Document généré le 2 mai 2024 06:33

Studies in Canadian Literature
Études en littérature canadienne

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George Elliott Clarke

Volume 44, numéro 1, 2019

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066496ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1066496ar

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Éditeur(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)
1718-7850 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Clarke, G. (2019). On Pamela Mordecai's "Passion Plays": A Plea for Their Performance. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, *44*(1), 5–29. https://doi.org/10.7202/1066496ar

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George Elliott Clarke

Prayerful Opening

Beloved Reader, herein I take up two works by Afro-Jamaican Canadian author Pamela Mordecai, *De Man: A Performance Poem* (1995) and *De Book of Mary: A Performance Poem* (2015), treating the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in the first instance and his[1] life and death and the bio of "Mother Mary" (I quote from "Let It Be" by the Beatles) in the next. I wish to share my readings of these dramatic poems — these Afro-Caribbean Catholic interventions in Greek-letter, Gospel narratives (the so-called New Testament) and Afro-feminist retellings of the seminal (I pun), more-or-less masculinist, Occidental Christian[2] texts — to encourage, actually, their mounting as plays. I state forthrightly that I wish to share my readings of these dramatic poems with you because this interest represents a return to my own roots as a scholar and poet/writer.

Indeed, I confess that I am a child — somewhat errant or prodigal — of Africadia, or African Nova Scotia, off the Black North Atlantic grid (if you will). I grew up within the precincts of the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia, a Black Baptist Church group founded by ex-Virginia slave Richard Preston in 1854 — two generations before African Americans established the US National Baptist Convention in 1895. Those are my African diasporic roots. I'm not a Baptist — not a baptized Christian — but I've been a fellow traveller in the *Faith* one hundred percent because it's my heritage as an African Nova Scotian, as an Africadian, and as an Afro-Métis (a member of the Eastern Woodland Métis Nation Nova Scotia).

My background as a pseudo-Christian, Bible-thumpin' poet — as a Black and Red, quasi-evangelical scribe dyed in the ink of Nat Turner's and Martin Luther King's enthusiastic, prophetic, exhortative discourse — brings me now to need to, to want to, take up "Sistah Pam's" restructuring of "Gospel Truth."

Now you know a bit more about me, but just who is Pamela Claire Hitchins Mordecai (1942-)? Well, a Jamaican native, she has come to letters through the real-world business of assembling and publishing textbooks — often anthologies — for the Anglo-Caribbean primary and secondary education markets. In a sense, then, she has a Blakean relationship to literature, a love of the page and its letters and their illuminations, but also a belief in the metaphysical — or transcendent — properties of books. According to her bibliography, Mordecai helped to compile and publish at least fifteen textbooks, between 1979 and 2012, for the English-speaking Caribbean. That these textbooks have enjoyed reissue again and again is a testament to her savvy negotiation of Afro-Caribbean (Creole) English (the tongue of the masses) and the pedagogical imperative to urge (or impose) Standard English on pupils. In her creative writing, Mordecai has worked primarily in poetry, publishing six titles between 1989 and 2015. But she has also published five books of poetry and short stories specifically for children. In addition to this authorial output, her poetry appeared in at least seventeen anthologies between 1980 and 2013. Moreover, Mordecai has edited five anthologies and published two novels and one work of critical prose. Resident in Canada since at least 1992, Mordecai now lives in Kitchener, Ontario, and has won a slew of grants, fellowships (including a prestigious Yaddo Writers' Residency), and nominations, in the Caribbean and in Canada, from 1993 to 2016. I will wager that her lifelong career interest in trying to reach a mass schoolbook-buying audience has brought her (and taught her) to write poetry with an eye for the dramatic and an ear for the stage (i.e., recitation).

In my study of Mordecai, then, I commence by stating a contradiction. Her place in African Canadian drama in the twenty-first century is a no-show, for *De Man* and *De Book of Mary* are less plays than closet dramas, so seldom have they been mounted beyond church doors. But I defend my adoration of these works by stating that they are post-colonial[3] revisions of the source Gospels; institute Afro-Caribbean and feminist perspectives; and, in essence, annex signal, Occidental texts for African Canadian and "coloured" Christian meditation and instrumentation. If an afterlife ever pertains to this essay, then it will be in scholars and producers actually seeing these works incarnated on stage.

Talking the Bible's Babel-"Babble"

In *Reading Dante's* Commedia *as Theology: Divinity Realized in Human Encounter* (2016), Vittorio Montemaggi registers that "in *Purgatorio* 15 Dante . . . uses explicit reference to the structures of grammar to speak of community" (109n30). Crucially, Mordecai's revision — as Afro-Caribbean Christian woman poet — of the Gospels is undertaken to replace the "community" of the KJV Bible with a specific Jamaican and/or Caribbean commonweal, for her dramatic poems are expressed via the Jamaican demotic — Jamaican English, that is Kamau Brathwaite's notion of "nation language."[4] Thus, Mordecai executes a post-colonial turn on Renaissance English-voiced Christianity, itself imperialist, annexing the original Hebrew and Greek scriptures for its own requirements. If Montemaggi is correct that "theological discourse can only be uttered in hope: the hope that, in and through its necessary finitude and vulnerability, human language might speak divine truth" (142), then Mordecai works to nationalize theological discourse (i.e., to "sanctify" Jamaican English) by asking the parties of God — tribunes and saints — to voice "divine truth" via peasant patois. She activates — verifies — this stringent secular critique that Frantz Fanon mutters:

> Every colonized people — in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality — finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (18)

Similarly, as Isabel Hoving advises, "criticism" — the act of implicit or explicit critique — "and orality are not mutually exclusive" (150). "Creole . . . is the site of conflict. It is also the site of the pleasure (of even bickering) togetherness" (150). Just as vitally, however, the redemptive reclamation of orality might also allow "some forms of criticism and reading [to] be violently dismissed" (320).

Bleakly, the project of "salvation," of requesting that the once-free "Native"[5] yield sovereignty to foreign interlopers brandishing Bibles, so that "he" — obviously savage and heathen — might become Christian, civilized, and cultured (i.e., "literate" in the interlopers' tongue),

becomes a smiley-faced project of brutally imposed (or pacifically suicidal) cultural annihilation for the Native. That "he" is delivered unto redemption by a white god, whose original tongue is Hebraic (Aramaic) plus Greek and then Latin, suggests that the Native can only ever actually be "redeemed" by becoming as white as possible by mastering the European tongue, for he or she will never be white in complexion save via generations of policed breeding or by being afflicted by vitiligo. Fanon informs us again that "The Negro . . . will be proportionately whiter — that is, he will come closer to being a real human being — in direct ratio to his mastery of the [European] language" (18).[6]

If the Bible has been the chief means by which Europe has displaced the sovereignty of peoples of colour with its crusader/conquistador proselytizing, including projecting as its chief symbol a white male figure (more congruent in complexion and phenotype with Scandinavian than Semitic peoples), also explicitly weaponized to represent the omniscient and omnipotent deity, the corrective to this oppressive propaganda is the linguistic blackening of the "guilty" theology. Although St. Thomas Aquinas deemed poetry, says Montemaggi, "'infirma inter omnes doctrinae,' lowest among forms of knowledge" (154), the critic's reading of Robin Kirkpatrick's verse finds that "poetry can be the sharpest form of . . . interpretation" (157-58), particularly of Dante.[7] Arguably, Mordecai, by translating Gospel narratives into free-verse patois in *De Man* and into unrhymed, patois-powered, Dante-reminiscent tercets in *De Book of Mary*, repulses the racialized cultural imperialism effected via the KJV — that showcase of the Shakespearean thunder and Sadean lightning bolts of a putative (and punitive) white male god.

Importantly, both Mordecai titles are subtitled *A Performance Poem*, and the subtle question in both is what Montemaggi posits: "[W]henever interpreting language theologically . . . how can we discern truth in the words before us?" (163). He resolves the interrogative in his consideration of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, wherein Dante weighs "the theological worth he believes the vernacular *as such* to have" (178). That the *Commedia* is "a sacred poem," connecting "Heaven and Earth," is evinced in its vernacular diction — that is, "in and through its vernacular instability and provisionality" (178). It is in this way, Montemaggi maintains, that "Dante's text can, truthfully, express something of the condition of humanity as created by God to exist in a world of linguistic flux" (178). That Mordecai dedicates *De Book of*

Mary to Kamau Brathwaite [5], inventor of the concept of nation language (or the unapologetic use of patois, the national vernacular), while dedicating *De Man*, in part, to Jesuit priests (including one termed her "spiritual director") [5], indicates that she, like her brother Catholic Dante, wishes to address "significant theological questions through reference to the grammatical structures of language" (Montemaggi 178n39). Mordecai redeems Jamaican patois as a language of divinity to carry out the post-colonial mission that Fanon identifies for Black intellectuals.

Also significant here is the slagging of patois — or Creole — as indicating the childlike nature of the Negro: "The Negro loves to jabber, and from this theory it is not a long road that leads to a new proposition: The Negro is just a child" (Fanon 27). Thus, Fanon insists, "A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronizing, cozening" (31). But for a Black — or Negro — to accept the use of patois, which sounds like "jabbering" or "nigger-pidgin" (34) to the European-tongue-attuned ear, is to allow oneself, Fanon warns, to be fastened to an "effigy" of oneself — to be snared, imprisoned, and made "the eternal victim of an essence, an *appearance*, for which [one] is not responsible" (35). But Montemaggi holds, *pace* his reading of Dante, that simple speech, "infant speech," is "a positive theological model" (209n81). In her heralding of patois to narrate and dramatize the historicity of Christ, in her choice of a simple-simple English that might sound like baby talk to tone-deaf ears and foolhardy minds, Mordecai reinforces Christ's own teaching in Matthew 18: 1-6 (KJV):

> At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?
>
> And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,
>
> And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.
>
> Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
>
> And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.

> But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Out of the mouths of babes, aye, there be wisdom. And in the exploitation of patois — of nation language — to reveal the theology of divinity is the power of vernacular to tunnel through ears and down deep into hearts and thus transform ways of thinking, being, and doing. Mordecai's judicious and radical focus on everyday Jamaican speech produces an extraordinarily human (and maybe humane) deity: Christianity with an Afro-Caribbean face. In her approach, too, Mordecai achieves for Black-accented English poetry, for so-called Ebonics, for African Canadian drama, a Dantean triumph, proving that "human poetry can, precisely as human poetry, be a manifestation of grace" (Montemaggi 168).

De Man and *De Book of Mary* appeared two decades apart — in 1995 and 2015 respectively — but both apply Afro-Jamaican speech to the New Testament chronicles of nuclear family, boy-wonder Jesus and the mature, charismatic, messianic, "King of the Jews," and "Son of God" Christ. *De Man* presents the reader with a glossary (79-81) for the edification of the non-Jamaican (and thus, in a political sense, anti-Christian) schooled only in Standard English; *De Book of Mary* provides, instead, a "Note" on "Language" pointing out that the reader is being presented with an accessible version of "Jamaican Creole (JC)" (123). If, as Hoving maintains, "Caribbean women's writing creates many different 'we's'" (320), then Mordecai seems to conceive not only of a "we" of Jamaican Christian (women) auditors but also of a wider constituency (or congregation) of Standard English speakers of various potential faiths (or non-faiths and/or heresies).

Nevertheless, being a Christian, Mordecai seems to accept the perspective of Harris Athanasiadis that "Scripture alone must stand against human tradition, grace alone against human rites, faith alone against human works, and Christ alone against human institutions" (47). Mordecai might seek to construct a community of feminist, postcolonialist, anti-racist, patois-savvy readers (and actors), but she must act according to her faith, which she must also animate — activate — now as a revolutionary revision of the Eurocentric and phallocentric (and classicist) interpretations of the KJV.

The Gospels According to Mordecai; Or, "It's All ~~Greek~~ Jamaican Creole to Me"

In *De Man*, Naomi (a maid to Pilate's wife) debuts Mordecai's resistive critique of white-face, King's English Christianity immediately: she knows some "people" will "go kill de man" — Jesus (9). Why?

> [I]s not a ting but
> Politricks — dat and red eye [envy].
> All dem old hypocrite —
> Seh [Say] dem is priest and nuh [don't]
> Have time fi people. (9)

More than a little envy is the motivation, in Naomi's mind, for the desire to assassinate Christ via the justice system of the Roman-controlled state. For one thing, the priests — clerics/clerks (who "have nuff book / Learning") — lack even "de power fi mek [to make] / A dead fish twitch" (10). Yet these impotents (eunuchs) confront a man, Jesus, who can allegedly "Raise dead" (10). Naomi is suspicious of the motives for the castigation and threatened execution of Christ, but Pilate's wife wants her report on these events since she is concerned that if Pilate lets Jesus die her husband "Will have no peace" (11). Naomi then reflects critically on Pilate:

> [I] Pray Jah dat my future
> Never rest with that frog-
> Face for him have neither
> Character nor courage
> Nor de commonsense [sic]
> Fi do what him wife seh. (11)

Mordecai composes her narrative as a sorority-centred duet of commentators on the plot to entrap and execute Christ. Naomi and Pilate's wife are de facto conspirators — spies — who, thanks to Naomi's gleaning of significant info (intelligence), might thus allow "Mrs. Pilate" to influence the Roman-installed, quisling governor to free or spare Jesus. Clearly, as *De Man* commences, *in medias res*, Jesus himself is in need of a saviour. Naomi perceives that Jesus is already a walking corpse, targeted for death by Orwellian forces. Every rationale that can be used to condemn the itinerant preacher is being promulgated, bruited, including the idea that he is mad — that is, a mad dog, who's gotta be put down:

Sun hot round dese here parts
Yuh know. Dat heat could fly
In a man head and turn
Him crazy. So him get
A likl [little] mix up. Dat is not
No crime. And furthermore
Dis nat [isn't] no ordinary
Crucify [Crucifixion]. Look how de
Man back bloody up!
A scourge dem scourge him . . .
Ah [I] doesn't like de looks
Of it. Dat cross is t'ree
Time bigga dan de
Normal size . . . (17)

That the state's end game is crucifixion is marked by the scourging of Jesus and the use of an oversized cross. Naomi acknowledges this insight: "Dis blood-lust business / Is a Roman rub-off" (22). Jesus is "in de midst of dark- / Ness and of politricks" (68). Her chief interlocutor, Samuel, "a disabled carpenter of Nazareth, to whom Joseph, Jesus's foster father, taught the trade" (6), reports that the weeping of women is so relentless, so torrential, as Jesus approaches his demise, that solace is utterly unavailable: "No hope / Inside that grief" (46).

The witnessing of Naomi — to Pilate's wife, to us (with sidebar, "filler" comment from Samuel) — assures us that, as Esther de Boer recognizes, women "are important witnesses: witnesses to the crucifixion, the burial, the empty tomb and the revelation about it" (45). The presence of women as account givers, as chroniclers, as scribes is magnified in *De Book of Mary*. In both dramatic poems, women are compassionate counterweights to the blood lust of patriarchs and paternalists, of macho men and misogynists. But *les femmes* also produce a counter-theology. Sonya Sharma dubs this "thealogy," a term "that came about during the second wave of feminism to reflect the meaning of Goddess in Neopagan communities" (24n5). "[T]o describe the feminine aspects of God," women "applied the term in feminist writings and literature" (24n5). While Mordecai's account of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and thus of God (or one-third of God-as-Trinity), might constitute a thealogy, so might the term gesture toward Mary Magdalen, the ex-prostitute turned pseudo-apostle of Christ, whose image "contains reminiscences of goddesses of love, wisdom and fertility" (de Boer 16).[8]

Conceivably, in *De Man*, Mordecai also articulates a quantum of thealogy by naming her heroine after the woman in the Old Testament Book of Ruth, wherein Naomi is a destitute widow who arranges for her have-not but loyal — and widowed — daughter-in-law, Ruth, to marry a rich and powerful landlord, the *baas* of the local cornfields, thus achieving a higher income bracket and status.[9] The Naomi of *De Man* is again shrewd and perceptive. Witnessing the scourging of Christ, she says, "Dem man deh [they] lashing him again. / Dem going beat out him brain. / Mash up him spine" (42). The torture is so cruel that any voyeurism ceases: "Me gone. Me cyaan [can't] look pon / No more of dis" (43). Happily — and in smart feminist fashion — Veronica, as both Naomi and Samuel report, ignores the soldiers to assist Jesus:

> Well woman brave fih [for] true.
> Dis one just arrive
> Inna de midst a [of] dem.
> Shub [shove] past foot soldier,
> Captain and centurion fi [for]
> Plant herself braps [forcibly] right in front. (36)

She then takes "One big white handkerchief" and "wipe [Jesus's] face — / so much fi [to] white and clean" (37). The distaff provides the staff of true justice and mercy.

In contrast to the central, contrapuntal discourse of Naomi and Samuel in *De Man*, *De Book of Mary* features women as speakers. Indeed, Jesus himself, whose talks, teachings, or deeds are reported by women, is permitted only a direct quotation here and there. The poem's table of contents clarifies the major roles allotted to women: "Miss Ann, Mary's Mother"; Mary's friend Esther; Mary's cousin Elizabeth; there's also "Anna's prophecy"; "Mary Magdalen addresses Mary's friend, Mariam"; and Leah marries Samuel [vii-viii]. Mordecai's text emphasizes just what Sharma sights in "*Christian femininity*" (20): "Historically, churches have been places where women are affirmed theologically and socially for right behaviour" (37), such as chastity, "appropriate body presentation and conduct, as well as married heterosexuality" (20). Mordecai's female saints model these behaviours — especially Mary but also the "redeemed" Mary Magdalen. But Mordecai's Gospel gals are also able to talk back to patriarchy: Veronica and Pilate's wife (in *De Man*), Mary and her sorority (in *De Book of Mary*). In addition to women who act as

the raconteurs, the reporters, the griots, the prophets, the apostles, and the disciples, a group of anonymous Eves faces off against a "chorus" of misogynist and, significantly, Christ-denying Adams.

Four such choruses — or verbal battles royal — occur in the text, and all feature boisterous and threatening men who attempt to silence women. The description of the scene sets up the gender dynamics: "Men in their 40s and 50s, wearing robes reminiscent of priestly garb. Women of varying ages in ordinary clothes" (1). The presentation seems to replay the apocryphal text of the young (naked bather) Susanna and the lecherous elders (judges) who try to entrap her and blackmail her into serving their depraved lusts.[10] In contrast to the efforts of the women to back the Christian salvific narrative, the men respond as hard-core realists, pragmatists, *realpolitik* types, as if Henry Kissinger (in high — war criminal — dudgeon) were rebuking Coretta Scott King: "[Jesus] and him barefoot crew was a true loony lot. // Mad master. Crack pupils. / Jesus & Company was a great comedy! / A bona fide paranoid posse" (2). The "female voices" answer:

> Paranoid how? Don't joke! Pharisee,
> Sadducee, every power-dat-be
> Was out to fix de man. . . .
>
> You all not going deny Roman officialdom
> downpressing poor colonized Jewry? (2)

The women speak to real-world problems — Rome versus Jews — while the men try to depict the women as deluded, as emotional. Yet the women are the ones to diagnose anti-Christian hysteria as being complicit with Roman anti-Semitism:

> But what a brutal, wicked thing!
> Imagine! Priest conspiring
> to murder!
>
> And a blameless man [Jesus] at dat!
> Sacrifice him to keep
> dem share of Roman power! (89)

The men retort that they are blameless, for they weren't alive "back den" (92) when the decision to crucify Jesus was made. But the women ignore

the AD status of the men, viewing their present-day macho attitudes as echoes of the sadistic sentiments of those priests and potentates who desired the execution of Jesus:

> If ever a murder was plotted
>
> and designed, engineered
> wid a scheme of pure evil in mind,
> it was butchering Mary one pickni [child]. . . .
>
> And of course,
> what a splendid climax
> for him mother to watch
>
> wid de rope
> of de cross
> round him neck! (89, 91-92)

The women liken Christ's tragic crucifixion to the pathos of a lynching,[11] but the men — cocky, cold-blooded, calculating, and callous (just like the imperial and colonial authorities of Jerusalem of 33 AD) — opine that "Mary son / did pretty much ask dem / for dat crucifixion" (91). The women suggest that phallocrats, in the manner of Dixiecrat-like preachers and politicos, being male, have seen fit "to arrange Jesus death / by Roman dispensation" (93), to work toward this end via an "outside army, / foreign politician" (93). Again, in the women's eyes, the men of today, like those of yore, are complicit with imperial anti-Semitism and establishment anti-Christianity — as if they are Fanonian compradors — a fifth column — supporting the forces of occupation, harassment, intimidation, and state execution. Such varmints — from a critical, Afrocentric perspective — are exactly like those that Malcolm X did castigate as "House Negroes" and "twentieth-century Uncle Toms" (10-11, 12). Yet they're also homicidal misogynists. Lookit, it's the phallocratic *right* to femicide that creates the precondition for the martyrdom of Jesus. The female consistory ("voices") affirms this idea:

> You name man. Dat is all and dat is everyting.
> You is judge and jury. You could stone
> any one of we til we dead anytime.

. . . You all love violence.
Dem cut your navel string
on disruption and war. (38)[12]

Another major image pattern in both *De Man* and *De Book of Mary* presents the individual believer and/or Christ versus the "mob." However, this positioning is also feminist, for Mordecai's most impressive believers are women, and her Jesus is both feminized and feminist. (Thus, the female voices instruct the male voices that "Jesus . . . did bring / a New Law. It say de likes of you / do not own none of we" [*De Book of Mary* 39].) Therefore, in *De Book of Mary*, the "Opening chorus of male and female voices" (1) is never as united as their yoking in a chorus should make each part. The first line's preceding stage direction has the female voices separated, "*Addressing the audience*," a "crowd-o-people" who will act as jurors of the male versus female debates of the poem (1). Indeed, the "audience" is the only neutral or dispassionate group that either Mordecai text acknowledges. Otherwise, crowds — hordes — are bad, raucous, rambunctious, and scathing news.

So, in *De Book of Mary*, Mary recalls the stoning of her friend Esther "by a village of ravaging dogs // wid de lust for fresh blood like a fire / up dem tail" (6). Ironically, this first martyr of the passion play — executed by men for having been the lover of a Roman centurion — is the namesake of Queen Esther, who, in Hebrew scripture, beguiled her Persian husband, King Ahasuerus, to depose and execute his genocidal minister, Haman, thus preventing the utter despoliation and extermination of Persian Jews.[13] A further irony here is that this pre-Christian martyr, Esther, perishes at the hands of a stone-age lynch mob, just as the father of Christianity — Jesus himself, also "King of the Jews" — will be crucified by a similar phalanx of (educated) phallocrats. The murder of Jesus to satisfy Mafioso-like blood lust is foreshadowed by the narrated execution of Esther. In this way, too, Christ is feminized — as a victim of male-demanded, male-propelled, and male-imaged violence (phallic thorns, whips, spikes, beams, the *coup de grâce* thrust of the phallic spear).[14] Then again Esther's pulverizing by stones foreshadows Jesus's rescue of the woman "taken in adultery" from phallocratic, hypocritical stoning (John 7:53-8:11).[15]

The threat of mechanical, macho smack-downs is a preoccupation in *De Book of Mary*. Mary's mama, Miss Ann, warns her unmarried, divinely impregnated daughter not to bruit her condition, for their

neighbours are "a barbarous lot dat worship // decree . . ." (23). She could suffer Esther's fate.[16] Ann stresses that, if gossips get hold of this nascent gospel,

> de hypocrite round here —
> dem going only too glad to stone down!
>
> If dem hear dis story
> dem going take hold of you
> cover you wid a tomb of rockstone! (27)

Mary is in peril of the injunction in Deuteronomy as relayed by Ann:

> if you making baby
> and you don't married yet
>
> for playing de whore inside your
> father house, you must stand in de door
> of dis dwelling so every last man
> in dis town can hurl rock after rock
> til you drop down stone dead. (31)

When Mary complains to "Baby-father," God, about her danger, she warns, "We don't have no connection wid fat // politician" and "no centurion . . . / to come take charge of crowd," though the Israelites are quarrelsome — "warlike" — and stage ructions (34). Soon Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt with the newborn Jesus, for Herod has unleashed gangstas — his army — to seek out "all boy pikni [children] from / two year old to just born" and "kill dem, every last one!" (54). Later, when Jesus is twelve, and the family visits Jerusalem, Mary deems it "Always one crowd of people and one set-o-noise" — of braying and baaing — so that "chaos reign" (59). Once his ministry begins, Jesus, warns Mary, has "a big / crowd-o-people pressing down pon him, / de horde of dem shouting 'Hosanna!'" (69). When Jesus casts the money changers out of the temple, "De crowd bad" (73), and the folks "push and shub [shove], swarming to reach near him" (72). Before "de heap of howling // mad Jewry," Jesus is soon condemned to die (76). First, though, "a legion / one whole battalion of soldier" ("brutes"), "spit on him, grab de rod / out him hand and lick him in him forehead — / not one time, again and again like de devil in dem" (77). Crucially, Mary and other women — "sistren" — can only weep at this gent mass-inflicted assault

(77). But the martyrdom of Christ is only the beginning of pogrom and lynching. Sho nuff: “Priestman get blind vex, // so dem do what dem know to do best, / pound [St. Stephen’s] bones to powder” (99).

The most striking contrast to the gangbanger-level, orgiastic brouhaha, perpetrated by hordes of penises or by the white-bladed pricks of the phallocrats, is the wake that women keep as Christ dies and is interred. Although the dude-disciples turn duds and flee from their dying or dead lord (think of the spiritual “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” [first printed in 1899]), women stand as sentries. Mary Magdalen reports that only she, Mariam, and Jesus’s mama, plus “Veronica and Ruth, and Elizabeth too, / and Martha,” constitute (except for the loyal disciple John, “what [Jesus] love / specially” [84]) the “pure woman around dis rootless tree” (84).

Generally, the most positive groups are met only after Christ is dead (and purportedly resurrected[17]), when Mary escapes to Ephesus to avoid “Roman official and bloodthirsty rabbi” (99), all wishing to eliminate this small, vulnerable body of the followers of Christ, a sort of “visible minority” at the time. Once in Ephesus, Mary and company “find de home church dere”: “De bredren [brethren] and sistren [sisters] take we in . . .” (102). This congregation is, well, a class of righteous goody-two-shoes. When Leah and Samuel marry, “de whole company” — the wedding party — “rejoice all de more, / and de serious eating and drinking begin” (109). On her deathbed, Mary reminisces about her son and fixes on Palm Sunday as one glorious event: “Jesus come on de scene / riding on dat jackass like a king / wid him retinue strolling longside” (114). However, she also deplores “how *so much* people // did say dem love Jesus . . . / [but] did end up / bawling out, ‘Crucify de Nazarene!’” (115; emphasis added).[18] Yessum, they were a “mob / bawling for his blood” (91).

In *De Man*, whose focus is soundly on the crucifixion, the sight of a throng is never positive. Naomi tells Samuel, in one of their early dialogues,

> Now crowd is not sinting [something]
> Me like. No sah. First ting
> Dem smell so bad.
> Next ting
> Dem carry on worser dan
> Dem stink. (14)

Samuel concurs with this denunciation: "Yuh never take a / Good good look pon man face / In a stoning crowd? Is / Not a pretty sight" (22). Naomi seconds this critique:

> every
> Crucifixion is a
> Cussing match. . . .
> De bad bwoy [boy] soldier dem
> Is royal retinue. (23)

Of course, "royal" is ironic here. The lynch-gang-like backers of Christ's execution are "vicious murderers" (32), while "Pure rowdy rude bwoy [boys] posse / Roaming bout de street" (33).

In *De Book of Mary*, Mordecai confronts misogynistic discourse — Judeo-Christian and/or puritanical — to assert her Christian feminism (*pace* Sharma's conception). First, her Mary must decide to allow herself to be impregnated by the deity. She is not a passive recipient of the divine incarnation. Her corporeal freedom is signalled by Archangel Gabriel: "Never mind old time ways, never mind / how she young, woman not nobody property. / She free to decide on her own destiny" (16). Second, being the vessel bearing the Messiah of the world, Mary herself comes to redeem matter ("fallen" creation), thus verifying the redemptions available to mere mortals and the divine origins of the matter that forms us and keeps us alive:

> Dis big angel arrive
> and de next ting I know, my whole flesh
> is on fire, and my head is a flame
>
> of bright light and my limbs swim and fly,
> and I dance wid each creature, laugh, cry,
> sing a song wid each leaf,
>
> every tree, every mountain and sea,
> every small grain of sand. (20)

Elsewhere, Mary relates,

> As Archangel take off, as him reel

out him wings, my whole body swim in
to de plenty of things for it hug
up de world, sky and sun,

lake and sea, fish, fowl, sheep,
goat and cow, crawling thing,
bush, flower, tree —
is like all creation living inside of me. (32)

Similarly, when Mary "convinces Jesus to perform the miracle at Cana" (64), to turn water into wine, she signifies again that matter is — or can be — good, positive. Perhaps Montemaggi underlines the apparent thealogy: "To be with God is not to leave behind the created order, but rather the illusion that the created order has any existence apart from God" (166). But just as Mary can be interpreted as blessing creation, so too Mary Magdalen can be seen as symbolizing "a sexual theology [emphasizing] the lived experiences of sexuality as the starting point to illuminate our understanding of scriptures and tradition," while a "*theology of sexuality* uses the scriptures and tradition literally to inform our understanding of human sexuality" (Andrew Yip, qtd. in Sharma 98). Moreover, M.M.[19] represents the fusion of "Eroticism, tragedy and power . . . brought together in this one person, so close to Christ" (de Boer 7). Together the Marys present Christianity as an instance of what C.S. Lewis insists is "almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the body — which believes that matter is good, that God Himself once took on a human body" (87-88). Mordecai's additional rebuff of fallacious phallocracy is to present Jesus's supposed rejection of organic family bonds: "Anybody dat do what God say, / dat one is my bredren, / my sistren, and my ma" (70). Although his words seem to snub Mary, the next and last stanza of "Jesus disses his family" (69-70) clarifies that he is just acting the rhetorician: "And Jesus find my two eye dem / wid him own. Him look straight / in my face, and him wink" (70).

The Proof Is in the Performance

A passion play is a drama re-enacting Christ's arrest, imprisonment, trial, scourging, mocking, crucifixion, and resurrection (Holman 380). The passion is in Christ's suffering, which is gruelling, macabre, spectacular, mortifying, dreadful, Gothic, terrifying, and death defy-

ing temporarily and then, for believers, literally and eternally. That Mordecai's "performance poems" centre relentlessly on these plot fundamentals is perhaps not enough to render her works more than closet dramas (Holman 103), "mere" poems whose only stage is the theatre of each reader's imagination. In fact, arguably, *De Man* is more a folk ballad (more Bob Marley maybe than Bob Dylan) than it is anything else. Its structure consists of fourteen scenes of dialogue between the invented characters of Samuel and Naomi, who witness Christ's passion. The initial-majuscule lines of their versed conversations usually utilize no more than six or seven syllables each but can't be justly read (recited) as accentual-syllabic. Rather, they are accentual, with two or three beats (accents) delivered unevenly across each line. Their Jamaican English is reminiscent of the drumming stresses and coloratura monosyllables of Old English and Norse, so that the Jamaicanized, "fictionalized" scripture ought to be received almost as alliterative verse — *Beowulf* as sung by Bunny Wailer — I mean as a kind of fluid staccato. The look of each page? A skinny column — just as in many Bibles, save that most of them employ a couple of columns per page, whereas a newspaper will make do with three or more.

In *De Book of Mary*, one is even less in the realm of pure drama, of theatre, for Mordecai's unrhymed tercets recall Dante Alighieri and his epic trilogy, *La Divina commedia*. Moreover, Mordecai is likely being competitive versus her Carib "bro" and Nobel laureate Derek Walcott, who uses slant-rhymed tercets — also shadowing Dante — in his epic poem, *Omeros* (1990). The back cover of *De Book of Mary* informs us that the work is "an epic poem in Jamaican Creole based on the Biblical story of Mary." In this manner, too, by producing Aramaic as the "gutter talk" of Jesus (87), Mordecai affirms an allegiance — or sound likeness — to the divine vernacular of Dante while also perhaps critiquing the greater formalism of Walcott, his general preference for Standard English rather than Creole (though it doth show up — is sounded — in *Omeros*). But there's a classical virtue in Walcott that Mordecai also gestures toward: that is, his Aristotelian desire to be a poet of lyric, a poet of epic, and a poet of drama (tragic and comic). And not just to wish but also to accomplish: Walcott's verse-plays have been produced around the Caribbean and in England, Canada, and the United States.[20] Mordecai would know this, or should know this, and though she has

scribed "epic" poems and/or closet dramas, she simultaneously offers us texts self-described as "performance poems" meant to be acted.

Upon reaching out to Mordecai via the internet, I received her recollected accounts of the productions (or her own enacted readings) of the works. Here is her primary list, from e-mails to me of 8 and 9 August 2018:

> The first reading from de Man took place at the IFOA[21] in 1995 — a few sections, maybe 15 mins is all, to nuff JA folks in di audience. The next reading in Canada was I think on Good Friday in 1996 at the Church of St Thomas Aquinas, U of Toronto, in conjunction with U of Toronto's Gospel Choir.
> I read Naomi and Keith Lowe read Samuel. . . . We read excerpts, rather than the entire play. . . .
>
> **2015**[22]
> Launch of *De Book of Mary* on November 10th [—] an individual launch, which meant that I could do a good chunk of reading.
> *That it was launched at Beit Zatoun*[23] *was wonderfully ironic!*
>
> **2016**
> Plasticine Reading Series, January 17th [Toronto]
> National Reading Campaign Black History Month Event, February 26th, Hamilton
> VERSeFest in Ottawa
> The Tree Reading Series event on March 16th
> Jamaican launch on 11th June . . . at Sts Peter & Paul Church Hall, Hope Road,
> Kingston 8
> *Two other women read with me at this event, one as Mary, the other as Mary Magdalen.*
> Congress of Black Women Waterloo Region Annual Tea Party, June 2 . . .
> Lakefield Literary Festival [Lakefield, ON]
> Reading on Sunday, 17th July
> *[P]art of the Sunday service at Lakefield United Church. Supported by a soloist and the homilist.*
> The Word On The Street Toronto festival, Sunday, September 25 at the Great Books Marquee
> *The MC expressed wonder, in the course of her introduction, as to why anyone would be wanting to write about the subject.* (*One of the other*

readers thought the comments most inappropriate.) As ever, though, the Creole did its thing. . . .
Thin Air Festival, Winnipeg
Reading on Wednesday, September 28th at About Town event.
This deserves a likl note[:] We worked hard to stitch this together as a community event, circulating the text of the first Chorus to volunteers in the Caribbean community in the hope that there would be Caribbean voices supporting my individual readings. The women came well prepared and read well. . . . Not so much the men! It was a noble but not especially successful effort!
Mainstage, final event, Thursday, Sept 29, 7:30 pm
[T]he final act at this event, involving several of the event participants[, but I read solo].

2017
Rowers Pub Series at Supermarket in Kensington Market [Toronto], April 4th
ReLit Reading in Hamilton, ON, 7 May . . . at 7:30 pm
Mikinaakominis/Trans Canadas Conference, U of Toronto, May 26.
AlieNation: Multicultural Poetry Reading, May 27, Ryerson University [Toronto].
"Deliberate Vulgarity: Writing the [D]emotic", U of British Columbia, November 15th, 12:30-1:30 pm
Kwantlen Polytechnic University [Surrey, BC], November 16

2018
Atwater Poetry Project, Montreal, 10 May

Several points arise from this compendium of a *paucity* of stage productions of either Mordecai "gospel" but of a *cornucopia* of readings, sometimes dramatic and involving at least one other voice beyond the poet's — plus, once or twice, a chorus. First, Mordecai is attentive to the demands or interests of Jamaican or Caribbean audiences (e.g., the IFOA reading in 1995, the Sts. Peter and Paul Church Hall reading in Jamaica in 2016, and the Thin Air Festival reading in Winnipeg, also in 2016). Second, she has attempted to integrate other voices (e.g., the 1996 Good Friday reading of *De Man* utilizing a gospel choir; the 2016 Jamaican reading of *De Book of Mary* featuring two other women; the 2016 Lakeland Literary Festival reading employing both "a soloist and a homilist" — or a singer and a preacher; and the 2016 Thin Air Festival

in which "Caribbean" women assisted Mordecai but the guys were missing in action or no-goes or no-can-dos). Third, Mordecai's demotic dramatizations of the passion of Christ have aroused controversy and/or academic interest (e.g., the comments of the master of ceremonies at the 2016 Word on the Street literary festival in Toronto and the invitation to Mordecai to speak about "Deliberate Vulgarity: Writing the Demotic" at the University of British Columbia in 2016). I suggest that *De Man* — as a veritable passion play — and *De Book of Mary* — as an epyllion (a mini epic) must both be performed aloud to achieve their greatest effects, but the addition of music would also be — pun intended — instrumental.

The need for actual staged performances and/or productions is underscored in another e-mail from Mordecai:

> There has never been a production, nay even reading, of the whole work [*De Book of Mary*].
>
> As for [*De Man*], there have been at least 6 readings (performances?) of the whole poem in Canada (3 in Calgary, with Jamaican Howard Gallimore as Samuel; one in Norris Point, Newfoundland, with Martin [Mordecai, Pamela's husband] as Samuel; one in St John's, again with Martin, at MUN's [Memorial University of Newfoundland's] CITL [Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning] facility as part of the taping of my oeuvre for archival purposes; one in Kitchener, again with Martin as Samuel). The readings in Calgary and Kitchener were part of church services in Lent. In one case in Calgary, and in the case of the Kitchener reading, the poem constituted the main part of the Good Friday church service. . . .
>
> The complete work [of *De Man*] has had about eight "performances" in Jamaica, most of them not involving me and some unbeknown to me and/or the publisher. . . . [T]here may have be[en] more than I know, since *de Man* is performed there as often as not without permission, and I hear of readings after they have been done. I understand that it has been performed on radio, but I have never made certain. I have taken part in three of the Jamaican readings, (1) with Orville Shields SJ as Samuel when it was read as the gospel at mass at the official launch of the book in Jamaica, and (2) and (3) with Cowal Lyn as Samuel in 2 pre-publication readings at the university church of St Thomas Aquinas whose pastor "commissioned" the work by inviting me to write "something for Good Friday." (There's a note on that in the text. . . .) *The only full*

> *production, with costumes and props, using the church as a stage, was directed by Eugene Williams, former director of the School of Drama at the Edna Manley College of the Performing Arts, on Good Friday 2015* [emphasis added]. It took place at Sts Peter and Paul Church in Kingston. (E-mail to the author, 5 Aug. 2018)

This fuller list of recollected stagings and/or productions registers the fairly frequent — also maybe unauthorized — productions of *De Man*, while mainly authorial recitations of *De Book of Mary* have been permitted. They might both be "performance poems," but *De Man* is treated as the performance piece,[24] whereas *De Book of Mary* is received as a poem. In addition, the crucifixion is the centrepiece of *De Man*, but Jesus gotta share space with Mary in *De Book of Mary*. The female voices underscore the fact: "And is her [Mary's] story, yes, / but her son is de star" (117). So (Jamaican and/or Caribbean) Christians pick up *De Man* but presumably decide that interest in Mary must peter out with the nativity, relegating her (because of sexism?) to a secondary position. Yet the pronounced feminist slant (or angle) of *De Book of Mary* is precisely why it needs to be staged loudly and flamboyantly. In an e-mail to me, Mordecai states that "Jesus was the original feminist. Women [in his/His view] have status, agency and his deep affection" (5 Aug. 2018).[25] Elsewhere, Mordecai identifies Jesus as a transgender, multiracial figure of liberation: "[H]e is Ghandi [sic], Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero, Rigoberta Menchú . . . , Malala Yousafzai. He is good people everywhere, working for a better world" ("In Pamela Mordecai's Work" 3). To see the latter work on stage is to envision a gynocentric Jesus, whose chief companions are women — "black, brown, and beige" (to refer to the title of the Duke Ellington-composed tone poem featuring Mahalia Jackson on vocals), whose tongue, Jamaican Creole, sounds like Christ's own Aramaic, or "just Greek," to ears attuned to Standard English. To stage either work is to decentre Caucasian, Occidental Christianity, to both blacken and feminize it, to give the church a Ma Rainey-style "Black bottom" or an Amiri Baraka-style "Black ass." Mordecai knows the radical nature of these texts: "The creole [sic], the first thing created (within little more than a generation, some theorize), by transatlantic Africans, 'vulgarizes' the [Gospel] story, invigorates and grounds it. So Mary is every Caribbean teenager fallen [seduced] by some unnameable man, and Walter Rodney[26] is a Jesus figure" (E-mail to the author, 5 Aug. 2018).

In addition, she understands that "Performance poetry makes an audience into a community" and that "patwa [patois] and performance can't be separated" ("In Pamela Mordecai's Work" 3). To reinvigorate Bible stories for a post-colonial, Caribbean, and "coloured" Christianity, with a sistren or womanist focus, it is necessary to translate "em" into the vulgar tongue, the vernacular idiom.[27] "The newness is in the patwa in which they [the stories] resurrect," Mordecai suggests ("In Pamela Mordecai's Work" 3). Finally, this patwa/patois ain't no good unless "it lives . . . fully in the mouth of a performer or performers" (3).[28]

Revelation

Faithful Reader, that's just like the Word of God, ain't it? Meaningless if silent, transformative if sung? Best get Mordecai on stage, y'all!

Notes

[1] One may read the pronoun as "His."

[2] Feel free to read Christian as "Xn."

[3] I prefer "post-colonial" to "postcolonial" because I cannot permit the violences (plural) of imperialism and the attempts to ameliorate it — or overthrow it — to be smoothed away and dissolved by pretending that the splits between occupiers/colonizers and occupied/colonized are only hairline fractures, not abysmal gulfs.

[4] "Brathwaite explains that nation language is the English spoken by those [African slaves] brought to the Caribbean" (Hoving 335n2). Mordecai observes that Brathwaite has "demonstrated the artistic possibilities of *patwa*, which I like to call my 'heart language' — a term Bible translators use" ("Poetic Prisms"). She goes on to say that "Kamau showed me how to be truly vulgar, as in the Latin root of the word, *vulgaris*, 'of or pertaining to the common people.' . . . He helped me recognize how brilliant poetry could be as unrestrained [oratorical] spectacle" ("Poetic Prisms").

[5] I use the term to refer to all classically native/slave/"other" versus conquistador/slave master/settler situations. It is not *necessarily* synonymous with "Indigenous."

[6] Fanon's teacher, poet Aimé Césaire, alerts us to "the dishonest equations *Christianity = civilization*, *paganism = savagery*" (11).

[7] Mordecai gifts *De Man* to "the parishioners of St Thomas Aquinas Church, Papine, Jamaica" [5]. Ironically, she rebukes Aquinas's vision of poetry by repurposing the poetic speech of Jamaican congregants gathered "under his name" — or, if that seems to be tacitly blasphemous, under a roof that carries his name.

[8] Mordecai is currently at work on a third "performance poem," "The Book of Joseph." One expects that it will present Mother Mary's husband from a feminist/womanist perspective.

[9] See the Book of Ruth (KJV).

[10] See the version of the story related in "Susanna."

[11] Cf. Athanasiadis: "Justice is a crucified slave in the world" (224).

[12] Thus, Mordecai names Man-the-Murderer-of-Woman as being kin to Man-the-Murderer-of-God (in mortal guise). She acts, in the terms of Athanasiadis, as a "theologian of the cross," one who "recognizes reality as it truly is," that this world — this phallocracy — "is one of evil, suffering, misery, and affliction" (49).

[13] See the Book of Esther (KJV). Significantly, witnesses Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther's position as a woman in a male court mirrors that of the Jews in a Gentile world, with the threat of danger ever present" (332). Clearly, Mordecai's character Esther experiences male violence while all Jews are living under (or with or through) Roman occupation.

[14] Another feminine parallel is presented when, in mirror image to the fetus in Elizabeth's womb that jumps up when Elizabeth sees the pregnant Mary (43), the cross of Christ, with him upon it, also jumps as it is dropped into a hole (97). Like a babe in a belly is Christ on the cross.

[15] Esther de Boer asserts that Jesus "speaks just as easily of the pains of giving birth, leaven, salt, light, water, and keeping the house clean, as he does of stewardship, keeping sheep, fishing and being a father" (37). Christ's rhetoric mingles feminized and masculinized metaphors.

[16] Premarital sex and adultery are sins in Christianity because, says one of Sharma's interlocutors, "The personal decision to have sex is an oxymoron in the church. . . . [I]t is a society decision" (51).

[17] Yes, I'm playing at objectivity, but Montemaggi seems to be uncanny here: "Before the mystery of salvation the distinction between fiction and nonfiction collapses" (202).

[18] Mordecai also employs "massive" — as a noun — to denote a brutish assembly (71, 75, 81).

[19] *Not* Marilyn Monroe — this time!

[20] Cf. Walcott, *Odyssey* (1993), which employs slant rhyme and Creole lingo — and the blues — now and then, here and there.

[21] IFOA stands for the International Festival of Authors, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto (an annual event).

[22] All boldface, italic, and underlining are Mordecai's devices.

[23] A Palestinian-branded event space in downtown Toronto, shuttered since 2017 because of gentrification — "condominium-ification" — of the neighbourhood.

[24] Notably, *De Man* has had one full production — on Good Friday, 2015 — in Kingston, Jamaica.

[25] In an interview with Jacqueline Bishop, Mordecai elaborates that "I'm very much a disciple captivated by Jesus, for one thing because of the status he accorded women, beginning with his mother. In a huge break with tradition, Jesus made them persons with agency, striking individual selves, from the anonymous woman caught in adultery, to Magdalen, who washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, to Martha, the enabler, and Mary, the one who was mindfully present" ("In Pamela Mordecai's Work" 2-3).

[26] Rodney was a pan-Africanist intellectual: Marxist informed, Fanonian in clarity. Born in Georgetown, Guyana, in 1942, he was assassinated there, via car bomb, in 1980.

[27] Ntozake Shange achieves a feminist, secular, vernacular "performance poem" in her *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf: A Choreopoem* (1977). Note her subtitle!

[28] Like that of Bob Dylan, Mordecai's "verbal art [evades] the straightjacket of fundamentalist rhetoric" (Scobie 46).

Appendix: Pamela Mordecai's Selected Bibliography

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