Reviving Desdemona

Dayna Patterson. *O Lady, Speak Again*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2022. 112 pp. Paper: $14.95. ISBN: 978-1-56085-464-7.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Cranford Garcia

When I began analyzing literature in high school, I was trained to see a poem as a thing made perfect by intent, by genius, an idea that prepared me to become adept at finding an artistic rationale in everything I'd analyze—but a great stumbling block when it came time to write my own poetry. Letting go of that need to control the language in order to listen to it, to listen for the "muse's" whispers, has been a decades-long effort.

When I read Dayna Patterson's poems, I again appreciate the dedication of the craft. Her second collection, *O Lady, Speak Again*, embodies a poetics of intention, of rapt attention, in which nothing is accidental. These are the kinds of poems—perhaps because they live in Shakespeare's world and share in the same love of wordplay, the same appreciation of the world each word evokes—that my twelfth-grade English teacher would have held up to say, "Look what she does here, and here!" She leaves no aspect of Shakespeare's dramas untouched as fodder for metaphor—the invocation of goddesses, the cross-dressing, the forest as a place of upending societal structures, the endless puns and wordplay, the space of the playhouse stage, the interplay between the actors and audience.

In these poems, Patterson braids together the stories of Shakespeare's female characters (both major and minor—I'll confess, I had to Google some of them) with two more personal strands of narrative: her experience growing up with an absent mother (whose queerness she only came to understand later in life) and her Mormon inheritance of polygamous ancestors and structured religion—two forces that

ultimately grew to be at odds with each other. The arc of the collection expresses her personal journey toward regaining her mother (and herself) and the inner conflict involved in recognizing the flaws in a father's narrative.

By rewriting Shakespeare's characters and stories, she takes on perhaps the most iconic symbol of the male-dominated Western literary tradition, in turn taking on patriarchy itself. In one of the earliest poems, "In this version," she provides alternate endings for some of his most famous tragedies, summing up with an alternate version of her own story: "I chase away my mother's blue beasts, / concoct a strong spell to keep her from breaking / out of my childhood" (8). In "Ophelia, amphibian," she reimagines Ophelia's death as a metamorphosis, "shedding shroud like a skin, / up into the sky's blue burn," creating an afterlife for her outside patriarchal society, absorbed into the natural (perhaps maternal) world. And in "After the Curtain Falls, Isabella speaks in Achromatics," she gives Isabella the vocal response she is denied at the end of *Measure for Measure*, a voice embodied in nonlinear, visual elements.

This last example also illustrates Patterson's pattern of techniques that work to unravel the influence of patriarchal language, such as her experimentation with syntax in "Hermione as Phantom Limn"—"my blame I self [. . .,] blame I oracle's slow grace" (37); her incorporation of the visual with shape poems and titles using self-portraiture and still life elements; and her nonlinear string of word associations in her "color" poems like "Self-Portrait as Lady Macbeth in 30 Shades of Red" or "Titania in Yellow." The motif of threes introduced in "Thunder. Enter the Three WITCHES meeting HECATE," which sets up an association between this number and female power, works throughout the collection to deconstruct dichotomies, an inherent aspect of patriarchal language. In "How to Give Birth to Words," she attempts through wordplay to reclaim language as a female endeavor.

The implications of the narratives she has braided together carry specific import for LDS readers. By juxtaposing a rewriting of Shakespeare (arguably the most often quoted secular writer at general conference) with LDS institutional statements and quotes from her polygamous great-great-great-grandfather, she indicates a desire to rewrite that religious history. She sets up this conflict early in the collection in "Self-Portrait as Miranda after Shipwreck," in which the ship is both the unacceptable number of LGBT teen suicides in Utah, as well as the "ship" of her faith—and she is unconvinced of her father's (read: the Church's) attempts at consolation. In "O is the sound of Tragedy," she laments all these losses in a mournful and earnest tone that permeates the collection.

Furthermore, her attempts to reconcile two disparate versions of her mother (a process that unfolds gradually throughout the book) evoke echoes of the LDS tradition's Heavenly Mother—absent and silent, yet ultimately, discoverable to her daughters. We're reminded in "usque ad mala" that all of history and religion rely on their daughters "to scrape and stretch the parchment," to "hunt down a swan / feather," to "strip barbs from the quill," to "folio from memory your life's work"—in essence, to be the receptacles of male secrets, the vehicles of male power (88–89).

Setting technique and critical theory aside however—the experience of reading these poems is a delight for one who craves the challenge and surprise of well-crafted language. Yet I'm never lost in it, the backdrop of story always grounding me in images and place. A (very) small sample of my favorites:

Juliet's Nurse: "Should you cantilever / the question mark of your sadness, like / a tortoise emergent?" (67). Or Lady Macbeth: "Look: a bonfire of violins, varnish blustering / elegant F holes, strings snapping as they burn" (68). Cordelia (third wife of Charles Ramsden Bailey): "He used to hold me close, proud / of [. . .] the way I churn out son after

son / like pads of stamped butter / with his milky impression. [. . .] I let slip from the pantry / the mouse of my doubts / let its warm brown / scurry into the open, and find myself / shelved, long-languishing in a rough valley" (11). Or Perdita: "To out-mother my mother is easy / as staying this side of a one-inch threshold [. . .] All I have to do is / *Don't disappear*" (41).

Dayna Patterson adroitly pays homage to the complexity of Shakespeare's body of work while at the same time pushing back against the patriarchal messaging passed down to us. The title, "O Lady, Speak Again," an entreaty quoted from Desdemona's faithful servant as she is dying, evokes a sense of desperation to the collection, a deep yearning to give life back to our foremothers. Patterson fulfills this wish in a way that reminds us of what we have to mourn in our history, yet also empowers us to break the cycle of silence. Shakespeare's daughter, I think, would be proud.

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