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Daniel Ross Goodman
Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, danielrgoodmanesq@gmail.com

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Blue Jasmine* (2013), directed by Woody Allen.

Keywords

Woody Allen, Elia Kazan, Talmud, Brian de Palma, Tennessee Williams

Author Notes

Daniel Ross Goodman, J.D., is a rabbinical fellow at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, where he is the editor of Milin Havivin, an annual journal devoted to studies in Torah, society and the rabbinate.

The fallen woman: it is a common trope in tragic metatheatre[1] (think Tennessee Williams's Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire,* or the type of character that Ibsen's women are desperate to avoid becoming), and is also a recurrent historical phenomenon (think Marie Antoinette). The fallen woman is not as common of a trope in religious literature, but Cate Blanchett's mesmerizing performance as Jasmine in Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine* (2013) is redolent of a relatively unknown female character from talmudic lore, Marta bat [the daughter of] Baitus. During the Roman siege of Jerusalem prior to the destruction of the second Temple in 70 C.E., provisions understandably began to dwindle, and Marta, one of the wealthiest Jerusalemite women, asked her servant to procure fine flour. Unable to find fine flour, the servant returned, saying only white flour remained. Marta asked him to buy white flour, but when he arrived at the market, the supplies of white flour had been exhausted, and only dark flour remained. She asked him to buy dark flour, but when he returned to the market, the dark flour had also been exhausted. Marta then asked him to find barley flour, but even this type of flour was unavailable. Thus, not bothering to even put on shoes, Marta hurriedly went out herself to see if she could find any food; she subsequently stepped in excrement and died from the trauma. When he heard about this event, Rabban Yo□anan ben Zakkai intimated that Marta's story was a fulfillment of the *tokhacha* [the biblical prediction of curses that would befall people in calamitous times]: "The tender and delicate woman in your midst who would not deign to traverse barefoot upon the ground" (Deuteronomy 28:56). (Babylonian Talmud [hereinafter B.T.], *Gittin* 56a)

Marta's story is a tale that could be told in any age, and Woody Allen tells it with distinctively twenty-first century flourishes. While never quite reaching the desperate

circumstances of the Talmud's Marta, Allen's Jasmine nonetheless faces a similar plight. Sundered of her wealth and privileged lifestyle (she was married to a financial tycoon who was implicated in fraudulent schemes and, like Bernie Madoff, had his entire fortune confiscated by the government), Jasmine is compelled to exit the posh confines of Edenic Park Avenue and make her own way in the Californian wilderness. She leaves New York—not exactly barefoot, as she was able to retain her Luis Vuitton luggage and various sundry accoutrements—for San Francisco, where she is not so destitute as to be seeking barley flour in the marketplace, but is seeking her sister in the vicinity of Market Street.

Jasmine's precipitous fall from wealth (which may also be characterized as a fall from grace, given her troubled mental state, her assumption of heavy drinking, and her overreliance on medication) obliges her to move into her sister Ginger's (Sally Hawkins) "homey" apartment that Jasmine, in her previous incarnation as a Park Avenue socialite, would likely have described as a slum. From there, she sets out to commence a new life, and a slew of tumultuous events ensue.

The startling (and, to many of Allen's fans, disappointing) discovery that *Blue Jasmine* is not a comedy has been well-documented; it is a tense, interior, psychological drama that invites viewers to indulge in cinematic *schadenfreude* by voyeuristically gazing at the rude awakenings delivered by a harsh world to the formerly pristine, utterly spoiled woman who once "threw the best dinner parties" on Park Avenue. (Jasmine was the type of woman whose husband would, like Richard Burton would do for Elizabeth Taylor, give her a "£127,000 diamond ring simply because it was Tuesday."[2] Though not as dark or *noirish* as *Match Point* (2005), and not as broodingly Bergmanesque as *Interiors* (1978), *Blue Jasmine* is nevertheless far removed from a conventional "Woody Allen film." It still possesses an essential comedic core, and while it

contains sufficient doses of Allen's trademark neurotic brand of humor (as well as his standard jazz score), it is essentially a comedic drama that verges upon tragedy. And as a slightly humorous moral fable that elicits genuine ethical questions, the Allen film to which it is most analogous is his masterpiece—and the film with which he seemed to invent his own cinematic genre, the "tragicomic wisdom film"—*Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989). The ethical dilemmas in *Blue Jasmine,* though, are largely retrospective—filmgoers will wonder whether Jasmine acted appropriately during her years of luxury, rather than pondering whether a character's prospective course of action is ethical (as one does when viewing *Crimes and Misdemeanors*).

Contrary to some critics' hyperbolic, reflexive proclamations of this entrée being Woody Allen's best film, *Blue Jasmine* never reaches the cinematic perfection of *Match Point* or the sublime inventiveness of *Crimes and Misdemeanors;* nor can it compare with the uniqueness of *Manhattan* (1979), the comedic brilliance of *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), or even with the imaginative feats of *Midnight in Paris* (2011). But it is one of Allen's most nuanced, subtle, and complex films, and it may contain the greatest performance he has ever elicited from an actress—which is saying a great deal, given that his direction has produced 11 best actress or supporting actress Oscar nominations. All of the performances in *Blue Jasmine* are full of wonderful brio, especially Sally Hawkins's Ginger, Andrew Dice Clay's Augie, and Bobby Cannavale's Chili, but none more so than Blanchett's Jasmine.

Blanchett has acknowledged that her character is based upon Blanche DuBois—with dollops of Ibsen and Shakespeare—and it seems as if she particularly molded her Jasmine after Vivien Leigh's Blanche in Elia Kazan's 1951 adaptation of the Williams play. (Cannavale's Chili also appears to be riffing on Brando's immortal Stanley.) But Blanchett somehow makes Jasmine even more layered, deep, and complex: Jasmine is also a compelling combination of

Bronte's Jane and Bertha, a veritable female Jekyll and Hyde in her vacillations of mood. One can dare say that Blanchett's performance in this film will be spoken of in the same breath as Bette Davis's in *All About Eve* (1951), Elizabeth Taylor's in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966), Meryl Streep's in *Sophie's Choice* (1982), and only a select few others in an elite category of all-time great performances by an actress.

It is fitting that *Blue Jasmine* showcases such a stellar performance, for it is a film that is fit for the stage. Allen's film also evinces shades of Eugene O'Neill's confrontational, pathos-ridden metatheatre, and Arthur Miller's tragic subversions of the American Dream. "Go west, young man—didn't Horace Greeley say that?" Jasmine asks, before learning that perhaps she hasn't gone far west enough.[3] The American dream is as chimerical for Jasmine as it was for Biff and Willy; her story speaks to them through the theatrical ether, informing them that even if they had gone west—to a ranch to work in the open air, or even as far west as Alaska—their existential quandaries would still be unresolved. If Marta, the fallen woman of the Talmud, had survived her encounter with indigence, she presumably would have learned ethical lessons and perhaps would have sought to improve her character. The rabbis who survived the Roman destruction of the second Temple attempted to draw moral lessons from their destitution, and attributed the calamity that had befallen them to their ethical lapses (they pointed specifically to the moral sin of "*sinat chinam*" [baseless hatred]; B.T., *Gittin* 55b). But Jasmine seems to have learned nothing from her indigent interregnum. In her diasporic existence in the West, Jasmine seeks to maintain a veneer of *haute couture*, but her former social integuments have all but dissolved. She behaves and speaks in a slyly condescending manner to Ginger—and especially toward Ginger's friends—but this new social circle exhibits a charming, if uncouth, *bonhomie* that her previous social circles lacked.

In addition to his expected theatrical and literary references, Allen also appears to reference a film that one would not expect: Brian de Palma's *Scarface* (1983). In one of her forays with Ginger into San Francisco proper, Jasmine encounters Chili and Eddie, whose attempts to talk to her are reminiscent of Tony's and Manny's initial awkward attempts at talking to American women at the Floridian beach. The fiery Chili's (Bobby Cannavale) interchange with the cool Jasmine evoke similar scenes between Pacino—the hot, mercurial young go-getter full of machismo—and Pfeiffer—the slightly older, standoffish, icy Hitchcock Blonde. Chili's friend Eddie (Max Casella) provides some comic relief (that a Woody Allen film requires comic relief is itself indicative of how much of a *Match Point*-esque genre departure this film is for Allen); Casella plays Eddie as a spitting image of Joe Pesci.

Still, the essential filmic prerequisite for appreciating Allen's *Blue Jasmine* is Kazan's *Streetcar;* one is tempted to say that it should be required viewing for *Blue Jasmine* filmgoers, much as Marbury v. Madison is required reading for Constitutional law students, or as Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* is required listening for students of modernist music. Jasmine's melodramatic mood oscillations, Chili's brutish mannerisms, the claustrophobic *mise en scène*, and Jasmine's dependence upon the kindness of strangers all have their origins in Kazan's adaptation of the Williams play.

Blue Jasmine is not Allen's greatest film; a dubious *deux ex machina* inserted toward the film's dénouement is fatal for its pretentions of reaching the summit of Allen's considerable oeuvre. Yet, it is a tremendous cinematic achievement for a 77-year old writer-director whose perceptive "eyes have not dimmed, nor has" his passion for film or directorial "strength diminished" (Deut 34:7). In fact, Allen's directorial powers seem to have increased since he withdrew from acting in his own films; such an artistic triumph is a theological reminder that,

though the Creator may be hidden, He still abides as an indubitably influential Force in His creation.[4]

1. Sontag, Susan. "The Death of Tragedy," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays.* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961).

2. Williams, Chris, ed. *The Richard Burton Diaries.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012): 209.

3. Greeley technically did *say* "Go West," and probably popularized the expression, but he did not coin the phrase. "Horace Greeley," *New York Times,* accessed August 8, 2013. http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/g/horace_greeley/index.html

4. Greenberg, Irving. *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity.* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004): 52; cf. B.T. *Yoma* 69b (arguing that God's power is most keenly sensed in His hiddenness rather than in His overt miraculous interventions).

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