103 | book review

the subject of love: Hélène Cixous and the feminine divine

Sal Renshaw, Manchester University Press, Manchester, UK, 2009, 272pp., ISBN: 9780719069604, £60.00 (Hbk)

The latest in what is now a substantial series in 'Studies in Religion, Culture and Gender' edited by the late Grace M. Jantzen, Sal Renshaw's *The subject of love: Hélène Cixous and the feminine divine* is a book that contributes as much to a critical appreciation of the radicality of Cixous's 'theo-poetic' thought as it does to re-thinking the long and complex history of the notion of love in Western culture, particularly its imbrications in classical Greek and Christian patriarchal imaginaries of subjectivity, knowledge and gendered economies of giving. By way of a fascinating journey through the work of Plato, orthodox and feminist Christian theologians and finally Cixous, Renshaw offers a sustained interrogation of the multiple deployments of love in Western philosophy and theology as *eros*, *philia* and most crucially *agape*. Of these three concepts, it is the Christian notion of *agape* as 'other-regarding love' that constitutes Renshaw's most sustained focus of enquiry throughout the book, particularly in so far as her goal is to wrestle it away from a patriarchal tradition that has inscribed *agape* exclusively as sacrificial, disembodied love predicated on a radical voiding of the self. Far from being gender neutral, such patriarchal deployment of *agape* has in fact been historically implicated in women's oppression.

Against the grain of this traditional feminist analysis, Renshaw argues that Cixous's writing lends itself to a radical re-thinking of *agape* as 'other-regarding love' sourced in abundance and generosity rather than in moral imperative, a form of loving that relates to difference *as* difference rather than as something that needs to be appropriated, and whose horizon of divinity becomes manifest on a plane of *immanence* rather than *transcendence*, of humanly embodied *becoming* rather than divinely disembodied *ideal*.

As becomes obvious in the third chapter, Renshaw situates her study in the context of feminist theological reclamations of patriarchal conceptions of divine love, arguing that whereas *eros* and *philia* have been easily re-appropriated by feminist theologians, such as Andolsen, Purvis and Heyward, interested in articulating a humanly viable divine love founded in mutuality, embodied passion and social justice, the notion of *agape* has been far more elusive and difficult to reclaim precisely because of its sacrificial

overtones. And yet, according to Renshaw, feminist theology does need to reclaim *agape* in so far as the concept's capacity to signify other-regarding love covers aspects of generosity and affective ethics that neither *eros* or *philia* can grasp, because the first remains grounded in an appetitive notion of desire as sacred yearning (Heyward), whereas the second relies on sameness rather than difference as grounds for its enactment. And this is where Renshaw turns to Cixous.

Set against the backdrop of a recent surge of studies in English that examine the religious dimensions of French feminist thought, Renshaw's work shares with its predecessors (Jantzen 1998; Joy *et al.*, 2002, 2003) a belief in the inspirational role that thinkers such as Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous can play in shifting religious studies away from the analytical approach of theology to an approach that interrogates the divine as a *horizon of infinity* called forth by cultural imaginaries that are profoundly shaped by historical deployments of sexual difference. Differently from her predecessors, however, and particularly from Morny Joy's most recent study of Irigaray's religious thought (2006), Renshaw seeks less to account for the religious dimensions of Cixous' oeuvre as a whole than to read in depth *through* some of her texts from the 1980s and 1990s (most notably 'Sorties', 'Grace and Innocence' and *The Book of Promethea*) in order to draw out aspects of her work that speak most forcefully to Renshaw's own preoccupation with the question of love. In short, Renshaw's focus on *agape* provides the elective lens through which to read selectively through Cixous's vast oeuvre and intriguingly take advantage of what she argues is Cixous's 'productive ambiguity' with regard to religion.

Indeed, Renshaw shows how Cixous radically re-reads the foundational Judeo-Christian narratives of Western civilisation through the lens of sexual difference, offering an *invocation* of the feminine divine that leads to *simultaneously* rearticulating the ethical, the epistemological and the economic dimensions of our current symbolic order. It is such re-readings—particularly of the Fall and its highly gendered drama of (lost) grace and innocence—that allow Cixous to articulate a feminine economy of 'dispersed subjectivity', which, according to Renshaw, is at the heart of Cixous's inscription of an agapic 'other-regarding' generous love, predicated on 'self-dispossession', rather than self-sacrifice.

Overall, *The Subject of Love* offers a passionate argument for re-thinking love within a horizon of divinity that moves powerfully beyond the binary and sacrificial logic that characterises Western (religious *and* lay) thought. Renshaw is committed to 'a vision of love between people that flows from abundance, that can be considered to be divine, but that does not require a necessary sacrifice of self for its fulfillment' (p. 166), and Cixous's theo-poetic writing fits

her quest perfectly. Whether we want to call it *agape* or any other name is a different issue.

Elena Basile
York University/University of Toronto

references

- Jantzen, G.M.** (1998) *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Theory of Religion*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Joy, M.** (2006) *Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, Women, Gender and Religion*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Joy, M., O'Grady, K. and Poxon, J.L.** (2002) editors, *French Feminists on Religion: A Reader*, London: Routledge.
- Joy, M., O'Grady, K. and Poxon, J.L.** (2003) editors, *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, London: Routledge.

doi:10.1057/fr.2012.33