BOOK REVIEW

Alison E. Jasper. Because of Beauvoir: Christianity and the Cultivation of Female Genius. Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2012.

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In Because of Beauvoir: Christianity and the Cultivation of Female Genius, Alison E. Jasper addresses the somewhat tenuous historical relationship between Christianity and feminism, particularly in regards to feminist scholarship of the last 40 or 50 years. Because it relies on a combination of feminist theory, early modern and modern literature, and historical biography, the book crosses disciplinary bounds. Utilizing the theoretical framework of Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva, Jasper explores the literature of four English women: seventeenth-century Jane Leade, eighteenth-century Hannah More, nineteenth-century Maude Royden, and twentieth- and twenty first-century Michèle Roberts. Jasper’s stated purpose is to support “the work of building bridges between [the Christian and feminist] imaginaries by developing an understanding of female subjectivity—called here, female genius—that can move, even flourish within both environments” (3). Her thesis is that there is a way to recognize these four women as female geniuses despite the specific limitations of their respective historical contexts (30). In other words, while modern feminist scholars such as Beauvoir have tended to dismiss such work from historical women as failing to meet the criteria of genius because they remained within an oppressive, patriarchal context, Jasper complicates the analysis by arguing that women need not escape all the confines of their particular time or, indeed, reject religious faith in order to struggle to be subjects. The book is separated or divided into two parts; Part I addresses the theoretical methodology Jasper relies on, rooted in readings of Beauvoir and Kristeva, while Part II includes one chapter on each of the four women and their work as well as a conclusion.
Before analyzing the specific lives and writings of the four women Jasper chose to represent as examples of female genius, she lays out the reasons for focusing on the theoretical work of Beauvoir and Kristeva and defines the terms “Christian,” “feminist,” and “genius” as they pertain to her thesis. Jasper explains that Beauvoir’s groundbreaking examination of the category “woman”—including the famous conclusion that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman—provides the basis for critiquing male privilege. She states, “Men, [Beauvoir] shows, assume an epistemic privilege that enters without comment or justification into every aspect of life and work, not excluding philosophical discussions about subjectivity as the freedom to choose how to be human” (9). However, Jasper contends that Beauvoir internalized the very privilege she set out to critique because she did not recognize any historical women as representatives of genius, rooted in Beauvoir’s definition of genius as being part of the process of social change in a significant way (19–20). While Beauvoir concedes that some women can achieve “creative fulfillment,” Jasper points out that Beauvoir’s definition of genius requires “a kind of suspension of self in order to let the ‘universal’ or objective truth control mind and body” that only men have achieved (39). Jasper’s use of women in Christian history is a response to Beauvoir’s apparent blindness regarding women’s historical resistance to gender norms that is characteristic of much of second wave feminism’s critique of religion as patriarchal.

Thus, as Jasper defines genius, she asks the question, “... is it possible to represent women of the past who have drawn significantly on their identity or experience as Christians robustly, without bracketing off this important source or influence in their lives?” (30). Tracing the masculine history of the concept of “genius” as related to procreativity, skill, talent, ingenuity, reason, passion, sexual energy, and imagination, she argues that this definition fails to allow women to be classified as geniuses unless they take on a masculine character (37). In order to clarify her definition of genius and how it applies to the historical women she analyzes, Jasper turns to Kristeva’s semiotic and psychoanalytic theory for support. She suggests that Kristeva was skeptical of feminism as a movement because the definition of female genius Kristeva offers in her work *Female Genius: Life, Madness*,...
Words—Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette avoids stereotyping women and is therefore not dependent on the modern feminist narrative (46). Rather, as Jasper asserts, “[f]or Kristeva, becoming someone—taking a subject position or becoming a human being—is not some kind of preliminary process onto which genius is grafted. ‘The work of a genius culminates in the birth of a subject’” (51). Because Kristeva sees female genius rooted not in “bracketing off womanhood,” but in fully exploring “what it means to a woman,” Jasper can apply this definition to her analysis of Leade, More, Royden, and Roberts, whom she wants to characterize as geniuses (51).

Armed with the definition of female genius as becoming a subject—as one who thinks, creates, and wrestles with norms (55)—Jasper moves in Part II of her book into careful examination of her four chosen female geniuses. Aside from their respective relationships to specifically Anglican (Church of England) Christian contexts, Jasper gives two main reasons that she chose these particular women. First, each had relative success with their published or circulated writings, which she recognizes as characteristic of their White, educated backgrounds; and second, each was rooted in a different historical location in modernity (75). The first woman she examines is “mystic” and “visionary” Jane Leade, who was born in 1624 in Norfolk (73). Leade chose to spend some time in London with her married brother following her completion of formal schooling, where she participated in Puritan circles that informed her later Universalist ideas (81). Though she married a man her parents had chosen for her after breaking off a relationship with a man in London she had found herself, she remained contented with William Leade until his unexpected death (82). Jasper argues that Leade’s writing reveals her underlying thoughts about the institution of marriage and the requirements it places upon women. Speaking of Leade’s reference to her relationship to Christ as her second marriage, Jasper states:

...it may well reflect the sense in which she understood wifely obligations of the earthly kind to be analogous to the law of old covenant, something that in the light of the new covenant would be utterly swept away, leaving her clear to focus her attention on her mystical and theological imagination... (83)
Indeed, Jasper goes on to outline various themes found in Leade’s writing, including her treatment of Sophia (wisdom) as a theological trope; her confidence in biblical interpretation in which she identifies as both male and female characters; her reliance on subjective certainty over rational criteria (which places her in the mystical tradition); and her alchemical metaphor for the soul in which she becomes the healer. Based on her creative readings and visionary experiences, Jasper classifies her as a female genius, one who wrestled with the masculinist norms creatively and without detaching from her female-ness (97).

Another creative thinker like Leade but within a much stricter context, Hannah More was born in 1745 in Gloucestershire and baptized in the Church of England. Though More began as a poet and playwright, she later became an influential commentator on issues of public morality, such as the slave trade (101). After experiencing some setbacks in her early career in London, she focused her energy for the remainder of her professional and personal lives on her adopted evangelical Christian circle (103). Initially engaged in her early twenties, her fiancé continually postponed their wedding, eventually offering her an annuity that helped launch her literary career (107). She in turn renounced both him and marriage altogether (108). Jasper highlights one of her works, a conduct book entitled *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, in which More advocates for women’s education, a point Jasper suggests may have been an attempt to wrestle with More’s desire for the life of the mind that seemed closed off to women (114). More sustained wide public success with this book, though it was criticized of impropriety. Jasper contends that while she was entrenched in a largely conservative milieu, this does not discount her as a female genius: “. . . she cannot merely be dismissed as a female collaborator with patriarchal society . . . because—her actions speaking louder than her words—she too demonstrates ways in which to achieve subjectivity in a singular life, resisting the limitations imposed on her by her context . . .” (125). In other words, More’s genius lay in how she wrestled with the tension between her desires and her cultural context through her writing and life choices.

Although she was also connected with the Church of England, Maude Royden, born in 1876 in Liverpool, was not affiliated with the conservative evangelical groups of More’s time.
Rather, she associated with the Oxford movement from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which sought to reconnect the Church of England with the administrative and theological authority of the Pope. Jasper argues that Royden, as a preacher and philanthropic worker, "passionately resisted the patriarchal ideology so powerfully influential upon elements of the Church of England's practice and ethos at the time" (128). Also pointing out how Royden's privilege played into her ability to resist these norms, Jasper highlights how Royden's wealth allowed her the freedom to dedicate her time to notable causes like women's suffrage, women's ordination, and pacifism (129). Jasper centers on Royden's series of public lectures published under the title *Sex and Common-Sense*. In it, Royden makes a case for women in the Church who had submitted to the Church's teaching on sexuality and motherhood, in other words, those who had remained single and celibate despite the growing numbers of younger women ignoring or rebelling against social custom of the time. She argues that the Church should accept and embrace the work these women did instead of mocking them for being "undesirable" (130). Royden herself remained single until 1944 when she married the recently widowed Hudson Shaw, with whom she had been in love for over 40 years. Royden and Shaw maintained a celibate relationship to honor the Church's standards of sexual morality. Jasper suggests that this experience contributed to her advocacy for women's leadership and equality with men in religious vocation (136). According to Jasper, Royden maintained the argument "that passionate celibacy was not merely a craven, defeated acceptance of the limitations imposed on single women by a church that continually demonstrated its contempt for them by refusing formally to acknowledge their ministry" (136). In so doing, Royden reasons that both celibacy and marriage are valid choices for Christian women, one not lesser than the other. Jasper argues that Royden's female genius is rooted in her presentation of a new theology that connected "body and mind, affect and representation, pleasure and politics" as well as one that "locates the divine in the creativity of each singular life" (138).

The final woman Jasper examines is Michèle Roberts, born in 1949 in Edgware, a suburb of London. While her mother was French Catholic and her father was Anglican, Roberts claimed the label of atheist after developing an interest in feminism in the late
1960s and early 1970s. Despite this, however, Jasper specifies that Roberts’ work still addresses theological themes, and her identification of Roberts as a female genius is not merely rooted in Roberts’ feminism (141). Because her novels explore and push the bounds of patriarchal Anglican norms, Roberts’ genius “is illustrated precisely in the breach through and beyond the ‘situation’”s (Jasper 142). Focusing on the novel *The Wild Girl*, Jasper highlights Roberts’ feminist strategy of feminist re-visioning of familiar narratives or characters in identifying the main character of the novel with the Mary Magdalene of the *Gospel of Mary* (144). This Mary not only engages in a romantic (and sexual) relationship with Jesus, but also takes on the role of theologian (147). This sense of uncertainty and exploration in theology are not just themes Roberts explored in her writing, but were motifs in her lived reality, as she forewent security in marriage and career to experiment with Marxism and feminism, sexuality, and living abroad (150).

Jasper concludes that each of the four women she examines demonstrates a wrestling with her given cultural norms and limitations that helps her achieve subjectivity (152). She likewise used the concept of female genius to suggest that the perception that women before the feminist movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were insignificant or absent is an “illusion produced by the normatively male context” (150). Overall, Jasper positions herself neatly in the trajectory of feminist historical and literary scholarship by attempting to avoid the oversimplification of historical women’s lives and their influence. Additionally, she does not ignore the myriad ways women have found space within Christianity to challenge patriarchal norms without necessarily rejecting traditional Christian theology. Nevertheless, there is little recognition of the debate over whether and how “subjectivity” applies to historical personhood. Indeed, Jasper insists, “the development of female genius does not depend entirely on the conditions prevailing at any specific period” (76). However, it is not apparent from the evidence presented that the stark differences between the four historical periods of Leade, More, Royden, and Roberts do not affect the claim to female genius if genius is, as Jasper defines it via Kristeva, becoming a subject. Yet Jasper astutely recognizes the ways these women each respond to and push back against these respective contexts while not bracketing
off their womanhood. The book is most engaging through the depth of its exploration into these four lesser-known women’s lives and writings as well as its contemplation of the complicated ways more traditional forms of Christianity can intersect with feminism.