

## REVIEW

## Spinning a Thread

**Title:** *Subversive Sonnets* by Pamela Mordecai  
**TSAR publications, Toronto, 2012, 112 pages.**

**Reviewed by:** Stephanie McKenzie

*Subversive Sonnets* (2012) is Mordecai's latest book of poetry, published by TSAR publications in Toronto. It is rich, technically talented, wise, playful, and, indisputably, the strongest of Mordecai's poetry collections (though all are very strong) to date.

The three most popular and well-known forms of sonnets are The Petrarchan, the Shakespearean, and the Spenserian, each with their own strict rhyme schemes and rhythmic patterns. But perhaps one could say after reading *Subversive Sonnets* that the most interesting might be the "Mordecai sonnet." Mordecai does not imitate the strict rules of traditional sonnet forms, though she maintains the spirit, at times, of Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets. Each of Mordecai's individual poems is a collection of different sonnets (that is, individual sonnets constitute different stanzas in Mordecai's poems), and what is most striking about what Mordecai has "borrowed" from past sonnets is her dependence on rhyming couplets (the latter being a characteristic of Shakespeare's sonnets which end with two rhyming lines) which she spreads throughout her poetry. There are not many contemporary poets who can get away with rhyme these days — who employ rhyme well — but Mordecai is able to do so. In her poem "Lace Makers," for instance, Mordecai, writing about attending a "girls' school" in Jamaica as a child, appropriately recalls, in rhyme, a Jamaican childhood and the Jamaican poet Claude McKay who is to be admired as one of the first Jamaican poets to write in Jamaican Creole:

... Claude McKay say he remember  
 poinsettias in December. I recall red blooms as well:  
 three old nuns, faces flushed and wrinkled up as mace,  
 under tree conjuring waves of foaming Maltese lace. (from  
 "Lace Makers" 9)

Notably, Mordecai turns not only in this poem but also in many others, as McKay did, to the island and the language that raised her. In "Temitope," the speaker claims, for example, "we who come from islands know, / crac-cric, periphrastic, is so life go" (37).

But it is not only a love of Jamaica, love of language and love of the sonnet form which defines *Subversive Sonnets*. It is love of literature, love of family, and, most memorably, the love of a lover or partner. One of the collection's most beautiful poems is "Who Loves Not Self, Loves Not," a response to Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins' brilliant sonnets "The Windhover" and "God's Grandeur":

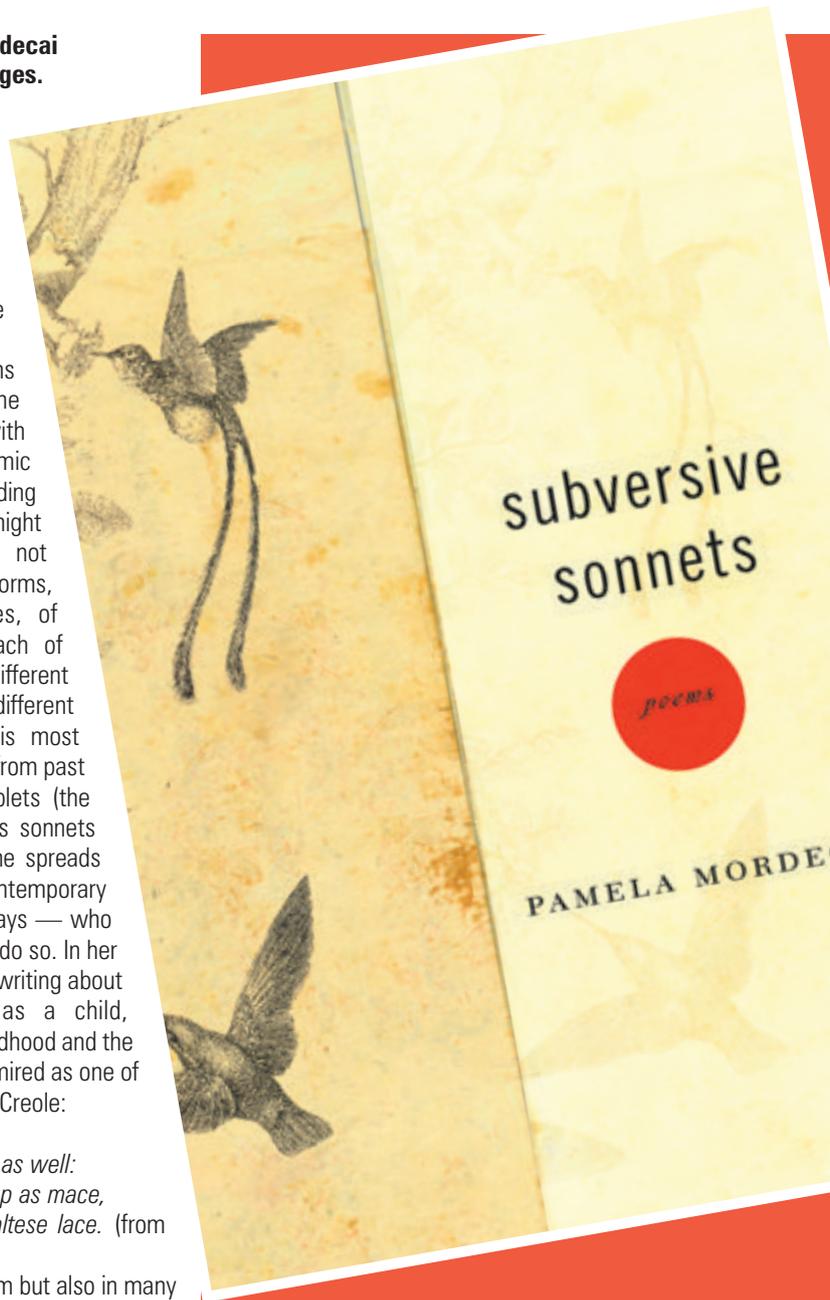
... But what if we despise  
 that craft, sweet curling that your Father set  
 about as he wove every self each in  
 his mother's womb? What if inside us, animus  
 flares furious, eating all air, prayer? What then, most valorous  
 when we say no to God's grandeur in us? (from "Who Loves  
 Not Self, Loves Not" 37)

As in Hopkins' sonnets, there is a lot of wisdom and spiritual reflection here, and these things, as well as compassion, also dominate Mordecai's verse, as the ending to "Poor Execution" aptly illustrates:

... Call the roll  
 of thousands and there is no lesson we  
 can learn but that we did not do for our fellows all  
 we needed to. And we will keep on dying till we do. (57)

Perhaps it is love for family, though, which comes through most strongly in Mordecai's poems. There is a tribute to a grandfather ("Old Diaries"), who "shot a man for stealing his newspaper" (4), and memories of a father steal the reader's affection at the beginning of the book:

Pops nibbled Latin through the English mass



determined the demotic should not pass  
 his ritual ears. Glum brood in tow, he went religiously  
 every Sunday. When force-ripe progeny  
 refused to go, he made do with the willing few.  
 We never saw him take communion though,  
 which meant our virtuous Pops was always in —  
 Ora pro nobis, Maria — a state of serious sin! (from "Introibo  
 ad altare dei" 18)

Another poem for a father, "Nutrament," "Temitope," in honour of a daughter, and "Zoey Stands up to Schrodinger's Cat," for a young granddaughter, remind the reader of the main subject matter of all sonnets: love.

However, it is a love poem for the author's husband which rivals any sonnet Petrarch might have written for his beloved, Laura, and which is reason, in itself, to buy *Subversive Sonnets*. "Counting the Ways and Marrying True Minds" echoes Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways . . ." and Shakespeare's sonnet "Let me not to the marriage of true minds . . ." Mordecai begins with Browning's famous first line but counts in her own original way:

Way One is forty on his next birthday.  
 Way Two is pregnant with our first grandchild;  
 . . . Way Three? Way Three,  
 Wash-Belly, is the last one to abide,  
 for when, according to my OBG,  
 you set them sweetly in my sweet inside,  
 for each Way hanging on, there was a Way  
 that saw the world outside and would not stay.  
 So Way Three, manic, mad, magnificent,  
 speaks the last lines in this soliloquy  
 of how your cells have swelled inside my cells,  
 of how your flesh has truly become me. (35)

And taking off on Browning's concluding lines — "and, if God choose, / I shall but love thee better after death" — Mordecai employs her trademark humour (well known by this point to not only readers of *Subversive Sonnets* but also readers of her other works) and also her spiritual focus:

. . . So our love  
 has bobbed and weaved to pass the edge of doom.  
 No mates in heaven yet we have a pact.  
 You've promised you will not ignore me who  
 has loved you many ways. I, beyond strife,  
 will once and finally be still, . . .

. . . touching only  
 on God and his fine Son, consummate bride-  
 groom, and on Wisdom, she through whom I lit  
 on you, sweet other one in whom I found  
 three perfect Ways to love. So let it be.

Awash in honeyed obstacles, you'll make  
 a keen addition to the choir. I'll be around. (36)

Small wonder that this book is dedicated "For Martin," and small wonder that the strongest poem in *Subversive Sonnets* is a fierce love poem.

This is not to say that Mordecai's collection is without its haunting moments, for Mordecai deals, as she has dealt before, with troubling subject matter. "Bill Belfast and Lizzie Bell" tells the story of a slave in Halifax, Canada, who "Escaped on Thursday evening" (the old spelling here is taken from historical documents, it can be presumed, as Mordecai notes the poem is "in part a found poem") and, being known to have "attempted twice to board a ship / which lay in harbour, bound to Newfoundland," is being looked for. Belfast tells the reader, though, that he has "gained . . . berth / on the *Creole*, boat bound for London town," and that he is waiting for his love to join him: "I wait amid barrels of salted cod / for Lizzie Bell, slave like me, let as laundress to / soldiers in barracks on Grottingen Street" (63). And the poem which follows, "Thomas Thistlewood and Tom," is bone-chilling in its depiction of slavery's crimes.

*Subversive Sonnets* ends in a most appropriate manner with "Yarn Spinner" and a comment about the power of language and literature:

And are you sorry for the yarns you make?  
 No, for they keep the children warm. What if  
 you die spinning a thread? Die, yes, but never dead . . . (79)

Literature, of course, keeps many things alive. Humour, hope, love, and, inevitably, writers. Yarn spinner that she is, Pamela Mordecai has produced another successful book — again, her strongest poetry collection to date. And one thing that stands out after reading this book of poems is an observation that many have also made speaking of Shakespeare: there is some range of vocabulary here! How many words Mordecai has at her disposal should be an interest in Mordecai scholarship to come, I would think. What she does with that language is another.

Pamela Mordecai was born and grew up in Jamaica, and educated there and in the USA. She and her family immigrated to Canada in 1994. A former language arts teacher with a PhD in English, she writes poetry, and short fiction. Her previous collections of poetry are *Journey Poem* (1989); *de man: a performance poem* (1995); *Certifiable* (2001) and *The True Blue of Islands* (2005). Her collection of short fiction, *Pink Icing and Other Stories*, appeared in 2006. In 2001, she and her husband, Martin, published a reference work entitled *Culture and Customs of Jamaica* in Greenwood Press's Culture and Customs series. Her writing for children is widely collected and well known internationally. *El Numero Uno*, a play for young people, had its world premiere at the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People in Toronto in 2010.

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