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IN
CORRESPONDENCE
WITH

REVEREND
DR. CHRISTINA
BEARDSLEY

JD FRI, 13 JUL 2018 08:51 AM

Dear Tina

The epistolary form seems like the right one for this conversation, mainly because of logistics but also because it's in keeping with theological communications throughout history. I have a lot of things to ask and say, but please stop me if I'm getting ahead of myself.

I'm interested in Saint Jerome as a sick man, perhaps a gay man (though this probably meant something quite different in his time), and in his translation—which was, as I understand it, a 'mainstreaming' of the bible. He seems to have made certain linguistic choices that nailed down aspects of gender difference since used to justify and naturalise misogyny in the church and beyond; for instance, 'shame' and 'woman' became in some way synonymous after Jerome.

My real obsession, though, is not the man himself so much as his legend: the story of Saint Jerome and the lion. To me, this is a love story, but also a story about sovereignty, captivity, the domestication of otherness. It's ambiguous and ambivalent. I wonder when the lion showed up in the story, and why.

Let me know your thoughts!

xo

JD

CB FRI, 13 JUL 2018 10:46 AM

Dear Jesse

I didn't know much about St Jerome, apart from the fact that he translated the Vulgate—what an extraordinary achievement!—and artistic depictions of him with the lion. I've always felt very drawn to Shaw's play *Androcles and the Lion*, which I'll re-read now. The edition I have includes *OVERRULED* and *Pygmalion*, and I wonder whether they were bound together because of related themes, not least in the latter: a man schooling a woman on how to behave. I was intrigued to read that Jerome was noted for his spiritual counsel with women—women embracing asceticism, of course, and so stifling the possibility of fecundity. On my shelves I have Fenelon's *Letters to Women* from a later era. Men instructing women. Mansplaining ancient and modern. Such a relief to turn to St Teresa of Avila!

I'm leaving for Walsingham in an hour or so, where I'll be the priest leading our parish pilgrimage. It's many years since I stayed at the Shrine. I was pre-transition then. Now, because I'm a woman, I'm unable to celebrate Mass there and we'll go to a neighbouring church—Our Lady St Mary, South Creake, which is very ancient with wonderful carvings, and very inclusive too—where I can concelebrate the Sunday Mass. So the demeaning teaching about women still runs deep in my Church.

Best wishes

Tina

JD MON, 16 JUL 2018 01:44 AM

Dear Tina

I'm excited to notice all the parallels in the story of *Androcles and the Lion*, which in turn shows up again in Aesop's fables as 'The Lion and the Mouse'. I'm interested in how these versions ascribe a greater agency to the lion—in the sense that he remains a wild creature with a wild creature's prerogative to kill. [He] gets to keep [his] teeth, somehow. The lion's gesture of friendship is given weight and consequence; it's not naturalised as I feel it is in the St Jerome story, in which the lion just wanders in from the wilderness and—once healed by Jerome—somehow sticks around, instantaneously tame.

The story goes that when the lion showed up amongst the scholars, they all went for their crossbows, because the lion was acting rowdy. Jerome alone held back his brothers: 'Stop! This lion is just wounded.' I used to think of this parable as the most romantic of queer love stories: to be seen as one 'is', in one's woundedness, and defended against those who see the wound as frightening or threatening—surely this is what everyone wants? But now I'm not sure. Jerome the great benefactor seems to lack the courage of Androcles or the cunning of Aesop's mouse. I learnt that Androcles the slave, escaped from a consul in Africa, is usually racialised as Black (especially in modernity), so perhaps the white-coded Saint Jerome of art-historical fame could even be understood as a sort of whitewashing of the story, if only in the sense that Androcles has a political subjectivity as regards the empire and the state, whereas Jerome the occasional penitent—for all his asceticism—was patronised by high-society ladies and mixed among the rich.

Having chosen a life in the church and knowing well the ways in which the church demeans and stigmatises women (and certain forms of sexual difference in general) it must have been hard for you to have come out as a woman. You mentioned Teresa of Avila; I think a lot about Joan of Arc, though she (who I want to think of as 'they') wasn't much

one for writing things down. I'm interested in the canonisation process, though, when it comes to women and girls. I learned about Maria Goretti, stabbed fourteen times by a teenage boy trying to rape her; the story goes that she forgave him everything before succumbing to her injuries. The boy converted and ended up in a monastery after his jail time. She was eleven years old. This was in 1902. Then you have St Gianna Molla, who discovered a fibroma on her uterus while pregnant with her fourth child. She chose to save the child rather than herself: offered an abortion or hysterectomy, she carried the child to term instead, and died soon after it was born, in 1962. I'm afraid that these stories make me cynical about sainthood, and the posthumous recognition of 'saintliness' in people who died more or less because of structural violence. A costly faith rewarded only after death seems a bad deal to me.

By the time you get this letter, you'll already have been to the mass at Our Lady St Mary, which I also read about online. I was interested in one paragraph of their FAQ page, in answer to the question of why there are statues in the church:

Statues are visible reminders of what we believe. They are also aids to prayer. God gave us eyes, as well as ears and voices so that we can pray through what we see. A picture is often said to be worth a thousand words.

I sometimes think that the only way to redeem art objects (embedded as they are in a fairly monstrous system of capital, coloniality and the violence that accompanies all luxury) is to think about them in this way.

All best to you,

JD

CB TUE, 16 JUL 2018 12:15 AM

This is such a fascinating letter Jesse—thank you. I was, as you'd expect, in search of Jerome this weekend. I didn't find him in the library, which was located on the ground floor, below the room where my husband and I were staying in the quarter allocated to the clergy. I did, though, pick up a second-hand copy of Maurice Wiles' *The Christian Fathers*. I'm collecting his writings at the moment and it was only £1. He offers Jerome as an example of 'a harsh unnatural hatred of God's gifts which is intolerable even to contemplate—Jerome telling husband, wife or mother to rejoice at the death of partner or child, not because the one who has died has gone "to be with Christ which is far better", but because they themselves have been set free by their bereavement from something which was previously a distraction from their highest service of God.' Wiles thinks that, even at its best, this attitude is open to criticism: 'Its underlying conviction that God is most fully known by escape from the phenomenal world rather than through the sacramental use of it is Greek rather than biblical in origin.' He also considers the ideal of detachment not just from material things, but from people as well, to be 'a subtle form of self-centredness'. So here we have Jerome the ascetic.

Jerome's compassion and connection with this wild, suffering beast sounds like the much later story of St Francis of Assisi and the Wolf of Gubio. But I'm wondering whether it also harks back to the Old Testament vision of the prophet Isaiah, of the lion and the lamb lying down together. This could be interpreted as a 'taming of nature', but is also a depiction of the messianic kingdom, when violence shall end and peace reign. But the tame lion, as you point out, must also symbolise a subduing of nature, especially since we know Jerome was so preoccupied with bringing flesh under the control of the spirit.

As a child, I was fascinated by Joan of Arc. Even their name seemed strange, let alone their visions and boyish appearance. I couldn't name what it was that intrigued me.

I was reminded of a book I came across in our local library when I was in my early teens, which described how menstruation debarred women from entering church sanctuaries. I didn't menstruate and never would or will, but I knew that what it said was wrong. It was probably a dated or sectarian view even then, but it made me realise that Church culture could be exclusivist and this wasn't just on gendered lines in those days. There was just one woman student at the theological college I attended (and two trans women, though neither of us was aware that the other was trans then). I was a feminist, and very pleased that the first parishes where I was in sole charge had two women in training for ministry. But they began their ministries as licensed lay workers, later becoming deacons and eventually priests—the stages dictated by the passing of legislation to make these steps possible.

In one respect, it seems as if the persistence of a male-only priesthood served to hold my transition in check. As long as it continued, my unconscious process appears to have been, 'Priests are male. I am a priest. Therefore I am male.' But once the legislation was passed enabling women to be ordained, I was faced with a dilemma: 'Priests are male and female. I am a priest. Therefore I am ...' So thought my therapist anyway, and there could be something in it.

Ah, Maria Goretti. It feels uncanny that you should mention her. I recall a conversation with a friend in the mid-1970s about this saint; he spoke negatively about her canonisation at the time. He and I have corresponded about this fairly recently because one of the altars of the church I now attend contains a relic of St Maria Goretti. I'd love to know more about why her relic was chosen.

Best wishes

Tina



Dear Tina

Thank you for meeting my letter with one of your own! As before, I had to go and read about some of the references before attempting a reply, so forgive the delay.

I read the first act of Shaw's *Androcles* and was struck—as I have often been—by the fact that Christians were historically an insurgent anti-imperialist fringe group who lived and died in defiance of the monied amoral excesses of Roman society. I like the story about the righteous Jesus versus the moneylenders, for instance. In general, I prefer to think of Jesus as a neurodivergent brown bisexual rebel than Mr Caucasian Piety of the year, but then again—though I understand there are warnings against it—the figure of Jesus tends to appear according to the likeness or preferences of the person or people he's deployed to serve, and like any good folk hero enjoys a great deal of plasticity and variety, depending on where he shows up. For me, that's one of the best things about him. But then I fast-forward through history and arrive at the greedy and corrupt First Estate feudalism of the middle ages, and so on. And, not for the first time, I have to make a parallel between church and empire: the subjugation/subduing of 'nature' that would expand to include women, children, witches and queers, the poor and the 'savage' Indigenous of the colonies forced into missions and work camps on their own stolen land.

Sometimes I walk into a church and I feel 'the spirit' very strongly (though it's also a sort of awe at the depth of feeling and strength of desire of which the species is capable—and all the hours and bodies that have passed through there in that place, held together across time-space in the name of God. At other times, I'm uneasy with all the gilt and incantation. And the relics! I'm uneasy about death in general, and about these dismembered corpses, the scattered remains. Now you tell me about Maria Goretti's relic, I don't know how to feel about it. Poor kid.

I'd like to know more about relics, though. In fine-art discourses, there's a partially retired concept (coined by Walter Benjamin and once very influential) in which one talks about the 'aura' of a work. The aura is hard to define, but seems to communicate something of time passing, or having passed—a quality in which time is somehow stored and crystallised in the work. At the same time, the aura produces a sense of distance from itself, which one might also think of as a distilled form of authenticity—the very particular, non-reproducible nature of a thing. In this way, the relic would be a perfect example of an object rich in aura; and perhaps 'aura' is just another word for that which is 'holy'. Art and theology share a lot of ideas and experiences, though the language tends to differ.

Churches and museums have something in common, too, including that ambivalence: to be in the presence of what can properly be called beauty (or whatever—call it what you like) but uncomfortable in the knowledge of what has been wrought in its name; what is depicted versus what is erased; which stories are told or not told. In art history, one also refers to the canonical, and it seems to me that the whole of Western secular culture has been imagined in the model of the Christian church, propelled in search of/in memory of/in spite of God—rumoured dead, but no wake or funeral.

The real Jerome seems to have run into trouble in Rome over the demise of a socialite who changed her habits from hedonic to ascetic on his recommendation. She made it about four months into that regimen and died. Her influential and well-connected friends grieved the premature loss of their vivacious Blaesilla and laid the blame on Jerome for the death of a party girl. He couldn't stick around long after that. This may have been the basis for his period of 'exile', depicted as penitence in the wilderness, though the real Jerome doesn't seem to have been in the least bit penitent. In fact, it was this girl's mother, one of his patrons, to whom he issued the advice not to mourn; and yet this woman, Paula, followed Jerome out to wherever he ended up and set him up with a brand new library and everything he needed to start again!

Paula was alleged to be Jerome's lover, which cast some aspersion on his reputation as a paragon of self-denial. She became quite famous in her own right, though a contemporary of Jerome's wrote that though she was 'able to surpass all, having great abilities, [Jerome] hindered her by his jealousy, having induced her to serve his own plan'. Maybe *she's* the lion.

There's an anecdote in which some of his haters attempted a defamation of Saint Jerome by placing a woman's robe next to his bed. The idea was to rumble him as having lain with a woman when he woke up, but instead—the story goes—Jerome woke early (ascetic as he was) and absent-mindedly pulled the dress on as he went off to prayer.

Are there any trans woman saints, do you know? I was thinking that—if enduring sexual abuse and gendered violence are reason enough to canonise Maria Goretti—there really should be.

Anyway, back to you—

All best

JD



CB THUR, 26 JUL 2018 04:14 PM

Thanks for that reply JD. Scholars seem to question the pervasiveness of the 'one sex' theory that's thought to have operated in the ancient world, but if there's any truth to it, then Jerome's accidental cross-dressing might not have been as taboo as gender-crossing can sometimes be in our highly binary culture, but still, as you note, a stick to beat him with.

Maria has been part of my consciousness from the early 1970s, due to a conversation with a fellow research student who's still a good friend. Her poverty is an important detail, because it was the death of her father that brought her into proximity with her murderer, and led to her presence in the home while her mother laboured on the land.

I'm from a long line of miners on my father's side, and from people who worked on the land on my mother's side, and I grew up in the industrial north of England (as it then was), so economic and social inequalities trouble me. I expressed my uneasiness with my comfortable life as a parish priest in a middle-class parish prior to moving into healthcare chaplaincy, and had worked in inner city settings prior to that. The parish where I live now is much more mixed, and typical of London: high social deprivation in some areas, high incomes in others, with the two populations living side-by-side in most streets.

My parish priest discussed Maria with some Catholic clergy when he was on sabbatical in mainland Europe a couple of years ago. Their angle was that the Church shouldn't be seen to be policing the bedroom, and that Maria should be regarded as a civil martyr in terms of respect for human life, dignity and self-determination.

Maria isn't alone in our church. The main altar has a relic of another young female saint, Gemma Galgani. Unlike Maria, her feast day seems to have dropped from the Roman Calendar, though she is commemorated by the Passionist Order, which she had hoped to join but was unable to on the grounds of ill-health. I gave a talk about her to our

Walsingham Cell earlier this year, and although she lived only just over a century ago, one of the Cell members commented afterwards that she sounded more like a mediaeval saint, due to her visions and receiving of the stigmata, and we all agreed that were she alive today there would be attempts to have her committed.

JD WED, 1 AUG 2018 08:07 AM

Dear Tina

You've made me see the Maria Goretti story differently. To think about her as 'a civil martyr in terms of respect for human life, dignity and self-determination' makes sense to me. The idea of a civil martyr is an interesting one and must include figures such as Rosa Luxemburg and Malcolm X. Does one have to die fighting to be a martyr? Saint Trayvon Martin, canonised in the vernacular, was an unarmed seventeen-year-old schoolboy whose murder in 2012 by a policeman (since acquitted) is considered by some to have sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. I googled around a bit and learned that he's been described as a martyr, and that his feast day is 25 September. But because George Zimmerman—Trayvon Martin's murderer—was forgiven by law, he need never repent. It's a strange paradox. I don't believe in hell, but sometimes lately I find myself wishing there were something like divine justice that strikes with precision, like in the Old Testament, so that people like the current politicians of the regime could somehow experience the hurt they seem prepared to visit on others.

Anyway, I started thinking of a painting in which Maria Goretti, the little murdered girl, walks hand in hand with the lion of Saint Jerome in the garden. It made me think of a Kit Wright poem, 'Hoping It Might be So':

*There must be a place where the whole of it all comes right,
Where the little boy buggered and strangled in the wood
Is comforted by his parents, and comforts his parents,
And everything horrible ever is understood*

If I could paint, I would surely paint that. Maybe I'll try.

Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words (or at least that's one of the conceits behind the idea of art), so as an artist, I have to entertain that conceit sometimes, though I'm ambivalent about words, images and all forms of signification.

Like the truly faithful, I often find myself longing for something outside the realm of signification. Derrida would have one thing to say about that and Deuteronomy would say something else, but I say there are things we just can't understand as individuals, communities, societies; perhaps even as a species.

The art-making impulse is to give form to what one can't say. It's a shame that art has become such a 'high church' in whose great houses (museums, galleries) many feel unwelcome.

That has to do with class and capital, of course—and I think also with ideas of work and labour. I'm also from a line of miners, metalsmiths, unlanded agricultural workers etc—and I myself didn't go to university until I was twenty-nine, instead working as a cook and singing in bands. I used to have a hard time listening to people talk about 'the work' (in the sense of emotional development, art commodities, political consciousness etc) because something ancestral in my head said: 'That ain't working, that's just messing about'. As such, all my subsequent rationalising of artwork comes down to a conviction that it's a sort of faith practice: one of many ways to become the vessel, channel the elders, talk to the ethers.

I think precisely because we don't know, and on one level *know* that we don't know (at least understand that we're small, vulnerable and confused in the face of the great chaotic plan) we're a faithful species, performing our rituals and rationalisations in order to keep going. I looked up Saint Gemma: what a difficult life she had. Happy for her that she lived at a time in which her visions and outbursts were seen as holy rather than crazy—there must be plenty of would-be saints walking through life on neuroleptics, opiates and sedatives, anchoresses of the psych ward.

Thanks for writing to me—your letters make me think a lot, and read a lot, and encounter new stories.

Xo

JD

Jesse Darling is an artist who lives and works in Berlin and London. Recent projects include solo exhibitions *Support Level*, Chapter, New York (2018), *Armes Blanches: History is Other People*, Galerie Sultana, Paris (2017) and *The Great Near*, Arcadia Missa, London (2016), and commissions from Volksbühne, Berlin (2018), MoMA, Warsaw (2014-16) and the Serpentine Gallery, London (2015). JD has published texts in print and online including *The Best British Poetry* (Salt Publishing, 2015), *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the 21st Century* (MIT Press, 2015) and *Art After the Internet* (Cornerhouse Books, 2014).

Christina (Tina) Beardsley, a retired healthcare chaplain, and previously a parish priest, is honorary assistant priest at St John's Church, Fulham, London. Tina was Changing Attitude, England's first transgender trustee (2007-14). The author of *Unutterable Love* (Lutterworth, 2009)—a biography of the Victorian preacher FW Robertson—she co-edited (with Michelle O'Brien) *This is My Body: hearing the theology of transgender Christians* (DLT 2016) and co-authored (with Chris Dowd) *Transfaith: a transgender pastoral resource* (DLT 2018). She and Chris Dowd are currently writing *A guide to including trans people in your church*, to be published by Jessica Kingsley in late 2019. Tina is a core consultant member of the Coordinating Group for the Church of England's episcopal learning and teaching document on human identity, sexuality and marriage, called *Living in Love and Faith*, which is due to report in 2020.

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