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Book Review: The Lion in the Waste Land: Fearsome Redemption in the Work of C. S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, and T. S. Eliot by Janice Brown

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Janice Brown, *The Lion in the Waste Land: Fearsome Redemption in the Work of C. S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, and T. S. Eliot.* 290pp. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-60635-338-7.

Readers of scholarship about C. S. Lewis are familiar with studies that discuss his work and life in the context of his fellow Inklings: Tolkien, Williams, and Barfield. Janice Brown's decision, however, to treat C. S. Lewis alongside two of his contemporary writers, both non-Inklings—Dorothy L. Sayers and T. S. Eliot—does demand an explanation. Brown must have recognized as much since she begins *The Lion in the Waste Land* by building a case for considering these three authors together, citing British historian Adrian Hastings, who identifies a "re-appropriation of Christian faith" during World War II and attributes this revival to the "Anglican lay literary and theological writers C. S. Lewis, T. S. Eliot, and Dorothy L. Sayers" (2).

Taking as her starting point that all three of these writers served as apologists for the Christian faith, Brown goes on to explore other harmonies among their views, identifying six shared subjects: the nature of Christ, the experience of conversion, the reality of angels, enduring suffering, struggling with time, and the failures of modernity. At the outset, Brown defines carefully the scope of her study, pointing out that her "purpose is not to prove that the similarities among them were greater than the differences" (3). Rather she intends to "explore the complementary nature of what Lewis, Sayers, and Eliot had to say on a number of important subjects. By placing these three writers side by side, Brown aims to give the reader new insights into each writer as well as an increased appreciation for the historical, theological, and literary context in which they wrote. That Brown largely accomplishes her goal can be attributed, not only to the carefully defined thesis and scope of her study, but also to her clear writing style, her balanced critical approach, and her close reading skills.

The book's first chapter, "A Meeting of Minds," documents the many ways in which the lives of the three writers connected. Brown lays out the evidence for the friendship and collaboration between Lewis and Sayers, using their extensive and warm correspondence as a primary source. When it comes to Eliot, the mood changes since during the first 30 or so years of their acquaintance, Lewis and Eliot were not friends. In fact, Brown documents fully Lewis's distaste for Eliot's modernist poetry and notes that Lewis was, for many years, unconvinced of the genuineness of Eliot's faith. Brown describes in detail the less than cordial meeting between Lewis and Eliot, arranged by their mutual friend, Charles Williams. In fact, it was not until 1959,

four years before Lewis's death, that the two men became friends through their work on the committee to revise *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England. I found Brown's treatment of the troubled relationship between Eliot and Lewis (the trouble, to be sure, was more on Lewis's part than Eliot's) an example of her thorough research and balanced critical approach. She does not accept easy explanations for the antipathy between the two but neither does she attempt to minimize their very real differences and disagreements—as one might be tempted to do when writing a book about the complementary nature of the works and ideas of two writers.

In Chapter 2, "Prophets in the Wilderness: Imagination vs. Apologetics," Brown explores how these three writers felt called to be lay apologists for their Anglican and Christian faith. Brown introduces this chapter with a nuanced discussion of two prophetic functions: preaching and poetic utterance, indicating that both Sayers and Lewis felt compelled to do more "preaching" than they would have liked due to the advancing secularization of British society and culture. She sees both Lewis and Sayers as reluctant apologists, with Sayers being more reluctant than Lewis. Sayers, Brown notes, cited her lack of "evangelical zeal" and the "unemotional" nature of her Christian faith as barriers to her entering enthusiastically into apologetic writing. In spite of Sayers calling Lewis "God's terrier," Brown rightly points out that Lewis also had misgivings about his apologetic work, citing his confession in a letter to Sayers that a Christian truth never seemed dimmer to him than when he had just defended it (*Collected Letters of CSL:* 2:730). Eliot, Brown asserts, was even more reluctant than Lewis or Sayers to speak out as an apologist for Christianity. However, Brown does make a convincing and perhaps original argument that in his *Criterion* reviews and his "The Idea of a Christian Society," Eliot's strong critique of secular modernism constituted a very effective contribution to the Christian apologetics of his day.

In Chapters 3-8, Brown focuses on the creative works of the three authors. For Sayers, this means primarily drama; for Lewis, fiction and poetry; and for Eliot poetry and drama. Brown identifies six subjects (detailed above) that the three writers address in their creative work. For example, Chapter 3 identifies their shared vision of Christ as both Lion and Lamb, an imaginative picture that Brown calls the "unsafe Savior" and that all three writers believed was necessary to correct what Eliot called the spiritual dilemma of his day: the inability to feel rightly toward God. Brown's fine close reading of Eliot's poem "Gerontion" demonstrates how Eliot

uses imagery similar to Lewis and Sayers's in depicting the dual nature of Christ as lamb and lion (or in Eliot's case, tiger). In Chapter 4, which deals with conversion, Brown is particularly effective in showing how Sayers's plays—about the architect William of Sens and the Emperor Constantine—portray characters who must travel the way of repentance, brokenness, and humility and must ultimately make a choice to be the chosen of God.

A virtue of Brown's thematic approach in these six chapters is that the exploration of disparate works often reveals surprising coherence of subjects and themes, as when she identifies the use of Ezekiel's wheel within a wheel imagery as interpreted by Eliot (*Murder in the Cathedral*) and Lewis (*Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*) or when she sets a war poem by Eliot ("A Note on War Poetry") and one by Sayers ("Target Area") side by side. Brown's approach also highlights interesting historical comparisons, as when she points out that the three authors all thought carefully about issues of patriotism, nationalism, and war and peace. Finally, Brown frequently highlights the shared debt these writers owed to previous authors and literary themes, as when she notes their common reverence for and allusions to Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Lewis and Eliot's use of the grail quest and Arthurian legends in *The Waste Land* and *The Chronicles of Narnia.* Such revelations support Brown's thesis that viewing these three writers side by side yields discoveries and unique insights.

In Chapter 8, Brown explores a particular aspect of a shared worldview of these three authors: their approval of old views and values—what Eliot called "permanent things." All three saw the loss of respect for education as an alarming aspect of society's deterioration (see Sayers, "The Lost Tools of Learning," Eliot's "The Idea of a Christian Society," and Lewis's *Abolition of Man*). Like Lewis, Eliot called into question the modern assumption that the new is always better, and, like Sayers, Eliot was dismayed by the de-Christianization of society. Sayers bemoaned the widespread ignorance of basic Christian doctrines, and all three regarded the modern belief in progress as naïve and futile.

Scholars and lovers of the works of Eliot, Lewis, and Sayers will find much to celebrate in Brown's book. And since most readers will likely not possess detailed knowledge of all three writers, they are likely to discover many new insights and even a few gems. For me, one of the gems was learning more about Sayers's plays and discovering that a war-related drama, *Just Vengeance*, was the work Sayers regarded as her greatest. I found Brown's analyses of the

poems and plays of Eliot and the plays of Sayers particularly helpful. Brown has an eye for detail and technique but consistently relates those details to larger themes and theories.

I noted earlier how Brown dealt in a balanced way with the difficult relationship between Eliot and Lewis. I wish she had done the same with that of Lewis and Sayers. The overall thrust of Brown's treatment of the two would indicate that they agreed on almost everything. While Brown does acknowledge their different attitudes toward apologetic writing, she fails to notice their fundamental differences when it came to questions of gender roles, marriage, society, and the church—for example, their disagreement on the ordination of women.

Although Brown may overstate her case when she suggests that "the key ideas of Lewis, Sayers, and Eliot are most powerful when considered simultaneously" (260), throughout the book, Brown maintains a fair and measured critical approach. She never tries to force the facts to fit her thesis. Rather she delivers careful scholarship, clear argument, and perceptive critical analysis, enhancing and enriching the reader's appreciation for the contributions of these significant Christian thinkers and writers.

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