of the Sun; his father had two sons and divided his empire between them, but Atahualpa wanting it all, declared war against his brother and killed him. Atahualpa has thus become the supreme power of the kingdom of Peru.

At first the Inca King is simply Pizarro's military adversary. As Pizarro comes to know his captive better, he is attracted to Atahualpa's unassailable self-assurance. And although sceptical at first, Pizarro comes to see the Inca King's beliefs as offering a last hope of discerning an ultimate design in human life. Pizarro declares of his prisoner:

Yes. He has some meaning for me, this man-god. An immortal man in whom all his people live completely. He has an answer for Time. (TRHOTS 56)

Atahualpa cannot be released alive because all the Spaniards recognize that the Inca King, once free, will order the entire Spanish contingent to be killed, which he has not promised not to do. The mercenaries are not worried because they do not intend to release Atahualpa alive. And, without the leadership of their god-king, according to Incan tradition the Indians will be left helpless. However, the dilemma persists for Pizarro. If he releases his hostage, the Spaniards will be slain, if he reneges on his oath to free Atahualpa, he violates his sacred word. At this juncture, Pizarro is once again made helpless by Time.

But before all this actually happens, Pizarro chooses to die

with Atahualpa rather than to betray him. But he finds the sun king surprisingly unperturbed. Atahualpa trusts his own godhead, reassuring his friend:

It is no matter. They cannot kill me.... Man who dies cannot kill a god who lives forever. (TRHOTS 85)

For Pizarro again, Atahualpa's metaphysical stance answers the riddle of Time and Death. As Pizarro finds:

It's the only way to give life meaning! To blast out of Time and live forever, us, in our own persons. This is the law: die in despair or be a god yourself!.. (TRHOTS 86)

Pizarro's encounter with Atahualpa works as a catalyst in his search for a god. Also, there is a strong identification between the two men, Pizarro and Atahualpa: both are illegitimate and both are the leaders of men. Of even greater importance is that each one considers the other a god. In an interview with John Russell Taylor in *Plays and Players*, Shaffer himself comments on Pizarro, Atahualpa and their relationship:

[O]ne of them is an atheist, and the other is a god.... Pizarro is, like most orthodox religious people, in practice an atheist.... Atahualpa, on the other hand, is a god... they are so different yet in many ways – they are both bastards, both usurpers, both unscrupulous men of action, both illiterate – they are mirror images of each other. (Cooke and Page 24)

Atahualpa wants to meet Pizarro in order to receive the blessing of the White God, and Pizarro finds more meaning in the Incan religion than he ever found in Christianity. Pizarro comes to believe that perhaps the Incas have the answers to the questions that the white man has never been able to receive. He further declares that it was a fantastic wonder that anyone on earth should dare to say: “That's my father. My father: the sun!” (TRHOTS 44). Ever since he has heard about Atahualpa, the son of the Sun, he has been dreaming about him every night.

Pizarro and Atahualpa, after their meeting in act two, have gradually come to understand each other, and a strange bond has grown between them. About this relationship, Norman Nadel remarks in *New York World Telegram*: “It is father-son, or god-to-god because Pizarro pretends for a while that he is divine” (Cooke and Page 28). This bonding between the spiritual duelists occurs gradually beginning with an exchange of tokens to celebrate their mutual bastardy and progressing to a wild dance in which they affirm their developing brotherhood. As his admiration for his hostage grows, Pizarro is won over to Atahualpa. Later in the play Pizarro excitedly declares:

Look at him: always so calm as if the teeth of life never bit him... or the teeth of death. What if it was really true, Martin? That I've gone god-hunting and caught one. A being who can renew his life over and over? (TRHOTS 86)

Once convinced that the Incas pursue a more worthy godhead

than Christians do, Pizarro can articulate his stand:

Look: I'm a peasant, I want value for money. If I go marketing for gods, who do I buy? The God of Europe with all its death and blooding, or Atahualpa of Peru? His spirit keeps an empire sweet and still as corn in the field. (TRHOTS 82)

In time, a spiritual relationship unites the two men as well. Pizarro, despising his mortality as he does, cannot believe in immortality. But he is fascinated by the Inca king's faith that even if he is garroted, he will swiftly be reborn. But then in the end, as Walter Kerr says in *New York Herald Tribune*: "He stares at the folly of another man's faith, and sees in it the death of his own fleetingly resurrected last hope" (Cooke and Page 29).

Besides, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* is an attack on the hypocrisy of martial ethics, which again is a driving force for Pizarro's search for a trustworthy god and true religion. Earlier in the play, Val Verde, the Chaplain to the Expedition, appeals to the Spaniards' religiosity, as it is their chance to save the souls of heathens who are otherwise condemned to eternal damnation. Shaffer here ironically attacks the hypocrisy of the Church through the character of Val Verde. On the one hand Val Verde encourages the Spanish army, and on the other, Atahualpa, the Inca king, satirizes the Christian ritual of Holy Communion. While explaining to his High Priest of Peru, Villac Umu, he informs why Christians believe their god is inside them.

Further, De Nizza argues that the Indians cannot know real happiness, because their despotic system denies "the right to hunger" (TRHOTS 63). But Shaffer's Pizarro can no longer rely on the traditional Christian God, because the Church's corruption is evidenced everywhere around him. Thus for Pizarro the answer, if one exists at all, must be found elsewhere. Eventually, he has to search for a trustworthy god and an authentic religion.

Such a sophisticated defence of a free competitive capitalist society against a controlled egalitarian society of the Incas is just one of the surprising strands in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. De Nizza's subtle apologias are ironically deflated by the unscrupulous and greedy Spanish conquerors. They want the Peruvian gold and the only way Pizarro can get it for them is by tricking Atahualpa into giving away gold in return for freedom. When the gold is duly amassed, Pizarro proclaims Atahualpa a free man, but "for the welfare of the country [Spain], he [Atahualpa] will remain for the moment as guest of the [Spanish] army" (TRHOTS 73).

When Pizarro is confronted with a dilemma whether to release or kill Atahualpa, he is advised by the Incan King not to worry. To an exhausted old Pizarro, Atahualpa explains:

Pizarro. You will die soon and you do not believe in your god. That is why you tremble and keep no word. Believe in me. I will give you a word and fill you with joy. For you I will do a great thing. I will swallow death and spit it out of me. (TRHOTS 87)

Atahualpa agrees to die, being confident that the rays of the rising sun will resurrect his dead body. Before he dies, he is

made to kneel to Christ - otherwise he would be burnt and have no chance of being reborn, as his body would be turned to ashes. Despite his assurances, no supernatural force revives Atahualpa who is garroted, and a stunned Pizarro witnesses the wreckage of his metaphysical hopes. Disillusionment gives way to paroxysms of fury as Pizarro admits the futility of his search for a trustworthy god. Thus, the title of act two, "The Kill", accurately mirrors the action on two levels: the assassination of the Inca god king, and the destruction of Pizarro's hopes for godhead on the earth. Pizarro, frustrated, shouts at the king's corpse:

Cheat! You've cheated me. Cheat... You have no joy for me, Atahualpa, my boy: the only joy is in death. I lived between two hates: I die between two darks: blind eyes and a blue sky.... But to live without hope of after, and make whatever God there is, oh, that's some immortal business surely!... I'm tired.... There's a snow of death falling all around us.... It's over, lad, I'm coming after you. There's nothing but peace to come... (TRHOTS 89-90).

Old Martin informs the audience that Pizarro was killed later in a quarrel with his partner bringing up reinforcements, but to speak the truth, "he sat down that morning and never really got up again" (TRHOTS 91). The play ends with Pizarro singing quietly and sadly beside Atahualpa's body. The final stage direction theatrically summarizes the situation:

The sun glares at the audience. (TRHOTS 91)

As C. J. Gianakaris explains that the breaking dawn gradually reveals Atahualpa to be quite dead, still tied to the execution post, and his claims for immortality are belied for all to see; the clamour of keening Indians is paradoxically synchronized with the rise of the morning sun, which signals the extinction of the Inca Empire and the climax of Pizarro's personal tragedy (88).

Conclusion

Pizarro's character undergoes a total progressive transformation towards the end of the play. At first, he was a part of the Spanish army advancing to slain the Incas for gold and fame. But then the encounter with Atahualpa reinforces the values of trust and love in Pizarro. At one instance, he chooses to die with Atahualpa rather than betray him. Atahualpa teaches him to forget the fear of death and live fearlessly. Further, Pizarro is also able to find a trustworthy god in the form of the Sun. He explains his conception of God to Young Martin: "What else is a god but what we know we can't do without?" (TRHOTS 86). Later Pizarro admits to Young Martin: "The sun is the only god I know!" (TRHOTS 86)

Throughout the play, Christianity is presented as hypocritical, cruel and death-centred, while the sun-worship is just as much a betrayal of belief. The „impossible' resurrection fails. Yet by doing so it produces a real miracle in restoring Pizarro to humanity. He ponders over how to 'make water in a sand world' after knowing Atahualpa (TRHOTS 90). At the beginning, his 'frostbitten' soul is incapable of feeling (TRHOTS 42). The relationship with Atahualpa moves him

to laughter, love and finally the only tears he has ever shed. The young narrator (Young Martin) writes the word „god’ on Atahualpa’s finger nail; and in terms of the play, the divinity so conspicuously absent in Church and society is found in the individual spirit (Atahualpa), and this insight is earned in theatrical terms.

References

1. Shaffer Peter. *The Royal Hunt of the Sun: A play concerning the conquest of Peru*. TRHOTS 1964. Penguin Books Ltd, Middlesex, 1983.
2. Cooke. Virginia and Malcolm Page. *Comps. File on Shaffer*, Methuen, London, 1987.
3. Gianakaris CJ. *Peter Shaffer*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1992.
4. Klein Dennis A. *Peter Shaffer Rev. ed*, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1993.
5. Acheson, James, ed. *British and Irish Drama Since 1960*, St. Martin’s, New York, 1993.
6. Berney KA. ed. *Contemporary British Dramatists*, St. James Press, London, 1994.
7. Fear Adrian. *Breaking Onward Boundaries/Take Two Prison Diary by Adrian Fear*, HMP the Mount. <http://www.londonshakespeare.org.uk/prisondiaries/onward.htm>, 2017.