

I AM BECOMING MY MOTHER

Lorna Goodison. London: New Beacon Books, 1986.

Deborah Jurdjevic

Lorna Goodison sowed the seeds for her second volume of verse in *Tamarind Season* (published by the Institute of Jamaica, 1980). The themes she established in that first volume -- a concern for continuities, for deeply integral harmonies between human kind and the natural world, for true identities -- these ripen and bear their fine fruit in *I Am Becoming My Mother*.

It is a mark of Goodison's stature as a poet that her preoccupation with the past draws on an enormous and very much in-the-present vitality: "To My Mother (May I inherit half her strength)" -- which finds its place in both volumes -- "Lepidopterist," "Farewell Our Trilogy," and "Guinea Woman" all reflect this blend, while the title poem, "I Am Becoming My Mother," "My Will," and "On Becoming a Mermaid" show an appreciation of the interrelatedness of death and life.

Goodison's concern with continuities begins most often with the immediate and the actual and finishes frequently at the point where myth and history acknowledge one another: "the jed-bead warts/ that itched when the rain set up," on the cheeks of an unseen great grandmother; or the bedspread of Winnie Mandela, confiscated by the South African police, but woven by makers who "knotted notes of hope/ in each strand/ and selvedged the edges with/

ancient blessings/older than any white man's coming."

As though to underline the significance of continuities in *I Am Becoming My Mother*, Goodison's first piece is titled "My Last Poem;" and although it summarizes the past and laments a cold and empty present, its ends look forward to new beginnings, to a poem where the poet, her voice gone sardonic, will use the word "love," because since love has used her, she would return the courtesy. "My Last Poem" introduces both poet and the individual poems which follow. The imagery is personal, often domestic. The poet sees herself as a craftswoman and a homemaker. Her poetry requires a "rough edge for honing/ a soft cloth for polishing/ and a houseproud eye."

Underneath the summary account of the poet's achievements runs a central religious metaphor which sees life itself as a journey. Goodison's poet wonders, in the cold season marked by her father's death, where the next year will find her, "in whose vineyard toiling." And since man does not live by bread alone, the poet gives, to her son, the poem, the chronicle of her many lives: "daughter, sister, mistress, friend, warrior/ wife/ and a high holy ending for the blessed/ one/ me as mother to a man." The primary emphasis is on family relationships. "Daughter" heads the list; "wife" gets a line to itself, "me as mother to a man," is a whole line.

The poems which follow explore those relationships. In "Garden of the Women Once Fallen" the flowers are women to whom the poet offers redemption. "The Tightropewalker" is an extended metaphor for the mistress who must balance her life to make room for her

love. "Nanny," surely one of the best in the volume, celebrates woman as hero and as warrior, a keeper of the consciousness of the race:

*And when my training was over
they circled my waist with
pumpkin seeds
and dried okra, a traveller's
jigida
and sold me to the traders
all my weapons within me.
I was sent, tell that to history.*

*When your sorrow obscures the
skies
other women like me will rise.*

That rough stone which the poet remembered polishing in "My Last Poem," is many faceted. Each of these poems shines with its own light, and each poem lights another, for her vision of the world we all inhabit is an harmonious one. The harmony carries over into cover design: Goodison's paintings are the basis for the woman who seems to be both full blown plant and the seed in *Tamarind Season*, and for blue/green woman who merges with a landscape of sea and sky on the cover of *I Am Becoming My Mother*.

In an interview with Anne Walmsley (in *Africa Events*, May 1985) Goodison defined a good poet as one who had learned to listen. Her "measure for a good poem is when it doesn't sound as if the person was talking, as opposed to listening." It may be this attitude which accounts for the naturalness of her poetry, the seeming ease with which important things are said. And this is, perhaps, the mark of all great art.



THE DRAMAS OF HROTSVIT OF GANDERSHEIM

Katharina M. Wilson. Saskatoon: Peregina Publishing Co., 1985.

Ann M. Hutchison

Once upon a time, in the northern land, a noble virgin, whose name was remembered from the distant past to be Hrotsvit, was born among the Saxon people. This learned lady sang divinely inspired love songs; in skillful verses, she recounted holy lives of martyrs and the deeds of priests. Phoebus, looking down on her labours, heaped well-deserved honours upon her and, with eternal praise,

made her the tenth in the sacred number of sisters.

This Latin encomium, written by an admirer at the turn of the 15th century, tells of Hrotsvit, a 10th-century canoness of the Abbey of Gandersheim, who had for many centuries passed into oblivion. In 1493, she was virtually rediscovered when the German humanist Conrad Celtes found a manuscript of her works, written in Latin, among the books of the monks in the monastery of St. Emmeram in Regensburg. Celtes edited the legends, plays, and epics contained in the manuscript and circulated them among his friends and fellow scholars, who responded to this "second Sappho" with great enthusiasm.

When they were published in 1501, Hrotsvit's works generated an even wider interest, and once again in our own century her writings have attracted scholarly attention, both in Europe and in North America. Since 1900, there have been three editions of her works, and, in addition to translations of individual plays, there have been three complete English translations of the dramas. With Katharina M. Wilson's *The Dramas of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim*, we have a fourth English translation.

The woman who has generated all this interest, Hrotsvit,¹ as Wilson, reverting to the Old Saxon nominative form of her name, has chosen to call her, was born about 935 of aristocratic parentage. She was thus eligible to live in the royal foundation of Gandersheim, a small, independent community of unmarried noble women, ruled by women, in which learning and intellectual activity were cultivated. While the nuns of Gandersheim took strict monastic vows, as a canoness Hrotsvit had greater personal freedom -- a canoness could retain private wealth, buy books, entertain guests, and come and go with relative freedom. In a recent study,² Peter Dronke speculates that Hrotsvit spent some of her early years at the court of Otto I, where she would have come into contact with the brilliant scholar Rather, who had been invited to give Bruno, Otto's brother, advanced literary teaching. Dronke draws particular attention to Rather's distinctive style of rhymed prose, to which that of Hrotsvit bears a notable similarity. At Gandersheim, Hrotsvit would have had an opportunity to study the major authors both pagan and Christian — Virgil, Lucan, Horace, Ovid, Terence, Prudentius, Fortunatus, Boethius, Priscian, St. Jerome, St. Augustine — and would have participated in literary exchanges with learned men. Through friendship with her abbess, Gerberga II, the Emperor's niece, Hrotsvit would have maintained contact with the imperial court and its intellectual milieu.

In such an environment, Hrotsvit's particular talents were fostered and nourished. Her known writings include eight legends in verse based on lives of the Virgin, of Christ, and of six saints and martyrs; six plays in rhymed prose dealing with themes of conversion and martyrdom; and two historical epics, one on the deeds of Otto I, and the other on the foundation and early history of Gandersheim. In addition, she wrote prefaces and dedications to her works,

and a brief hexameter composition on the Apocalypse which forms the conclusion to her book of plays.

Part of her aim in these writings is to put the role and culture of the Ottonian dynasty into a Christian context and to show the way to heavenly bliss. More importantly, she is concerned to make use of her gift -- or talent, as she refers to it, echoing the biblical parable -- to demonstrate the strength and capabilities of women. In her Preface to the Dramas, Hrotsvit in a veiled pun speaks of herself as "ego Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis," or "I, the strong voice of Gandersheim," a statement that long ago Jacob Grimm showed to be the Latin equivalent of her own name in Old Saxon: Hruot = clamor = voice; suid = validus = strong. Indeed, this voice has been acclaimed by generations of critics: in the organization of her legends and dramas, Dronke, for example, observes "the boldest and most elaborate compositional design in Carolingian or Ottonian literature and art."

With *The Dramas*, Wilson, author of numerous studies on Hrotsvit, provides a translation and discussion of what she elsewhere terms "Hrotsvit's most important (because most original) creation."³ In her introduction, she points out that Hrotsvit's "dramatic intentio seeks to counteract the noxious effects of Terence's comedies by attempting to gain both intellectual and emotional assent to the monastic ideal." Describing her own translation, Wilson states: "I have tried to provide the reader with a taste of Hrotsvit's style by including some of the *figurae* and tropes... as well as by translating the dramas in rhymed rhythmic prose... I also opted for retaining her terse, occasionally elliptic stichomythic dialogue in preference to a perhaps more idiomatic but also longer and more discursive rendering." Indeed, Wilson's translation of the six plays and the concluding poem on the Apocalypse is impressive. She has managed to capture in English the flavour of Hrotsvit's rhymed prose, whether it be the cut and thrust of a fast-paced dialogue, or the pathos of a recognition scene.

It would be a pleasure to be able to recommend the volume as a whole as positively as the actual translation, but unfortunately this is not possible. I can only surmise that this book has been prepared in great haste, as the edition is riddled with errors of every kind. Throughout the edition, and particularly in the Introduction, footnotes are missing, misnumbered, or not indicated in

the text. The bibliographical references, both in the footnotes and in the Bibliography at the end of the edition, are unreliable or non-existent. The nine citations to Edwin Zeydel in the Bibliography serve as a sample of recurrent problems: only two — the second and the seventh — are correct. In the seven others, volume numbers (first, third and fifth), dates (fourth and ninth), or page references (fourth and eighth) are omitted or incorrect; or the titles are not accurately quoted (fourth and sixth). Spelling errors abound: the running title of the second play appears as "The Martydom..."; "Fides", in the title of the final play, is missing its "F"; Hrotsvit's discoverer Celtes becomes Celtis, and so on.

The text of the Introduction, though learned, also bears marks of carelessness. A few examples follow: on both pages 16 and 17 Celtes discovers the Emmeram codex (the manuscript of Hrotsvit's works), but at the first mention 1494 is given as the date, while at the second, the correct 1493 is cited. In discussing the organization of Hrotsvit's works, Wilson demonstrates the link between the legends and the dramas; she also claims a connection between the concluding poem of Book II and the two epics. Since this is a view not generally held, a fuller discussion would be helpful. And though she touches on the relationship between the apocalyptic vision of John and only one of the epics, she states that the connection is to both.

Textual problems consist of mistranslations and omissions — which should have been caught in a careful reading of page proofs.⁴ The 35-hexameter poem, "St. John," appears with only 34 lines: lines 26 and 27 have been con-flated; it also contains two errors of translation: "lay open" should read "lie open" (L. *patent*), "twice twelve stars" should be "twice six stars" (L. *Bis senum*). In *The Martyrdom of Agapes, Chionia, and Hirena*, "so-eternal" in the speech of Agapes should read "co-eternal" (L. *coaeterno*), and in the same play, a line is omitted after the last speech of Sisinnius (misspelled "Sissinus") in the penultimate scene. In *The Conversion of the Harlot Thais*, Pafnutius says "neither is the body mortal like the soul" (p. 94); he should say "immortal" (L. *spiritalis*). And so on.

In her section on Hrotsvit in *Medieval Women Writers*, Wilson avoids such problems. There the introduction is logically and clearly presented, the text is generally free from errors, and the

notes and bibliography are accurate and more extensive. In fact, as the editor of this anthology, Wilson shows herself capable of sensitive, intelligent, and careful work. By contrast, the failures of the present edition are the more glaring. This is particularly unfortunate since the book is published by a Canadian press, the Peregrina Publishing Company of Saskatoon, and is the kind of project one would wish to encourage.

Wilson, moreover, gives very little hint of her motives in preparing this new translation of the plays. How does this version differ from or supplant the other three translations made this century? What is the stage history of the plays? There is no mention of productions in Paris and London late last century and early this, nor do we learn whether Bonfante's translation, intended for the stage, has ever been so used.

Though she mentions Hrotsvit's rhetorical practices, Wilson simply lists highly technical terms, certainly not familiar to the average reader, and some not even common in scholarly circles. Surely examples would enhance the discussion, and brief definitions of the terms would be both an aid and a courtesy.

Indeed, the powerful dialogue, whether it be angry or tender, the subtlety of characterization, and most of all the intelligence informing them, make Hrotsvit's plays important. More than 1000 years after it was first heard, the forceful voice of Gandersheim still speaks to us; and there is no doubt that it deserves -- and with 1000 years in which technology and knowledge have developed, it should have been given -- a commensurate medium.

¹ The form "Hrotsvitha" is perhaps most commonly used today, while earlier writers chose the variant "Roswitha".

² *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (+203) to Marguerite Porete (+1310)* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984).

³ "The Saxon Canoness: Hrotsvit of Gandersheim" in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 34.

⁴ I have compared Wilson's text with H. Homeyer's edition (*Hrotsvithae Opera*. München, Paderborn, Wien: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1970) on which her translation is based.

FACE VALUE: THE POLITICS OF BEAUTY

Robin Tolmach Lakoff and Raquel L. Scherr. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.

Linda Hunter

Face Value: The Politics of Beauty by Robin Lakoff and Raquel Scherr is an insightful and timely introductory reader which comes to terms with our taken-for-granted notions of the concept of beauty. In an intelligent and witty style the authors discuss and expand upon three separate, yet interdependent themes which are of central importance to such a concept. The history, psychology and politics of beauty are presented and discussed in a manner which adequately satisfies the interests of both academic and general readers.

Beginning with their personal childhood memories of the pains and joys associated with beauty and commenting on perceptions about women and beauty in adult life, Lakoff and Scherr convince us of the necessity of bringing a concept — which at one time was considered taboo in feminist circles — out of the closet and into the literature. As these authors state themselves, "Fairy tale, cautionary tale, romance — all lure us into the beauty-is-power paradox. We have to understand the force of that myth over all of us in order to free ourselves from it, to become politically effective in a true way."

In their first section, Lakoff and Scherr introduce and expand upon many

of the myths that have been and continue to be associated with beauty. It is pointed out that myths reveal a great deal about how we want beauty to function symbolically for us. The existence of the "most beautiful woman in the world" (Miss Universe) or the notion that "beauty is allied with innocence, virtue and stupidity" (dumb blond) are two of the myths which the authors challenge with both realistic statements and countermyths. Lakoff and Scherr question our perceptions and classifications of beauty in order to understand the power that these myths wield over the centuries.

Feminine perfection has regularly been represented in art and literature, from the Greek goddess Aphrodite 4000 years ago, through the Roman Venus, to this month's captivating model on the cover of *Vogue*. Chapter 3 "The Representation of Venus" and Chapter 4 "Beauty in Our Time" are particularly insightful with regard to understanding "beauty and its vicissitudes across time and space." The "neat beauty," the "wild beauty," the "temptress," the "innocent beauty," the beauty of the "thin, childlike figure" or "matronly, buxom, womanly body" are some of the varying representations that Venus has endured over the ages. Lakoff and Scherr analytically interpret the myriad of ideal beauties by descriptively and visually contrasting these symbols of Venus which have been sculptured and painted throughout history. In modern times it is the camera which has become the vehicle for symbolizing true beauty. The "professional beauty" must be made

to look good in front of the camera, her photogeneity uniting her with the cover of glossy fashion magazines. Yet, her airbrushed figure blurs the boundaries between illusion and reality, leaving us with feelings of deep dissatisfaction if we do not somehow live up to the expectations our culture seems to hold for us (at least in terms of our representation in the media). The authors candidly expand on this theme:

Today, beauty is pure illusion made to look invitingly common...The explosion of the visual media can be lethal for women since it opens up unrealistic expectations. The message we are given daily by the myriad images of beauty is that women must look a certain way to be loved and admired — to be worth anything.

This rapid and widespread proliferation of the goddess of fashion and beauty reflect and produce the mass democratization of social attitudes and values regarding beauty.

Beauty has become big business and the fashion industry has developed schemes that present the up-to-date style in appealing ways for all. Lakoff and Scherr demonstrate how fashions and fads intrinsic to a particular culture and time period provide insight into socio-political ideology and sentiment. According to the authors, "the pendulum of beauty swings along with the pendulum of politics." With detailed examples of fashions, well-known models and actresses, *Face Value* illustrates how fashion and beauty reflect rapidly changing social attitudes. At the end of the 1930s, for example, beauty