



## Crashing Canons: A Review of Pamela Mordecai's Sixth Book of Poetry, *de book of Mary: A Performance Poem*

**Title:** *de book of Mary*, by Pamela Mordecai. Mauwenzi House Publishers Ltd, Toronto. 121 pages + Notes (122-23)

**Reviewed by:** Stephanie McKenzie

PAMELA Mordecai's latest and sixth book of poetry, *de book of Mary: A Performance Poem*, is a gripping and strong account of the story of Mary, mother of Christ. It builds on Mordecai's earlier work *de Man: a performance poem* (1995), an account of the death of Christ, by making Mary the primary focus of attention. *de book of Mary* is, perhaps, Mordecai's strongest collection of poems. Strong and impressive with its rhythms, extensive vocabulary, and vision, it is the accomplishment of a seasoned poet. Notably, it does not employ "very creole Jamaican Creole" (as Mordecai explains in the notes) but, rather, standard Jamaican English, or mesolectal (middle range) Jamaica Talk, to reach a large audience and extend the recognition that sacred stories are not the property of any one language.

*de book of Mary* blends feminism, a disregard for those who abuse power with wealth and privilege, and a condemnation of patriarchy to tell a powerful story about women's power and Christ's role in giving voice to women. The poem, occurring 18 years after Jesus died, about 48 CE, opens with a chorus of both male and female voices that underscore important distinctions throughout this book. "Men in their 40s and 50s, wearing robes reminiscent of priestly garb" and adherents of old Testament laws, are pitted against common women who adhere to the tenets of Christ. Notably, the women employ Christ's teachings to exercise their power, to underscore the validity of the female characters (including Mary, who will tell Mary's story), and to discredit patriarchal voices and that which they represent:

*Jesus long come and gone. Him did bring a New Law. It say de likes of you do not own none of we.*

These men's robes later remind one of Pilate's abuse of Jesus and Pilate's abuse of power, which he hides behind the clothes of his privileged position. As Mary later says of Pilate,

*Me don't trust him. Him good to hide tricks in de skirt of him robe!*

In fact, the women of the chorus, and the female characters (Mary; Mary's mother; Mary's friend Esther; Elizabeth, Mary's cousin; Miss Beth; Anna; Mary Magdalene; Mary's friend Mariam; and Leah) come to represent the values of democracy and Christ's role in spreading them. The female voices of the chorus counter the male voices, who believe Christ "should keep wid his class," who lament the fact that they are to witness a "tall tale" and "makeup



### *de book of Mary*

A PERFORMANCE POEM

herstory," and who refer to "de bogus virgin [they] studying":

*De difference wid Rabboni is him have respect. No mind if is women, pikni, outcast wid leprosy, rich or poor . . . Him bless up everybody same way.*

Further, the words of El Shaddai (one of several names for God "used by rabbis, priests, holy persons, prophets, angels and ordinary people who are reporting or imitating the speech of such persons"), carried by the Archangel to Mary, who asks her to give birth to the son of God, indicate that women's rights are part of a sacred plan:

*Never mind old time ways, never mind how she young, woman not nobody property.*

The democratic import of this book is fuelled by fully rounded characters who leave their often flat portrayal behind them and whose very human characteristics undercut the elitism Biblical characters might seem to carry today in a 17th-century text. There is Mary, who refers to God as her "Baby father, Jah-Jah" and notes she's "bigging him up," who dares to scream out to God with a mother's panic in seeing her son killed:

*And me scream to Jah-Jah for me vex to de root of my soul. 'Lord, me cannot believe dat is dis me born your pikni for!'*

There is "de liklest shepherd" who,

travelling to Christ's birth, "was frighten so bad / him pee up himself" when "a angel appear out of a great light." There is Mary and Joseph, "Folks [who] count every shekel," and struggle financially to raise their child and Joseph's other children, whom he had in his first marriage. And there is Jesus who possesses a fierce sense of humour and who, as a little child, uses his power to perform miracles as a kind of practical joke when he makes the fish his cat has eaten reappear in a disgruntled neighbour's kitchen. In fact, Jesus is shown as a child almost in need of reprimand at times. When he disappears from his parents in order to question those at the temple, Mary describes a father's frustration:

*Me could see Joseph getting ready to clap him, when dat pikni give out 'You was searching for me?'*

Jesus is also torn up, as a young man would be, when his father dies:

*Him cry as him plane cedar plank and shape dowel pin and glue de wood box for him Pa*

The humanity of this text, though, is most notably witnessed in the cast of strong female characters who, tough as nails, kick out at injustice as fiercely as Mordecai's text underscores the belief that Christ's teachings speak for equality. Mary Magdalene does not shrink from the Roman

soldiers who will crucify Mary's child but, as Mary describes, lashes out:

*. . . is not a few kick dat de girl Magdalene land on nuff soldier shin One of dem take a spear*

*and him jook she and me, and she double her fist, fix him good wid a thump*

After Joseph's death and living in the hills, Mary will build her own house with the help of Leah:

*And me know to lay stone. Joseph never do only carpentry work; him do masonry too and me watch*

*as him teaching Jesus and me learn!*

However, the strongest trait these common women possess is their power to give birth, a fact that challenges the privileged patriarchs in the chorus who, of course, possess no comparable strength. When the men of the chorus refer to the women as "girls," female voices respond:

*'Girls?' You can't be serious?*

*De youngest one of us is mother to seven pikni!*

Perhaps this book ultimately suggests that it is the ability to give birth, such as Mary's ability to bear the son of God, that places women in a privileged light. This is the story of Mary, as the men grudgingly admit, but, as they also note, "If it wasn't for she, true, him would / never born." Thus, the women of the chorus are unequivocally able to disregard the lesser power that patriarchs wield with fancy robes and money:

*Dem will quick figure out dat authority— meaning you reverend folks—*

*couldn't manage we poor likl female posse*

Much more can, and will, I am sure, be said about *de book of Mary*. Driven by its feminism and common characters which, together, speak out against unfounded privilege, *de book of Mary* is testimony to a need for equality and democracy in a world that still thirsts for these things. More than that, this is a beautiful book of poetry. Exquisite. Intelligent. Accomplished in its rhythms and delivery. When Mariam says to Mary that Christ, amongst other things, is to be remembered for his use of different languages, both common and official, we might think of Mordecai whose work slides along an impressive continuum to render a rich and valuable text:

*Dat Aramaic him speak was gutter talk, same like de koine Greek.*

*Him wield dem two and de Hebrew—*

*sound clash was always on him tongue.*

Likewise, in *de book of Mary* sounds clash and greet one another in an impressive fusion that marks the voice of a mature and honed versifier who can crash through any patriarchal canons.

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