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Mary: A Life In Verse
By Patricia Monaghan
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Review by Dennis Daly

Spring sparkled in every year with Mary's especial procession around Hawthorne Boulevard in my hometown of Salem Massachusetts, culminating in this mythical woman's crowning as "Queen of the Angels, Queen of the May." As a prelude to summer these festivities offered a fresh air escape from glum classrooms and prickly nuns. Even Father McCarthy, our pastor, emerging from one of his deep seasonal depressions, flickered an odd strangled grin here and there. Our school, after all, was named St. Mary's Grammar School, and our church The Immaculate Conception. The Roman Catholic religion and our grade school education seemed only appendices to a powerful Marian cult/ subculture redolent of feminine fertility and revolution.

Patricia Monaghan's posthumous collection of poems, *Mary: A Life In Verse*, humanizes the mother of Jesus Christ in provocative and very engaging ways. She takes the awe and ceremony (May processions included) that many of her fellow religionists were brought up with and grounds them in the universality of ordinary life. Monaghan's Mary experiences life as a young Jewish peasant woman in Galilea. She carries all the sensitivities of her gender, her adolescence, and her place in time. Certainly there is a bit of naiveté in Monaghan's Mary, but opportunity and ambition also drive her. In the collection's opening poem, *The Annunciation*, Monaghan explains,

*... there was a moment when I
hesitated. I remember a wild desire
to be left alone, to be obscure again
and safe—I wanted the angel to leave,*

*to find some other girl for his strange
invitation. I was frightened. I heard
a sound like a fabric rending or
the tearing of flesh or a great tree*

*falling. And yet: I answered.
I leaned towards the angel
and, with a sound like wings,
the future was born in me.*

These conflicting passions inherent in a young woman's pride and sexuality give the poem its metaphorical underpinnings.

Early on in the book the poet spins out her own version of *The Magnificat*, the ancient Christian canticle in which Mary, now pregnant, details



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her transformative power to her cousin Elizabeth (also pregnant with John the Baptist). Mary's faith or transcendent delusion magnifies and exalts her humble ordinariness into a subconscious (or perhaps, devotional) position of power. The poem entitled simply Magnificat puts it this way,

*... greatest of all: there are times
when I am whole, when I dance
with each breath and each word,

when my consciousness dwells in all
my parts at once. When this happens,
I am earth, I am stars, I am incarnate god.*

The poet intersperses many wonder filled and intriguing illustrations throughout the text. Henry Ossawa Tanner's oil on canvas entitled The Annunciation absolutely hypnotizes, while an Old Woman from Tajikistan, a Steve Evans' photograph, complements the airiness and timelessness of the verse composition. In addition Monaghan breaks up the continuity of free verse pieces with what amounts to prose poems. "Prose" does not do them justice since some of them truly soar poetically. Here is the opening of my favorite prose section,

*I COULD HAVE BEEN ONE who suffers little joy,
little pain, one who redeems nothing, is guilty of nothing.
Except for that instant when I felt power spread through
My body.*

*It was in my flesh, not in my soul, that the miracle took
place. Life shone through my body. At the moment I
agreed, I embodied love and power. Rivers rose in flood
with my tears, the sea grew hot with my lust, the wind bat-
tered in fury when I raged.*

*I became the world. I had no doubts that this child was
intended by every power I knew.*

Oh, angels toy with us so!

After the death of her son, Mary struggles with her grief and has, seemingly, lost her faith. She goes to the temple seeking comfort and understanding—perhaps. She finds rage. A well-dressed kohl-eyed woman laughs at Mary and mocks her to a companion. Mary responds in Monaghan's poem The Rich Woman Despises My Tears with the hatred of all humanity. She says,

*... My arm,
before my face, froze.*

*What would he
say to that woman,
to her companion?*

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*He would say,
forgive, forgive,
they too are in pain.
They are small
and helpless. He
would say, forgive.
I say, may your
children die ...*

Mary does recover her faith, a faith that sorrow has changed profoundly. She understands the river of grace and the purpose of a conscience in a world of ignorance and cruelty. Her original naiveté she wills into a universal canniness, an all-seeing, but not quite religious, wisdom. Monaghan relates a bit of Mary's spirit in her poem Alleluia. Here Mary shares a sublime moment,

*... another gift came to me:
a man walked by, playing a flute.*

*It was late summer, and leaves
Had fallen from the palm
Beside the house, and one leaf*

*leapt up as he passed, leapt up
just as the melody piped sharply
higher, and held a high note,*

*and the sun winked at that moment,
from behind a cloud, and a sharp
scent of new figs filled the air,*

*and I was song, suddenly song,
I remembered in my deepest soul
something I had always known:*

*that our only purpose is to live,
to be the eyes of god watching
this world...*

The meek will inherit the earth, the son of Mary of Nazareth once proclaimed. Patricia Monaghan (named at birth Mary Patricia Monaghan) clearly agrees. Her book magnifies a simple naïve young woman into a goddess of secular goodness and the preternatural hope of mankind. Blessed be the legend of Mary. And blessed be the muse of Mary Patricia Monaghan.