AGING IN THE WORKS OF WOMEN CANADIAN WRITERS

Clara Thomas

'She's got an amazing constitution, your mother. One of those hearts that just keeps on working, whatever else is gone.'

A pause, and then Marvin replies.

'She's a holy terror,' he says.

Listening, I feel like it is more than I could now reasonably have expected out of life, for he has spoken with such anger and such tenderness.[1]

En étudiant les caractères de femmes âgées décrits dans les romans d'écrivaines canadiennes, l'auteure remarque que les vieilles grands-mères détiennent la vitalité alors que les mères, encore relativement jeunes, forment un ensemble plutôt triste, et sont toutes à des degrés différents, des obstacles à l'épanouissement de leurs filles. La qualité permanente à laquelle toute auteure aspire dans ses caractères, c'est l'engagement envers la vie. Les terreurs saintes, les grands-mères, la détiennent; c'est sur elle que sont basées les actions des mères héroïques et créatives. Les mères tristes, malades et dérangées la dénient en elles-mêmes et chez leurs filles. Vieillir, ce n'est pas tant ce qui compte, mais bien plutôt le droit de choisir et de vivre pleinement et librement.

At the very end of a long and bitter life Hagar Shipley has found grace and peace within herself. When she overhears her son, Marvin, speaking to the nurse, she has just told him the lie that he always needed to hear, "You've been good to me, always. A better son than John." Its telling was one of the first — and free — acts of her entire lifetime, "spoken at least and at last with what may perhaps be a kind of love."

Marvin speaks the popular cliché, the "holy terror" image which sets the old apart from their infirmities and our pain and loss, transforming them into "characters" whose eccentricities are valued as manifestations of stubborn, surviving will and spirit. But Hagar, listening, knows the path of painful self-exploration she has travelled. She knows, too, that she is indeed both holy and a terror. The chasm between what Marvin means by his words and what Hagar knows, is there to be bridged by the reader's understanding of her pilgrimage, its rich meaning a culminating power of *The Stone Angel.*

Backward in time from Hagar Shipley, uncomplicated by comparison but still a powerful literary figure, is Adeline Whiteoak, the matriarch of *Jalna.* She is the vital centre of Mazo de la Roche's prize-winning novel of 1926, though as the series continued, finally

becoming a long drawn-out dynastic romance, her son, Renny, eclipsed her. Much of the power of *Jalna,* however, resides in the fierce old woman, a "holy terror" who dominates and bullies all those around her and whose portrayal must be considered de la Roche's *tour de force.* With Boney, her parrot, perched on her shoulder squawking rude oaths, her stick ever as ready to beat an offending nephew as to pound the floor in a raging tantrum, and her bizarre Victorian costuming of ringlets, shawls, petticoats, and jewels, old Adelaide is a feared and fearsome centre to the life of Jalna swirling around her. Her vitality makes the book hum, its essence, like Hagar's, a strong survivor's will and an equally strong surviving pleasure in life's sensual gratifications. Old and physically decrepit, she still enjoys her present and her past, from her warm — and, in fact, lascivious — memories of her turbulent married life with Philip to her greedy delight in the food she eats.

> She held up her plate, shaking a good deal. Uncle Nicholas, her eldest son, who sat beside her, took it from her and passed it to Renny, who tipped the plate until the ruddy juice collected in a pool at the end. He put two spoonfuls of this over the square of bread. 'More, more,' ordered Grandmother, and he trickled a third spoonful.[2]

By any logical or human reckoning Adeline Whiteoak is a terrible old woman. She is malicious and cruel, manipulating all the family around her and despising all of them except Renny. But her energy flames through the book, providing its living centre, demanding and receiving our respect, however grudging. At the end, celebrating her hundredth birthday, she is still stubbornly committed to living and capable of quick rejuvenation.

> In a pool of serene radiance, Grandmother sat. A black velvet cloak, lined with crimson silk, had been thrown about her shoulders; her hands, glittering with rings, rested on the top of her gold-headed ebony stick.... One hundred years old! She was frightened suddenly by the stupendousness of her achievement.... She gathered her wits about her. 'Somebody,' she said thickly, 'somebody kiss me — quick!'...
>
> Grandmother peered, grinning, to see which of them it was, then, recognizing Pheasant, she clasped the girl to her breast. From that hug she gathered new vitality. Her arms grew strong. She pressed Pheasant's young body to her and planted warm kisses on her face. 'Ha,' she murmured, 'that's good!' And again — 'Ha!'.[3]

Constance Beresford-Howe has given us a more recent figure of crusty indomitability in *The Book of Eve.* The day after her first old-age pension cheque arrives, Eve Carroll simply leaves her sickly, complaining husband Burt and all the rest of her life behind her and moves to a tattered basement apartment in one of Montreal's run-down districts. She effectively loses herself and, in so doing, like Hagar, she finds herself, moving through stages of euphoria in her isolation and freedom, anxiety and the grinding poverty of being a bag-lady, to a gradual re-entrance into the business of living with its chaotic but necessary human contacts and responsibilities. At the end, the new Eve is, she says, "a damned woman," but she is also one reborn, willing herself to enjoy and participate, knowing that she will also suffer, but moving into life, not away from it. In the book's final scene she comes out of her basement and mounts the stairs to join her eccentric, unreliable, but warmly loving new mate, Johnny.

Unlike the grandmothers, the old-aging figures who are the centres of vitality in these fictions, mothers, the middle-aging group, are a sad lot. Mrs. Murchison in Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist,* Marilla and Mrs. Lynde in L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables,* Nellie McClung's portrait of her mother in *Clearing in the West,* Mrs. Gare in Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese,* Isabel in Marie Claire Blais' *Mad Shadows,* Mrs. Cameron in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers,* Joan Foster's mother in *Lady Oracle* and Renny's in *Bodily Harm,* Mrs. Heber in Marian Engel's *The Glassy Sea,* and Mrs. Jordan in Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women:* all are in varying degrees impediments to their daughters' development into free-standing, free-choosing individuals, certainly not role models to be emulated as much as horrible examples to be avoided.

Part of the reason for these continuing adverse portraits is certainly psychological, a projection of the stark conflicts that always potentially and often actually beset mothers and daughters; but part is just as certainly literary. In each of these works, where a younger woman is vitally central to the action, readers are invited to see the older woman as focus of conflict, at best a testing ground for the growth struggles of the heroine, at worst an unrelenting obstacle to them. In many novels the literary need for a centre of conflict outranks psychological realism, social verisimilitude, or historical circumstances. Nellie McClung, for instance, paid tribute on many occasions to the support her mother and her mother-in-law had given her and to the warmth of their relationships. Margaret Atwood has repeatedly spoken of her fortunate relationship with her mother. Margaret Laurence's mother died when she was six. Added to the mother figure's appropriateness as a focus for personal conflict there is also a strong tendency to portray her as an agent for society's repressive and limiting strictures against young women. Undoubtedly, also, an element of fear operates behind these portraits — the aging process viewed in close-up in the mother is inalterably and inevitably to be the fate of the daughter as well. In contrast, when the middle-aging process is over, and the woman is unmistakably and irrevocably old, she can be seen as a triumphant survivor and not as a threat of impending doom.

Sometimes in the portraits of middle-aging there are recognitions of common problems and rueful, belated glimmers of understanding, sometimes not. Duncan's Mrs. Murchison remains her fussy, complacent self. She is close to Abby, the daughter who is a replica of

herself, and alienated from her "different" daughter, Advena. In her opinion no man will be able to tolerate Advena, who has no use for housewifery — and in her opinion marriage is the only respectable goal for a woman. McClung sets up an archetypal threesome, herself a rebel child repressed by a forbidding mother but creatively nurtured by a gentle father. Ostenso's Mrs. Gare, psychologically browbeaten and physically beaten by her tyrant husband Caleb, still forfeits the reader's ready sympathy when she proves willing to sacrifice all her children by Gare for the sake of Mark, her illegitimate son and the only child she really loves. Atwood's maternal figures are paper dolls at best; at worst they are like voodoo dolls of clay, set up for the black-magic ritual of pin-sticking. Marie Claire Blais' portrait of Isabel, whose outward face-cancer matches her terrible inner rot, is the most malign middle-aging mother figure of all.

But Montgomery's Mrs. Lynde, the gossipy neighbour and Anne's harshest critic, is changed by contact with Anne and finally admits her worth; finally, too, the stern and ramrod-stiff Marilla is able to say, "I love you as dear as if you had been my own flesh and blood and you've been my joy and comfort ever since you came to Green Gables."[4] Stacey MacAindra sadly understands some of her mother's problems as she struggles with her own, and Rachel Cameron finally accepts her mother with compassion as her own "elderly child." From time to time Del Jordan divines and foresees her mother in herself, and Rita Heber, as she herself moves into middle age, comes to feel a bemused pity for her mother. These reconciliations, usually tentative and partial, partake, of course, of the dramatic necessities of the narratives. Even more, the degree of their emotional delicacy stems from and gives evidence of the sensibilities and skills of their writers in moving toward a mature communicating of the fragile complexities of real-life mother-daughter relationships.

By rare combinations of fact and artistry, two of our writers, Adele Wiseman and Maria Jacobs, have succeeded in lifting portraits of their mothers far beyond any literary stereotypes. Jacobs was eight years old when Germany overran Holland in World War II. Her father was away in the allied merchant marine and in due course her brother went away to train for the same profession. For four years she and her mother successfully hid in their house four Jews, Eli, Naomi, Joe, and Lena. Thirty-five years later, now a Canadian with a grown family, Jacobs wrote a poem sequence about those years of endurance, courage, fear, and hunger. Later still she bridged the poems with prose passages which flesh out the story, adding their own impact to it as well as adding to the impact of the poems. The result is *Precautions against Death,* dedicated to "my mother, Lucie Mendelson-Wolsak." Jacobs remembers well, absolutely without sentimentality, and though numbers of the poems are in the voices of other members of the household, her mother is always at the book's centre.

TEAM
(Mother)

The enemy brings me
shoulder to shoulder
with my youngest child.

Any night may be the one
when we can't hide
our friends fast enough
from raiding soldiers.
Dawn is a gift.

Their survival may cause
my clear-cut task.
The grocer Shapiro
his pale wife Lena
the orphan Naomi
and Eli, my lover
inspire the venture
refuel my energy.

But outside this family
my own child Maria
independent and free
coming in, going out
my little comrade
fellow hewer and drawer
she keeps the grave secret
of our backroom as I do.

She sees what I see.
There is no option.
We're a team of two
against the dark.[5]

Lucie is no mere icon of courage either, but an endearing, sometimes funny, sometimes eccentric, always loving woman, emphatic in her own beliefs and needs and a rock of strength for her daughter and her "guests."

> We had some strange traditions in our family. My mother used to go out sometimes, just before sundown, without saying where exactly she was going. She just 'went for a walk,' with a pair of garden clippers in her pocket. Half an hour later she'd be back with her loot. She had done nothing less than poach: half a dozen sprays of forsythia or lilac, a little bunch of lily-of-the-valley, some flowering crab or pussy willow, or a branch or two of colourful leaves — whatever was in season. Usually she confined her raids to the public parks, but if any creeping plant ventured on the street-side of a fence she'd consider that fair game too.[6]

Eli, who became her lover, marvelled at her strength:

> Look
> this woman
> my small soft woman
> hauling logs from a wheelbarrow
> through French doors
> into the backroom
> each log crashing
> to the floor just inside
> as her arms give out
> but never too soon.[7]

Precautions against Death ends with a shining testi-

mony to the enduring bonds of love and interdependence that were forged in those terrible years:

> We are scattered in all directions now, but the roof of the house we made for each other is still intact. My mother is old and frail, Eli's hair is gray, and geographically they live far apart, but in spirit they are still close and the warmth and solidarity between them will not be destroyed. I have a life and a family of my own now, that have little connection with the life we lived then. I live in the country that shone for us like a bright star. I speak the language that fascinated us so much and that has since become more my own in many respects than the one we spoke when we lived our war and took our precautions. But the language my mother speaks to Eli and me is the same one Eli speaks to us, and it is the same I speak to them: it has no sound.[8]

Lucie Mendelson-Wolzak is matched in our literature only by the mother Adele Wiseman honours in *Old Woman at Play*. Challenged by the mystery of the artist as she watches her mother's creation of dolls, her hands as unceasingly busy in age as she remembers them in youth, Wiseman tells her mother's story. Nothing about the early years in Russia, the constant dread of pogroms, the hard years of emigration and settlement, of bringing up her family in crowded quarters behind the tailoring store in Winnipeg, explains the selfless drive to make, create, and give to others.

> How long have you been sewing, mama?
> Oh, I was still a child, three, four, maybe five. Next door we had a little dressmaker, not what you would call a real modiste. She wasn't trained, but she tried, by herself, to do simple work. She used to gather rags, and whenever she saw me she gave them to me, and I started to work out all kinds of toys and dolls and doll clothes and flowers. I took to those. It meant to me . . . the whole world.
> You didn't make them when we were kids.
> Who had time?[9]

Starting with this puzzle, Wiseman unravels her mother's entire life. If she never completely explains the mystery of such constant benign creativity, she does set before us a wonderfully variegated person, her experience as wide-ranging as a long life can make it, its solid centre the ties of family over four generations.

> Not until I heard her with her grandchildren did I remember the feeling of it, those invisible, constantly reforming bonds which at the same time were roads to explore, teasing us along avenues of thought and imagination. Even now she counsels tirelessly, 'You have to talk to children, you have to tell them all the time, explain to them, entertain them, make them understand.' I see my daughter following her about with my own mesmerized eyes. I feel the persuasive murmur engulfing me from the past, a haze of language enveloping the enchanted child. . . . She was artist, magician, slave and seer, counsellor, songbird, judge and peer.[10]

In a climactic and powerful summary, Wiseman lists the teachings of her mother:

> ART AS COMMUNICATION
> ART AS IMITATION
> ART AS MEDIATION
> ART AS REORGANIZATION
> ART AS RE-CREATION
> ART AS INTEGRATION
> ART AS INNOVATION
> ART AS INTERPRETATION
> ART AS RECONCILIATION
> ART, above all, as CELEBRATION.
>
> And more, mama and her work have confirmed in me the knowledge that art, uncapitalized and unshunned, is our human birthright, the extraordinary right and privilege to share, both as givers and receivers, in the work of continuous creation. Understanding this, the questioner may no longer have to ask the abysmal, "Is this all there is to life?" Instead, restored in innocence and wonder, he may be able to exclaim with me, as I watch my mother's hands still at work as I type this now, 'All this? Oh mother! And yet more?'[11]

Life-committed. That is the enduring quality to which women writers aspire in their characters as in themselves. The holy terrors, the tough survivors, retain it, the heroic and creative mothers instinctively act from its base. The sad, sick, and wicked mothers deny it in themselves and are seen to be denying it to their daughters. Aging itself is not the point. The achievement of the right to live fully, the accepting of responsibility to live for oneself and for others as well, the opportunity to live freely, with choice: these make up the core of all women's strivings.

Notes

1. Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel,* Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1964, p. 304.
2. Mazo de la Roche, *Jalna,* Pan Books, Toronto, 1972 (first printing 1927), p. 20.
3. *Jalna,* pp. 268–9.
4. L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables,* Boston, Page, 1980, p. 412.
5. Maria Jacobs, *Precautions against Death,* Oakville, Mosaic Press, 1983, p. 18. This poem has been quoted in its entirety by permission of Maria Jacobs.
6. *Precautions against Death,* p. 31.
7. *Precautions against Death,* p. 50.
8. *Precautions against Death,* p. 72.
9. Adele Wiseman, *Old Woman at Play,* Toronto, Clarke Irwin, 1978, p. 28.
10. *Old Woman at Play,* p. 29.
11. *Old Woman at Play,* pp. 145–6.

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