

ANNE HÉBERT'S "LA FILLE MAIGRE": GENDERING POETICS

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Anne Hébert's poem, "La fille maigre," first published in *Cité Libre* in May 1951, and subsequently in Hébert's collection *Le Tombeau des Rois*, has attracted but brief, and sometimes passing, critical comment.¹ It is, however, a highly significant text whose radical modernity is in need of articulation. That modernity is best recognized if we contrast the poem with another poem published more than three centuries earlier and with which it has a curious relationship. The earlier poem, "Contre une dame trop maigre" by Jean Auvray, a minor baroque poet, appeared in his collection *Banquet des Muses*, published in Rouen in 1623. I quote the full text:

Non, je ne l'ayme point ceste carcasse d'os,
Qu'on ne m'en parle plus, quoy qu'il y ait du lucre,
J'ayme autant embrasser l'image d'Atropos
Ou me laisser tomber tout nud dans un sepulcre.

5. Dés la premiere nuit de nos embrassemens,
J'imaginai sa chambre estre un grand cimetiére,
Son corps maigre sembloit un monceau d'ossements,
Son linceul un suaire et sa couche une biere.

Ce serait violer le droit des Trespassez

10. De toucher sacrilege à ses membres ethiques,
Je les baiserois bien s'ils estoient enchassez,
Comme au travers d'un verre on baise les reliques.

Belle, dis-je, (tastant la peau de son teton)
Pour ne me point blesser lors que je vous embrasse,

15. Il faudroit vous garnir les membres de cotton,
Ou que je fusse armé d'un bon corps de cuirasse.

Quand je touche aux rasoirs de vostre hastelet,

- Je n'oserais mesler mes os avec les vôtres,
 Votre mere vous fit disant son Chapelet
 20. Puis que tout vostre corps n'est que des patinostres.

Au châlit innocent j'eusse dit ces propos :
 Pourquoi faut-il jaloux que si haut tu caquettes?
 Mais, je cogneus la Dame au cliquetis des os,
 Comme on connaît un ladre au bruit de ses cliquettes.

25. Son Meusnier l'autre jour revenant du marché
 (Piqueur alternatif de ceste haridelle)
 Me dit qu'il en avait le . . . tout escorché,
 Et que son asne estoit plus franche d'amble qu'elle.

- Un jour ce vieux fut d'arquebuze à gibier
 30. Je tastonnais par tout, je luy dit, ô ma mie,
 Que vous auriez besoin d'un excellent Barbier
 Pour enfilez les os de vostre anatomie!

- Ce corps qui va craquant aussi tost qu'on l'estreint
 Me semble trop fragile aux amoureux approches,
 35. Il vaut mieux le garder pour le Vendredy Saint
 Servir de tournevelle au deffaut de nos cloches.

Que ces Peres devots s'aillent doncques cacher
 Qui estiment Catin trop charnelle et gaillarde,
 Si paillardise n'est que péché de la chair,

40. Catin ne fut jamais ny putain, ny paillardie. (105-06)

The voice in this poem is unmistakably that of a man who prefers fully fleshed women, an understandable propensity for a contemporary of Rubens, and one that is evident in Auvray's other poems as well.² Not merely content to express a preference, however, he is offensive and insulting to a woman who does not meet his expectations. Indeed, the poet's vituperative tone recalls the caustic *contreblasons* of the previous century. The firm, unambiguous opening hemistich, "Non, je ne l'ayme point," strengthened in its negation by the added stress on "point" at the caesura, is further sustained by an abundance of negative signifiers in the first two lines: non, ne, point, ne, plus. The object of this hostility is "ceste carcasse d'os," a derisive designation since "carcasse," phonetically harsh because of its two velars in two syllables, refers primarily to the bony structure of an animal and only secondarily and

pejoratively to a human body. So repulsive to him is this thin woman, whom we assume to be wealthy ("quoi qu'il y ait du lucre," [2]), that he would rather make love to death, here personified as Atropos (3), the Fate whose task it was to cut off the thread of life. The expressed preference for falling naked into a tomb further consolidates the idea of making love to death, or to a dead body, as more desirable than the yet unnamed "carcasse d'os." A fascination for death is not unexpected in the context of post-Tridentine writing, but, baroque hyperbole notwithstanding, Auvray's necrophilic option remains startling.

Yet, he *has* made love to this woman—or at least has attempted to. In the second stanza, he refers to "la premiere nuit de nos embrassemens" ("premiere" would indicate that there were others), and the remainder of the poem makes it clear that he knows her body rather well. The second and third stanzas stress the association of the woman with thinness, and thinness with death. The final word of the first stanza, "sepulcre," is joined by additional signifiers containing semes of death: "cimetiere" (6); "suaire" (8); "biere" (8); "Trespassez" (9). Yet, these semes of death are found in an environment containing a number of signifiers bearing erotic semes: "nuit" (5), "embrassemens" (5), "corps" (7), "baiserois" (11), "baise" (12), and, if we extend our search to the first line of the fourth stanza, "peau" and "teton" (13). Love and death are ancient and frequently conjoined topoi in Western literature, but there is something peculiar here, for the third stanza begins by evoking violation and sacrilege.

The dead have rights: for him to touch her thin-as-death body would be a violation of those rights, a sacrilege, a profanation. The "membres ethiques" referred to in line 10 are not "ethical" members, for "ethique" in this instance is a Middle French word meaning "d'une extrême maigreur."³ He *would* kiss them if they were encased in a reliquary, the way one kisses relics, through a glass. The more explicitly sexual meaning the word "baiser" has acquired in contemporary French, though not widely used in the seventeenth century, is attested as early as the sixteenth century, leaving open the possibility of more pronounced sexual semes in this instance as well. Kissing a relic translates into a sanctioned bringing of the lips near to that which is dead; safe sex with the dead.

Since she is not, however, in a glass case, he risks wounding himself, shedding his own blood, by kissing her: "me . . . blesser lors que je vous embrasse" (14). To avoid injury to himself, pro-

phylactic measures would be required either on her part ("Il faudrait vous garnir les membres de coton," [15]) or on his ("Ou que je fusse armé d'un bon corps de cuirasse," [16]). Just as the glass of the reliquary permits a kiss that is safe from profanation, the padded cotton or the coat of arms will protect him from physical harm. Fear of mutilation is not an uncommon motif in baroque poetry,⁴ nor is the image of a protective device.⁵ But just as the kiss on the reliquary does not touch the bones behind the glass, so too would the cotton and the armor prevent the bodies from touching.

Touching is directly alluded to in the first line of the fifth stanza, precisely in the context of a possible wound: "Quand je touche aux rasoirs de vostre hastelet" (17). The latter item is a brooch with a large pin used to close a piece of clothing, or simply as an ornament. Hers, he tells us, have "rasoirs" (not razor blades specifically, but anything "qui coupe fort bien," according to Furetière in his *Dictionnaire Universel* of 1690). This poet, afraid of being cut, dares not ("Je n'oserois" [18]) enlase her. Her body "n'est que des patinostres" (20), that is, fish bones (this usage of "patinostres" is attested in Des Périers).⁶ In an attempt to resolve his fear and possibly to counter an unstated anxiety about his own decay and death, he resorts to continued insult (comparing the clanging of her bones to the bell of a leper), vulgarity (affirming that she sleeps with her miller,⁷ who claims to be have gotten scratched and chafed in the exercise; claiming that only a surgeon could have intercourse with her), and ridicule (proposing that her cracking bones could serve as a chimney cowl). He finally ends the poem with a play on the words "péché de la chair," maintaining that she could not be sinful, for she is without flesh. All this is said in the most rude and licentious language—hardly the "vers discrets" claimed by his twentieth-century editor (Balmas LX)—in an attempt to demean and debase this woman. Clearly, she is for him a figure of contradiction: as a woman, she is supposed to invite, even incite, desire. Yet, her body repulses desire. Like the woman in Auvray's "À une laide amoureuse de l'autheur" (95), she fails in one of the primary functions of womanhood.

Auvray's poem is of considerable interest to a reader of "La fille maigre," for Hébert's text can be read as the response of the "dame trop maigre" maligned by Auvray. Hébert's poem deconstructs the cultural representations that permeate Auvray's text, representations still current in the 1950s, and gives voice to

the woman who, in Auvray's poem is spoken about and spoken to but not allowed to speak:

Je suis une fille maigre
Et j'ai de beaux os.

J'ai pour eux des soins attentifs
Et d'étranges pitié

5. Je les polis sans cesse
Comme de vieux métaux.

Les bijoux et les fleurs
Sont hors de saison.

- Un jour je saisis mon amant
10. Pour m'en faire un reliquaire d'argent.

Je me pendrai
À la place de son cœur absent.

Espace comblé,
Quel est soudain en toi cet hôte sans fièvre?

15. Tu marches
Tu remues;
Chacun de tes gestes
Pare d'effroi la mort enclose.

- Je reçois ton tremblement
20. Comme un don.

Et parfois
En ta poitrine, fixée,
J'entrouve mes prunelles liquides

- Et bougent
25. Comme une eau verte
Des songes bizarres et enfantins. (Hébert, *Œuvres* 29-30)

Against the male poet who will not love a woman because she is but a carcass of bones, this female poet affirms, precisely, her bones.

Bones are not always positively marked in Hébert's work where they are primarily associated with mortality, a persistent though ambiguous theme in all her writing since "Présence" in 1944. In that poem the negative semes of death are muted, in part

because death is imagined as fleshy rather than bony: "Sa main qui me touche / N'est ni décharnée ni hideuse" (reprinted in Lacôte 100). When bones or thin or dead bodies are brought into love-making, however, a scene of horror is created, as is the case in her poems "Vie de chateau" and "Le Tombeau des rois." In the former, death itself "S'ajuste à toi, mince et nu, / Et simule l'amour en un frisson amer" (Hébert, *Œuvres* 47). In the latter, the female narrator has a sexual encounter with bony corpses:

L'immobile désir des gisants me tire,
Je regarde avec étonnement
A même les noirs ossements
Luire les pierres bleues incrustées

....

Et ma chair qui tremble :
Offrande rituelle et soumise

....

Autour de la chair sacrifiée.

....

Sept fois je connais l'étau des os
Et la main sèche qui cherche le cœur pour le rompre.
(Hébert, *Œuvres* 53-54)

Clearly, the experience is a terrifying one.

In "La fille maigre," however, thinness is not the result of death, and it is the woman herself who is thin and bony, both givens that radically alter the perspective. The initial affirmation, "Je suis une fille maigre / Et j'ai de beaux os," is a stunning one, as is the image initiated by the opening distich (even if Saint-Denis Garneau had already used an analogous one in "Une cage d'os"). Her bones are so precious that they are like old metal, worthy of constant polishing. Bones are not to be despised, but prized; not feared, but cherished. The first three stanzas reverse the values attached to the signifier, "bones," thereby radically altering the significance of the female body as a symbolic construct.⁸

The fourth stanza makes another kind of affirmation. Jewels and flowers have historically been given to women by men, creating an exchange in which the woman is the passive receiver, the man, the active giver. But this activity, she declares, is now "hors de saison." Why? It is only after reading the remainder of the poem that retrospectively we come to understand that the female voice

is announcing her adoption of an active rather than passive role, a stance quite different from that adopted by the poetic "I" in the first volume of Hébert's poetry, *Les Songes en équilibre* (1942). It has been observed that in traditional paradigms, "*men act and women appear*" (Berger 47; author's italics). Jewelry and flowers cohere with this emphasis on appearance, clearly a preoccupation of Auvray's narrator. It is precisely in contrast to Auvray's poem and the paradigm it represents that this female poet's role-switching becomes striking.

Auvray's male subject, it will be recalled, will not touch the bony woman, for fear of injuring himself. The female subject in Hébert's poem, however, upsets cultural expectations and seizes her lover. Auvray had imagined *her* in a reliquary. *She* will make a reliquary out of *him*: "je saisis mon amant pour m'en faire un reliquaire d'argent" (9-10). She will then violate the body of her male lover and accomplish the penetration that the male poet cannot or will not do for fear of hurting himself. *She* will enter *him* and hang herself in a place vacated by his absent heart. When we recall that Auvray did not dare "mesler mes os avec les vôtres," Hébert's *fille maigre* is daring indeed. The "cœur absent" is, of course, a metonymy for the lover who does not love, a metonymy for someone such as Auvray.

She then addresses directly this man in whom she is encased, rhetorically asking him who is his guest "sans fièvre." How could she produce heat, she who is but bones? She takes pleasure in the fact that her presence, "la mort enclose"—she is dead because she has hanged herself—terrifies him. This is her answer to Auvray who had pretended to prefer death to the love of a bony woman. Here, the bony woman becomes death and *he* is scared: "Je reçois ton tremblement comme un don" (19-20). Then, in a move designed to increase further his horror, she speaks of opening her liquid-filled eyes where bizarre and childlike dreams stir like green water. In the Christian tradition, water is a symbol of the spiritual life, and Hébert in other contexts has used the image of pure water to connote peacefulness. Here, however, she has recourse to green water, which in Baudelaire is "l'eau verte du Léthé," the water of Hell. Hébert herself has elsewhere used this image to connote the sinister.⁹

In proposing that Hébert's poem is a "response" to Auvray's, I am not affirming that Hébert knew of "Contre une dame trop maigre." Indeed, she probably did not, for Auvray's poem was not

republished until 1953,¹⁰ two years after "La fille maigre" appeared in *Cité Libre*. While the private book collections in some Québécois families were quite extensive, making it possible that Hébert could have had access to it in its original printing, her knowledge of the poem is not necessary to the present argument, which is based on something more important than influences. In these poems, two poets address topics that are inverted versions of each other. Both texts are about a thin woman and her lover, but the perspective in each is highly gendered. What primarily separates them is not the three centuries that elapsed between their respective composition, but rather their gender. The modernity of the later poem stems from the unanticipated affirmation that a gender-based perception of male/female relations might be profoundly different from that which Auvray represents.

In Auvray, the man is the subject of focalisation; the woman, the object. For the man, the female body must measure up to an ideal of perfection that is socially defined. The assumption is that his readers, respectable males like him (the collection is dedicated to the president of the Rouen parliament), would reject an emaciated woman as a lover and that even women would not consider thinness as desirable (his is an age quite removed from the anorectic ideal). Auvray is measuring her anatomy against a standard that requires that she have an acceptable amount of fatty tissue to be desirable. Significantly, he begins to address her directly when feeling her breasts, moved perhaps by a persistent image of the psyche of the Western male that a flat chest in a woman denotes a low level of sensuality. Auvray is not a disinterested observer, but a man whose desire is frustrated by the woman's refusal to meet culturally accepted norms of seductiveness.

Auvray recalls the words he spoke to the woman, but does not record her reply, if indeed he allowed her to reply. She is "the speechless, spoken female object," if I may borrow an expression from Domna Stanton, used in a related but slightly different context (Stanton xv). Hébert's poem gives speech only to the woman, whose discourse becomes subversive of the very order that subverts Auvray's speech. In Auvray, sex powers the text: desire provides him with a rhetorical aggression against the woman who cannot inspire it. In Hébert, it is text that powers sex: her speech provides her with the means to penetrate his body, to accomplish the very act that Auvray refused.

Bones are a favoured topos of baroque poetry, much of which deals with death and for which they are a graphic image. In affirming three centuries later the ossature of her body, that part of her which will survive the disintegration of the flesh, Hébert's female voice proclaims that which is more lasting. Bones, the least indestructible part of her, are a metonymy for the essential woman. This is why, in a later poem, "Sagesse," a personified wisdom that serves as a negative symbol of timid inaction and who is represented as "une vieille femme envieuse," attacks her victim's bones: "La sagesse m'a rompu les bras, brisé les os" (Hébert, *Cœuvres* 81). Wisdom seeks to break woman's spirit by breaking her bones. More importantly, the valorization of her bones points to Hébert's desire to go beyond substituting a female gaze for a male one, a strategy adopted by some contemporary feminist painters. Hence, she gives no details about her lover's body while Auvray is preoccupied with describing the body of his lover. His gender-driven preference for fleshy women is captivated by appearance, a perspective Hébert avoids completely.

Long before the feminist revolution and a decade before *la révolution tranquille* in Québec, Anne Hébert, who in later texts validates woman's sexual energy, provides in this poem an early voice for a radical affirmation of womanhood that is not dependent on her assigned role in the creation of desire. A few women poets in Québec, particularly Simone Routier and Medjé Vézina, had dared write and even celebrate the reality of sensuality without, however, escaping the web of guilt and remorse, perhaps because they never seriously challenged the role of women in a love relationship, a challenge which is at the heart of Hébert's discourse in this poem.

To read this poem as the voice of a "squelette coquet" (Bouchard 88) is therefore to misread Hébert, for "coquet" would retain the woman in the role of someone who seeks to please men, a position specifically rejected in this poem. So too is it in error to read the poem as one of several in which Hébert describes "de véritables fantasmes sadomasochistes" (Giguère 150), for the narrator's speech does not derive of pathology, but rather of health, or at least a process of cleansing which is the project of the collection in which "La fille maigre" would subsequently appear. Hébert chose to republish the poem in her collection, *Le Tombeau des rois*, in which it appears as the twelfth poem. In the original edition of the collection (1953) in which the poems were grouped under categories

(a practice abandoned in subsequent editions), "La fille maigre" was situated under the rubric "Inventaire," drawing attention to the stock-taking that necessarily must precede confrontation. One critic (Lemieux 77) has noted Hébert's use of the word "inventaire" in a script that she wrote for a film testimonial to her cousin, Saint-Denis Garneau. Speaking of her cousin's last years, she notes, "Le poète fait l'inventaire de ce qui lui reste 'afin de voir ce qui manque, de trouver le joint qui ne va pas, car il est impossible de recevoir assis tranquillement la mort grandissante'" (republished in Lacôte 131; the quotation within the quotation is from Saint-Denis Garneau). The notion of "taking stock" before facing death, an activity not unrelated to the final "examination of conscience" prescribed by Catholic tradition, is at work in this collection as well, for *Le Tombeau des rois* can be read as the narrative of a confrontation with death. Semes of death are present in each poem (in "Il y a certainement quelqu'un" the poet sees herself as dead, though still standing), but the final poem, "Le Tombeau des rois," which provides the title for the collection, records a victory over death. A descent into the abyss of the dead is accompanied by the expected fear ("ma chair qui tremble" [36]) and leads to a confrontation with death, an embracing of death, a copulation with death that exorcizes death. Such is the message of the final five lines:

Et les morts hors de moi, assassinés,
 Quel reflet d'aube s'égaré ici?
 D'où vient donc que cet oiseau frémit
 Et tourne vers le matin
 Ses prunelles crevées? (Hébert, *Œuvres* 54)

The blind falcon, we know from the incipit, metaphorically signifies the female poet's heart. The falcon who has regained sight and recognized the dawn brings the collection to a liberating closure. The affirmation of "la fille maigre" earlier in the collection is part of that liberation.

Significantly, Hébert reused the first six lines of "La fille maigre" (inverting the second and third distichs) in *Les Invités au procès*, a radio play performed in 1952, one year after the original publication of the poem. In that play, Aude, a beautiful young woman, the only one in her sullen and morose family who dares to laugh, the only one to believe in joy and to hope for the future, at one moment inexplicably sings out:

Je suis une fille maigre
 Et j'ai de beaux os
 Je les polis sans cesse
 Comme de vieux métaux
 J'ai pour eux de soins attentifs
 Et d'étranges pitiés (Hébert, *Temps* 179)

She ends her song at that point, however, without confronting her lover in the manner that the female voice of the poem does. Perhaps that is why Aude is ultimately destroyed: she is incapable of proceeding from affirmation to appropriation, incapable of laying claim to "le fer et le feu de [s]on héritage" as does the defiant female voice in "La Sagesse m'a rompu les bras" (Hébert, *Œuvres* 81).

In an interview with *Le Devoir* in 1982, Hébert spoke of the necessity for the woman to speak on her own behalf rather than to be spoken for or about:

Il est très important qu'on entende cette voix [de la femme]. Une voix qui soit audible et perceptible, une voix qui rende un son juste et vrai. Pendant longtemps cette voix a été étouffée, camouflée. C'est un son très pur Une voix nouvelle.

L'idée qu'on se faisait d'une voix féminine était plutôt celle d'une voix mièvre, à l'eau de rose. On n'imaginait pas toute la force que la femme pouvait avoir en elle. (Royer, "Anne Hébert. La passion" 40)

Poetry, then, becomes prophecy and salvation is to be found in words that speak the truth, "toute parole juste, vécue et exprimée," as Hébert explains it in "Poésie, solitude rompue" (Hébert, *Œuvres* 63), a frequently quoted text published a few years later and whose "dimension féminine" has been justly noted (Smart 191). "Poésie, solitude rompue" ends with Hébert's affirmation that poetry is salvific: "Je crois à la solitude rompue comme du pain par la poésie" (Hébert, *Œuvres* 63). In speaking the truth, poetry shatters solitude, and not only individual solitude. "Le poète," said Hébert in another interview, "exprime aussi tous ceux qui sont muets, tous ceux qui n'accèdent pas à la parole" (Royer, "Anne Hébert. Jouer" 22). The masculine demonstrative pronouns—still *de rigueur* in most francophone discourse fifteen years ago—need not deflect the reader from recognizing the identity of those who are reputed to be mute. By affirming herself as subject and there-

by breaking through her solitude, the thin woman is also shattering the solitude that passivity has assigned to her gender. In 1951, in a Québec still dominated by a centuries-old Bérullian discourse of abnegation, this was a courageous act.

NOTES

¹ See Marcotte 277-8; Amyot 243-4; Le Grand 26-7; Lacôte 54; Bouchard 88-90; Lemieux 86-91; Russell 38.

² Auvray ends "Sonnet" with the lines: "Mais sans mentir il faut, maistresse, que j'avouë, / Que sur tout me ravit ton grasset en bon-point" (58). In "A Mademoiselle M.C.," when requesting a portrait of the woman he loves, he asks "Pein luy mainte veine noire / Dessus son col grasselet, / Puis enfle son sein d'yvoire / En deux petits monts de laict" (59).

³ See Greimas and Keane 270. The word still exists with this approximate meaning in Modern French, spelled, however, without the "h".

⁴ On fear of mutilation, see Mathieu-Castellani 98-100.

⁵ Consider Desportes's "Je ressemble en aimant au valeureux Persée" in which the poet regrets that, unlike Perseus pursuing Medusa, he has no protection: "Mais hélas! je n'ai pas le bouclier renommé, / Dont contre tous périls Vulcain l'avait armé" (86).

⁶ See Littré 3: 1003; Huguet 5: 680.

⁷ One cannot fail to note the play on words here. A "piqueur" is indeed a squire, normally in charge of horses. But in Middle French usage, "estre piqué de" meant to be in love with. The miller as a "piqueur alternatif" is, then, an alternate lover. Since the verb "piquer" means "to stick, to prick, to stake," senses of sexual penetration are evoked as well.

⁸ On the subject of the body as construct, see Suleiman 1-2.

⁹ See, for example, "L'Eau": "Vert trouble des étangs" (Hébert, *Songes* 55); "Chats": "l'or se mêle au vert / Des étangs" (Hébert, *Songes* 58); "Sagesse": "La Sagesse m'a rompu les bras, brisé les os / C'était une très vieille femme envieuse / Pleine d'onction, de fiel et d'eau verte" (Hébert, *Œuvres* 81).

¹⁰ In the edition of *Banquet des Muses* quoted above. The poem was also republished (the first six stanzas only) in Rousset 2: 146.

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