

BURNING WOMEN

Roberta Degnore

Roberta Degnore
©2012
All rights reserved

BURNING WOMEN

Roberta Degnore

FADE IN

AERIAL VIEW - DAY - 1212

Wings pump at the edge of a sunset that gleams like a giant fire on the sea below. A rugged coastline swings into view.

Squat ships with sails, rows of oars sway at the dock. Crusaders' pennants fly from masts. On land, a festival is in full swing.

It gets dark. There's a vast forest relieved only by a black river that snakes on the left, a narrow yellow road cuts through on the right.

Farther inland the road leads to clearer land and a walled city. LOVERS entwine in a hay wagon. The largest building is only a shell, an outline of giant stones. All streets lead to it in a radiating pattern.

Farther, as night closes in, the tangle of treetops is broken again. This time, a lone castle. BULLS graze nearby.

Then the forest seals over everything. The road is a dirty amber ribbon. Lower and lower into the trees, branches twist in a perilous labyrinth. It is very dark now.

Down below, two clearings appear. In one, an ugly THATCHED COTTAGE. In the other, a SHED. Smoke and embers shoot from its chimney.

INT. WORK SHED - NIGHT

It is the darkest, scariest, sloppiest sorcerer's workshop ever. Flames WHOOSH from a JAGGED-MOUTH FURNACE. CRUCIBLES bubbling with molten metals hang from rods.

The only thing immaculately arranged is the PROCESSION OF TOOLS on a workbench: hammers, tongs, pliers, files.

A BLACK CROSS melts into boiling liquid.

MARY(20s)--sweaty, smudged, intense--squints into the steaming lava in the furnace. She dips a ladle, pours into a trough.

A thick ROPE OF LIQUID GOLD slithers toward her. She has turned lead into gold!

MARY'S EYES reflect the golden stream.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

A STREAM OF URINE SPLATTERS a wet line on the parched, rocky ground.

SONNY(20s) closes his pants as MATIS(50s), blind, plants seeds in the softened dirt. His fingers find the wetness.

MILLER(30s), thick and sly-eyed, waves from the road.

SONNY

Father, Miller wants his blade.

MATIS

Mary!

INT. WORK SHED - DAY

The place is scary even in daylight. So is Mary's lack of grooming. She focuses on the gold steaming down a spiral into a mold shaped like a cross.

Matis bursts in. The flames HISS from the draft.

He sniffs the air, recognizes the scent of gold.

MATIS

My God, you found the work I hid for all these years. This is why the Church took my eyes, stupid girl!

MARY

Father, it's my life! My only life...

SONNY

Miller wants his blade.

Miller pushes past Sonny at the door. Mary tosses a cloth over the gold. She and Matis act 'normal.'

MILLER

Your girl should be married by now, Master Smith Matis. I might be willing.

Mary flips a polished knife to Sonny, but he's all thumbs, drops it. Matis flinches at the sound--pretends otherwise.

MATIS

There's your blade. Sonny's my eyes. Finished it today, and none finer.

Mary closes her eyes. One tear escapes--hides her hurt.

Miller looks from the knife to Mary. Matis sniffs the air. Sonny picks his nose.

MILLER

What's our girl cooking?

Miller snatches the cloth. Gold! He reels in disbelief.

MILLER

Witch!

Miller runs out. Matis drags Mary to the furnace. He scalds a chain he's wearing around his neck with a poker. It falls into his hand.

MARY

I used the marks I found hidden
with your tools. I did it right,
father. By myself!

MATIS

You don't know your place, stupid
girl! That fool thinks he saw
something that he has not. And for
that mistake you are a dead woman.

Matis holds Mary down on the workbench. He solders the chain he took from his neck. It holds a jagged, gold half-pendant.

Mary SCREAMS as the hot poker nears her neck.

MATIS

Hear me, girl. If there is any
hope for you, you must find Master
Ivo. He is the only one who can
teach you what they think you
already know. Witch or not, you
will be valuable to the Church and
it will protect you. It will use
you if, only if, you can make gold.
That will save your life.

Mary holds her neck with one hand, douses the furnace with the other. Smoke and embers billow over her.

Matis rushes her along. She gathers her tools.

MARY

But I made gold. It makes me a
real smith. A master--

MATIS

You are a woman. Things are not what they seem. You don't know the secret. Trust me, I know this. If Churchmen catch you now you will die in torture because you can tell them nothing. You know nothing. Run to Strasbourg. Find where Master Ivo hides. Word will spread quickly, there is no time. Go!

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Mary slaloms around trees. The pack on her back reveals hammer tops tied in a bundle.

MATIS (V.O.)

They will hunt you. You must find Master Ivo to stay alive. Without what he can teach you about gold you are only half-smith, half-woman. Learn the real secret and you will be able to trade knowledge for your life. Trust no one. Nothing is what it seems, ever. God speed!

Mary stops. Listens. DISTANT SHOUTS, CRACKLING FIRE. She runs out onto the road, looks back.

MARY'S EYES GLOW WITH TEARS as they reflect images of Sonny and Matis in chains. SOLDIERS with crosses on their shields take them away.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Mary huddles under a tree. She takes the gold cross she made, lays it lovingly on a dirty cloth.

But, where she touched it there's a mark. It blackens, spreads.

She watches in horror as the cross disintegrates into ugly, pitted black metal.

Mary sobs, tries to open an acorn, cuts herself with her own sleek dagger.

She tries to look at the half-disk on her neck. Can't, too tight. She reflects it in her dagger. Symbols and Arabic writing cover it.

EXT. ROAD OUTSIDE OF CASTLE - DAY

Mary, dirty and disheveled, bites into a rotten apple. She watches RETURNING CRUSADERS cheered by a CROWD.

SIR RUDOLF(RUDY)(20s) leads. He leans from his horse to receive maidens' kisses, and hits a THUG who chokes a dog.

Rudy's eyes catch Mary's. She looks away.

The celebration sweeps toward the castle. A TEENAGE GIRL weighed down with all kinds of leather--tunics, shields, breeches--pokes her.

LEATHER GIRL
(in French)
Femme seule?

MARY
What?

LEATHER GIRL
Woman alone? Like them, femmes
seules.
(re the crowd)
Women, artists, who live by their
hands. Beguines.

The girl points from Mary's pack with exposed hammers to EIGHT STYLISH NUN-TYPES. The crowd makes way for them. Mary covers her tools.

LEATHER GIRL
They are not the nuns they pretend
to be. Not rich enough and too
bold. Take no Church vows. They
work. Support themselves, like me.
And you?

MARY
They work?

INT. CASTLE HALL - DAY

A CROWDED PARTY. IRMA(40s), the elegant lady of the castle, greets GUESTS. She notes that Mary covers her hammers.

AGNES(40s) is a dignified Beguine. SYBELLE(20s) is a sex-kitten, her robe trimmed in leather. They eye Mary.

SYBELLE
Her work tastes beautiful.

Agnes elbows Sybelle to shut up.

AGNES

Excuse her. Since the accident she's been mixed in her senses.

IRMA

(to Mary)

What do you do with those tools?

Mary looks away.

IRMA

Speak up, girl. Did you steal them?

MARY

I was apprenticed to my father, a weapons smith. Far from here.

IRMA

(re Mary's filthy clothes)

Far indeed. You are here, why?

MARY

He's dead.

IRMA

So sorry. And you helped him make, what? Armor and mail? Not work like this?

Irma waves her arm festooned in glittering jewelry and points at the dagger in Mary's belt.

MARY

Mostly swords.

IRMA

Swords? A girl? This, I must see.

Irma WHISTLES. MOLE(30s) enters: He's Rudy's right hand man.

INT. CASTLE HALL - DAY (LATER)

The partying crowd circles Mary and Mole who square off. Each holds a long, heavy sword. Both are barefoot.

People point and laugh at Mary. She is shy. Mole is cocky.

MALE VOICE 1

What if you lose to a woman, Mole?

MOLE

Not possible.

MALE VOICE 2

That's why he's got no wife.

Laughter. Irma WHISTLES for silence. Rudy enters. Mary looks away from him, concentrates.

IRMA

Smiths must know the properties and balance of the metals they work even better than the warriors who use them in battle. Let's see if you know.

Mary and Mole swing their swords to test the feel of them. They circle each other, eyeball to eyeball.

They place themselves back to back.

Each lifts his/her sword, struggle to balance it by its point on one finger. Slowly, effortfully, each does.

They turn. Swords balanced on fingertips, they face off.

Each wavers, keeping balance.

A DROP OF BLOOD seeps from the heavy blade creasing Mary's fingertip.

She strains. Mole strains. They waver, keep balance.

IRMA

Ready?

MARY'S BARE FEET steady, stop next to each other precisely.

MOLE'S BARE FEET slowly stop moving, plant together.

Irma raises her arm.

IRMA

Now!

Mary and Mole yank their hands away.

BLADES zoom down toward bare feet.

MOLE'S HAND, early, grabs the sword handle. His little finger nicks the blade.

MARY'S HAND, late, barely snatches and holds the sword handle as it zips past.

A thin river of blood etches down the gleaming metal of Mole's blade.

IRMA

A tie!

CHEERS. Partying resumes.

Irma guides Mary around with an air-touch at her dirty robe. Shows her off like a smart puppy.

Rudy is beset by women. Mary notes it. She self-consciously smooths her clothes.

Rudy watches Mary as she sneaks food from every tray. She drinks from a bowl Irma later dips her fingers in.

Mole approaches, shakes Mary's hand.

MOLE

Good concentration for a woman.
Sir Rudolf will supply a coach for
you to town. Reward for your luck.

MARY

Skill.

MOLE

It will take you where you want.

MARY

Strasbourg?

Rudy watches Mole lead Mary out of the hall.

Agnes intercepts, hooks her arm in Mary's. Sybelle spins around and wards off GIRL APPLICANTS who try to show Agnes their work: glass, soap, ironwork, masonry.

Agnes whispers urgently in Mary's ear...

EXT. CATHEDRAL CONSTRUCTION SITE, STRASBOURG - DAY

TOWNSPEOPLE cheer A JUGGLER in front of the scaffolds. NAKED CONSTRUCTION GUYS set stained glass windows.

Sybelle hides a candle in a metal tube--a flashlight--it makes a halo for Mary. Mary is the juggler: juggling a scythe, a sword, and a dagger.

Mary now wears the chic Beguine robes.

MALE CROWD VOICE

Bravo! An artist.

Agnes collects donations, pilots THREE SNARLING DOGS.
PRIESTS step on her robe hem to trip her, "accidentally."

Agnes sidesteps the attacks, picks pockets, slips a gold ring
on her finger. Sybelle joins her in the crowd.

AGNES

Biggest crowd ever for a first
time.

SYBELLE

Smells too big.

Agnes looks where Sybelle points with her tongue. The
elegant BISHOP ALFRED(40s) watches every move.

APPLAUSE. Mary's quick hands do a vanishing act, hide the
dagger and scythe up her Beguine robe's wide sleeves.

Her sword vanishes miraculously into a black handle. Mary
stashes it under her robe in a flash.

SYBELLE

(to the crowd)

For sale. At the Church store.

Sybelle waves a small gold cross over her head. The crowd
runs toward a DOZEN VENDORS in the b.g.

Alfred whispers to Agnes. They watch Mary try to get lost in
the crowd.

INT. CHURCH PUB - DAY

A line of kegs make an altar. The vendors' tables make the
pub's front. People swarm, grab for the small crosses.

Agnes and Alfred sit at the bar. Mary stands. Gold crosses
sprawl on the bar.

AGNES

Masterwork and you know it, Alfred.

ALFRED

Too good.

Mary backs up. Alfred stops her.

ALFRED

Miss Mary, answer me this. Stones
make a cathedral, trees make pyres.
Gold pillaged from the East comes
to me, Strasbourg's Bishop. I
allot it to smiths to work.

(MORE)

ALFRED (CONT'D)

So how is it that your work is as good as guildsmen's who have had all the gold I give them to work with?

MARY

Luck?

Alfred snaps a jeweled cross from its chain, flips it to her.

ALFRED

Fix it.

Hands shaking, Mary heats it with a candle on the bar.

AGNES

Your guildsmen should knit shawls. If someone wants to earn his keep, water your horses, trim your trees, don't you let him work? Drive him away he may steal your horse, burn your orchard.

ALFRED

Threats, Agnes? The Church loves to see sacrilege in women.

AGNES

Sacrilege? Don't we talk business, not religion?

ALFRED

Not religion? Is not rain, water? But I know a way to settle whether I permit this girl to work or not.

Mary returns the repaired cross. Alfred signals. FIVE PRIESTS rush in, grab Mary.

ALFRED

Are you the daughter of Matis of Helfta? Sister to the fool they call Sonny?

BROTHER ABLE(20s), vain-pretty and mean, slaps at Mary. She ducks. He hits a priest; the priest shoves him.

ALFRED

The Iron Maiden has spikes as long as my finger to pierce through your eyes. And it does not miss. Now, did your father teach you alchemy?

MARY

What?

ALFRED

How to change lead into gold.

MARY

If I could, I wouldn't juggle in the streets.

ALFRED

He was a smart young smith too before we burned out his eyes. The same, witch?

Agnes and Sybelle edge toward the door.

MARY

There's my pack. I'll show you.

Able flings it to her. Mary takes the ugly, pitted black cross. One tiny, nearly invisible gold spot still shines. Alfred hides it with his finger.

ALFRED

A failure like your father. Your half-wit brother can't learn so your father had to teach you blades, didn't he?

MARY

A few daggers maybe.

ALFRED

We will test what you know. The results will be simple to judge. Witch, or dead.

EXT. STRASBOURG STREET - DAY

Agnes and Sybelle run like hell in their billowing robes.

SYBELLE

What if he won't help her?

AGNES

He must. And you must stay with her.

Sybelle paws the air like she's playing an invisible harp, her way of "hearing."

SYBELLE

Me?

INT. CHURCH PUB - DAY

Priests grab at Mary's breasts in a sloppy body search. They expose the half-pendant. Alfred reaches...SLAPS her instead.