Title: Subversive Sonnets by Pamela Mordecai

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 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 “girls’ school” in Jamaica as a child, respectively 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 runs, 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-crac, 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 purling 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 valuable 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 fellows all we needed to. And we will keep on dying till we do. (57)

Perhaps it is love for family, 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-type 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 how your flesh has truly become me.

And taking off 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, well once and finally be still, here... touching only on God and his fine Son, consummate bridegroom, and on Wisdom, she through whom I lit on God and his fine Son, consummate bridegroom. 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... / 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 laudless 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:

... Are you sorry for the yams you make? No, for they keep the children warm. What if you die spinning a thread? Die, yes, but never dead... (78) 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); Centifable (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. If you were a young people, had its world premiere at the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People in Toronto in 2010.

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