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Resisting the Oppressive Paternal Metaphor of God in Michèle Roberts's *Impossible Saints*

Abstract

The protagonist of Michèle Roberts's *Impossible Saints*, Josephine, establishes a nonconformist convent for women who seek communion with God by following an unorthodox path of sensual spirituality. *Impossible Saints* intersperses Josephine's story with a number of miniature narratives depicting fictional lives of saints, rewritten in a feminist manner, portraying both the female predicament in the patriarchally structured society and women's struggle for empowerment in which they rebel against masculinist conventions. The article employs feminist thought, derived mainly from Julia Kristeva, to examine the way in which Roberts problematizes the relation of the Catholic Church to the position of women as well its concern with the human body. The bodily dimension of the divine, as proposed by Luce Irigaray, manifesting in the emancipatory communal experience of women in Josephine's convent, greatly contrasts with the Catholic regulatory character of religiosity. The analysis also situates the patriarchal institution of the Church in the context of the Lacanian order of the symbolic and his notion of the Name-of-the-Father. It culminates in exploring the issue of the metaphor of God as seen through the traditional patriarchal frame which pictures God as masculine.

Keywords: Michèle Roberts, feminism, religion, Catholic Church, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan

Impossible Saints, published in 1997, midway in Michèle Roberts's literary career, concludes a series of her novels focusing on religious themes and marks a point of transition to another stage in her writing, which is no longer so strongly concentrated on the issues of faith. In her early novels, including, e.g., *The Wild Girl* (1984) and *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), Roberts interrogates the inconsistencies and fallacies of Christian mythology and ideology, often by means of rewriting biblical stories or by weaving religious motifs into contemporary contexts. *Impossible Saints* is inspired by the life of the sixteenth-century Spanish saint, Teresa of Ávila, a mystic, a religious reformer and the foundress of the Discalced Carmelite order, but its narrative markedly subverts her official biography. The novel takes place in an unspecified place and time, its setting loosely reminiscent of Teresa's Counter-Reformation Spain, with the Church maintaining absolute control through the Inquisition. Roberts's protagonist, Josephine, founds a rather nonconformist convent



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for women who seek communion with God by following an unorthodox path of sensual spirituality. The novel intersperses Josephine's story with multiple miniature narratives depicting fictional lives of saints, rewritten in the feminist fashion, portraying both the female predicament in the patriarchally structured society and women's struggle for empowerment in which they rebel against masculinist conventions. This allows Roberts to question "the traditional perception of the female saint" (Bastida Rodríguez 80) and voice a "radical critique of the sexist ideology underlying Christian doctrine" (Bastida Rodríguez 70). In this article, I employ some feminist thought, mainly from Julia Kristeva, to examine the way in which *Impossible Saints* problematizes the relation of the Catholic Church to the position of the woman as well its concern with the human body. I attempt to situate the patriarchal institution of the Church in the context of the Lacanian order of the symbolic and his notion of the Name-of-the-Father. Finally, I explore the issue of the metaphor of God as seen through the traditional patriarchal frame which obligatorily pictures God as masculine.

The critique of the patriarchal character of the Christian religious and ideological doctrine undertaken by Roberts in *Impossible Saints* is firmly grounded in feminist thought. It relates, for instance, to Julia Kristeva's claim that the Western perception of femininity and sexual difference emerges from Judeo-Christian tradition. Kristeva sees the advance of Judaism as the replacement of perennial beliefs founded on worshipping fertility and *plural* "maternal divinities" with a new form of *single*, "male, paternal divinity" (140). She notes that the "discovery . . . of the specific form of religiosity known as monotheism . . . represents the paternal function" (142), and that "by establishing itself as the principle of a symbolic, paternal community in the grip of the superego," monotheism not only "is sustained by a radical separation of the sexes," which acquire different political and religious positions, but it significantly represses "women and mothers" (141). Judaism demands that women occupy an unprivileged socio-cultural position in the patrilineal system and that they are "excluded from knowledge and power" (143). Their role is restricted to assuring procreation, but they do not have direct connection to the religious and political community, because "God generally speaks only to men" (140). In Kristeva's view, the most potent manifestation of the female exclusion lies in the biblical myth of the relation between Eve and the serpent, who, as the critic postulates, represents "Adam's repressed desire to transgress" and also "that which, in God or Adam, remains beyond or outside the sublimation of the Word," that is, his bodily and sexual aspect (143). In this way, Eve, who yields to the serpent's (i.e. God's and/or Adam's) temptation, becomes a receptacle of sin, an estranged "other," a source of corruption. Christianity generally follows the Judaic creed, supplementing it with the utmost veneration of carnal chastity and martyrdom. Christian doctrine allows women to partake in the symbolic religious community "only if they keep their *virginity*, [which is] represented by Mary and imitated by the female monastic orders" (145–46). Otherwise, "they can atone for their carnal *jouissance* with their martyrdom" (146). In essence, Kristeva asserts that Christianity reverses all previous mythologies advocating the concept of resurrection which always rested on the belief in a "mother goddess"; instead, its philosophy proposes "the displacement of that bio-maternal determinism through the postulate that immortality is mainly that of the *name of the Father*" (175; emphasis added). A radical feminist revision of this masculinized view of religion is proposed by Luce Irigaray, who uses deconstructive strategies to destabilize "the ideal of a transcendent male God figure and the accompanying divinely sanctioned law of the Father" dominating Judeo-Christian religious tradition (Joy 222). As pointed out by Joy, Irigaray maintains that the Christian religion excludes women from its doctrinal essence, while bestowing all privileges on men, who are "the official representatives of God in directing religious institutions, performing rituals, and promulgating dogmatic decrees" (222).

Roberts's castigation of the patriarchal nature of Western civilization in *Impossible Saints* rests largely on her premise that Western cultural values are rooted in Christianity, which the novelist considers utterly masculinized. The novel demonstrates Roberts's agreement with Kristeva's assumption that the Judeo-Christian tradition marginalizes women, excluding them from power and knowledge. Both the main narrative, concerning Josephine's life, and the mock-hagiographic stories about female saints, testify to the male-centred character of European social structure and culture. This patriarchal domination is already observable in the early days of Christianity represented by Roberts. The novel relates the story of St Petronilla, St Peter's apocryphal daughter, who is excluded from her father's friendly religious disputes with his only-male companions and required to perform lowly tasks in their service, mainly to prepare food for their parties and clean the house. St Peter has specific expectations concerning the girl's behaviour, like all men in this society, who did not tolerate "sluttishness . . . in their own wives and daughters. It indicated a *failure of proper masculinity and control*. It was an affront to masculine dignity" (56; emphasis added). Another early Christian saint, St Thecla, finds that her lover would like to restrict her social position to family-related activities, since women "aren't born to be poets [but] to be mothers" (86). This subordinate social role is also taken by Josephine's own mother, who "gave birth to fifteen children in twenty years and died of this" (38). Correspondingly, the father of the seventh-century saint, St Dymphna, tries to ensure a prosperous life for the girl by teaching her to hunt and ride a horse "astride like a man," but only because he believes she is "infinitely superior to the rest of her sex" (198). Christian ideology, as depicted in the lives of the saints, defines masculinity in terms of prominence and the ability to control women, and links femininity with inferiority and subservience. This objectification of women, promoted particularly by the Catholic Church, is strongly endorsed by this Church through its use of the myth of the Virgin Mother, a paragon of female docility. As Sarah Falcus notes, since the cult of the Virgin evokes the image of a saint who is "a 'negative' woman: passive, accepting, endlessly brave and self-sacrificing," Roberts's use of the female saints' lives, along with her references to the Catholic cult of the Holy Mary, is an apt tool "for the investigation of the position of women within [the Catholic] Church tradition" (108).

The central character of *Impossible Saints*, Josephine, who is continually demeaned and marginalized by the Catholic Church, adopts the attitude of active contestation, which culminates in blasphemous subversion. Like her historical prototype, Teresa of Ávila, Josephine is a rapturous mystic. But the patriarchal Church officials reject her exalted spiritual visions on the grounds that the transcendent union with God described in them is represented in language rich in sensual imagery. Consequently, the nun is compelled to rewrite her autobiographical account in a manner deemed "appropriate to feminine minds" (34), repressing the true nature of her visions. Her disadvantaged position as a woman is often emphasized by the Catholic establishment: even the position of a prioress does not rank as significant compared to that of any male priest. Excluded and deprecated, Josephine loses faith in the masculinized institution of the Church and, in her last days, openly rejects Christian rites: she spends this time outside the convent, at her cousin's place, refuses confession and holy communion, and pushes away the crucifix which is put forward for her to kiss. When her niece, Isabel, inherits Josephine's rosary, she discovers that it does not have a cross and that its beads are made of paper spindles squeezed together on the cord, miniature pieces of a manuscript containing a real, independently written book of her life. Yet her sacrilegious attitude is no obstacle for the Catholic establishment to appropriate her achievements, warp them to the desired shape, and put them to good ideological use. The bishops decide that Josephine should be canonized and framed as an example of docility, "recognised as amongst the most humble and self-effacing of her sex" (308), thus joining the gallery of male-approved symbols of feminine

sanctity. The overpowering masculinized Church also usurps control over the convent formed and administered by Josephine, normalizing it to the standard of compliant Catholicity.

The establishment is originally meant by its founder to constitute what she ironically calls “a dumping ground for spinsters” (102) and what in fact provides a safe haven for self-determined women who do not wish to follow the demands of the patriarchal society and fulfil the roles of wives and mothers it has imposed on them. With the financial aid of her cousin Magdalena, Josephine is able to initiate a commune of independent women, placed in a house consisting of two symmetrical sides, one of which resembled “a convent without Catholicism and Catholic beliefs” (192), while the other accommodated exciting social receptions and intimate erotic trysts. As Emma Parker points out, the nature of Josephine’s convent reflects “the seventeenth-century use of ‘nunnery’ to mean both holy house and whore house,” as it is “simultaneously a place of spiritual retreat and sensual pleasure” (“Sex Changes” 338). Bastida Rodríguez argues that *Impossible Saints* participates in the “veneration of female bonding [which] repeatedly appears in recent feminist thinking and is also often portrayed in women’s fiction,” taking the form of female communities which are “sometimes the only way for women to escape from patriarchal oppression” (71). The motif of female community is recurring throughout Roberts’s text: it is signalled by a heap of bones of anonymous female saints found mingled in a chapel in the novel’s opening scene, then reappears in a group of women accompanying Petronilla, who “lay on the roof drying their hair discussing childbirth and menstruation” (60), and finally materializes in a genuine community of girls who stay with St Christine in a mental asylum. As Roberts implies, female communities allow their members to set their collective identity against the domination of men.

This collective identity of “impossible” female saints, vehement women trying to resist the patriarchal order, is built by Roberts by means of rewriting standard hagiographic accounts. The novelist uses here the lives of the saints recounted by the thirteenth-century Italian archbishop and chronicler Jacobus de la Voragine in *The Golden Legend*, a collection which, apparently, is read by nuns in Josephine’s convent. Since the stories were compiled by a male member of the Catholic establishment, they automatically advertise the desired Christian pattern of female holiness manifesting in meek passivity. As the critics notice, Roberts playfully deconstructs the official stories, manipulating the sacred genre of hagiography. Ruth Cain points out that “formal and moral constraints” of original narratives are “mocked and subverted” in *Impossible Saints* (416n). For Parker, the novel “rejects hagiography . . . in favor of what Mary Daly calls ‘hag-ography,’ the story of ‘hags,’ that is women who refuse conventional definitions of female virtue” (“Sex Changes” 339). Falcus, in turn, states that those rewritings “highlight what remains untold or repressed in the original versions,” which, consequently, draws “attention to the misogyny inherent in the tales and their patriarchal bias” and “subvert[s] the moral basis of the stories” (107). The alternative lives of the “impossible” saints related by Roberts portray women’s empowerment, manifesting their autonomy and individuality, proclaiming their ability to pursue independent goals, embrace their sexuality, and choose their career. For instance, Petronilla, unable to resist her father’s bullying, uses marriage as an opportunity for liberation: first, she invites female friends to help her with everyday chores and changes the house into a female domain; later, when the husband attempts to terrorize her, she disobeys and absconds. In another story, Thecla, despite feeling fulfilled in a sexual relationship, rejects a marriage proposal from her lover because it would involve limiting her independence through a socially predefined role of a wife. As Isabel points out, all female saints from official hagiographies are martyrs who die “noble and inspiring deaths” and are supposed to act “as an example”: even while their bodies are “torn to pieces by the fangs wild beasts, . . . their eyeballs [are] poked out and their stomachs slash open,” they are full of love, courage and “faith in

God” (286). The women whose lives are related in all individual chapters of Roberts’s novel refuse to obey this model by declining this God-inspired—i.e. male-inspired—martyrdom.

This physical suffering and death in martyrdom present in hagiography certainly stems from the long-established Christian practice of self-mortification and ascetism, which, in turn, derives from the deprecatory attitude towards the body, perceived as a hindrance to spiritual development of the human soul. Hall and Thoennes trace this “radical dualism” between the material body and the spiritual soul back to Gnosticism, which was itself rooted in Greek philosophy, in “the Platonic separation of matter and spirit” and in “the Aristotelian concept of divine impassability” (33). Such dualism means that “physical bodies are evil, and are a prison for the human soul” (33). This, understandably, has had immense impact on Christian morality and theological thought, as the body has for centuries been considered an inevitable repository of sin. Some psychological studies demonstrate that, despite the doctrinal idea of the sanctification of the human body, the concept of “radical dualism” upkeeps a scathing approach towards the body even in contemporary Christianity (cf. Jacobson et al., Beck). Furthermore, as Mary Daly, a feminist commentator of the Christian doctrine, points out, the biblical story of Eden ascribes all human imperfection and sinfulness to women, personified by Eve, who causes Adam’s fall. Christian theology encourages women to “accept the victim’s role [and] remain essentially identified with Eve and evil” (Daly 77) and, as a result, “reinforces the universality of women’s low caste status” (Daly 62). This unprivileged position is particularly evident in the Christian perception of the female body. St Augustine makes a clear distinction between the spiritual nature of a woman’s soul, which is, just like a man’s soul, created in the image of God, and the secondary physical nature of her body, visible in the assumption that “the woman in her sexual body is not the image of God, but rather images the body as carnal and prone to sin” and, as such, should be subjugated to men (Ruether 85). This view is continued in the Christian tradition by Thomas Aquinas, who propagated the belief that “woman is biologically defective physically and mentally” (Ruether 86).

As Michèle Roberts admits in an interview, her own Catholic upbringing and schooling fostered in her a similar deprecation of female carnality: “Catholicism taught you that the female body was somehow more corrupt and more evil than the male one and you had to rise above it to find God” (“On Women” 102). Since the Church identifies the body as the source of corruption and sin, women are meant to surpass its deficiencies by denying their natural impulses and engaging in self-mortification. Roberts states that she is aware of “a long tradition of women saints sometimes doing without food to transcend the body, which they felt horrid” (“On Women” 102), and incorporates a story of such a woman into *Impossible Saints*. Blesilla, a young widow, becomes overwhelmed by an insidious doctrinal influence coming from St Jerome, who inculcates into her a Christian tenet: “the more you ignore your body, the closer you will get to God!” (21). She pursues a path of self-abnegation and austerity, uprooting her desires and wishing “only for pain and punishment” (24). She resolves to mortify her body through fasting, because she considers food a major cause of evil: “Blesilla knew that food had teeth and could bite her. Food was dangerous and fierce. In the garden of Eden the apple had jumped off the tree and leapt at Eve and forced itself down her throat. . . . The devil hid in food and tempted her” (26–27). Observing the biblical myth, reinterpreted in a way which defies elementary human connection with the world of nature (i.e. as if our bodies were not physical and did not need food), proves fatal in this case: food deprivation does indeed bring Blesilla purity and peace of mind, but she attains them in death. Reading Blesilla’s denial of the body through Kristeva’s theory of the abject, the unassimilable element that needs to be expelled in the process of ego formation, Falcus postulates that the Christian ideology, imposed upon the character by St Jerome, representing the Church, “places the female body in the position of

the unclean, the abject, creating in Blesilla a system of prohibitions based upon the rejection of her own body” (112). In a similar Kristevan reading of Roberts’s earlier novel *Daughters of the House*, Parker claims that from the perspective of Christian tenets “becoming ‘clean and proper’ entails a repression of the female body and, specifically, female sexuality” (“From House” 156). Parker remarks that the two protagonists of this novel “are taught to experience their own bodies as abject [and that] their attitudes to their bodies are clearly learned, the product of social conditioning” (“From House” 155). This observation can also be applied to the characters from *Impossible Saints*, both the episodic female saints and the two protagonists from the novel’s main plotline, Josephine and her cousin Magdalena. During her convent years, Josephine reminisces about her innocent teenage elation of carnality:

she remembered Magdalena and herself playing, girls full of curiosity pulling up their skirts to display themselves to each other. . . . Knees bent and pulled apart while Magdalena peered. Oh you *woman*, her cousin had shrieked and they had convulsed in laughter. The smell of herself, like fresh curds. She liked it, in those days *before she learned she shouldn't*. Inside, she had something particular that meant she was a woman. She wasn't sure what it was but she was proud of it. Then *she'd learned to feel disgusted with herself*. Foul, evil-smelling, like a heap of carrion attracting gross, buzzing flies. Yet a long time ago, there had been innocence and gaiety, the comfort of bodies, living inside herself without giving it a second thought, she had not been ashamed at all, she remembered that now. (188–189; emphases added)

Roberts explicitly shows that the girls’ innate natural potential of corporal enjoyment is throttled by the dogmatic system which advocates the deprecation of the body for religious reasons.

In their adult lives, Josephine and Magdalena realize this oppression and undertake various measures to resist it. The main protagonist’s cousin, whose name evokes affinity to the biblical Mary Magdalene, is highly committed to bodily enjoyment. While the city inspectors suspect her of running a brothel, her house becomes a place where numerous male guests can fulfil various desires, also those that go beyond the erotic sphere: reclining on a sofa and reading, tasting different kinds of marmalade, putting on women’s dresses and presenting them to the company of others; there is even a man who spends every evening in a tree. Magdalena’s “establishment” is certainly condemned by municipal institutions, which find it inappropriate that its organizer, a woman, finds the activities pleasurable: “I amuse myself . . . that’s quite unforgivable” (156). As for Josephine, forbidden carnality manifests in her early monastic years through her visions of God, which take the form of “ecstatic night-time meetings with a man in gold claiming to be Christ” (105). Pressured by priests, the young nun records her spiritual experience in an expurgated form, abiding to doctrinal patterns. Later, when Josephine leaves the convent, she stays in Magdalena’s house and takes to gardening, a pastime symbolically representing her connection to nature. Her physicality, arrested by Catholic institutionalization, is soon reawakened. Magdalena’s hedonistic house inspires Josephine to start her own convent whose rule is based on bodily enjoyment; it is a “sensual convent, where God manifest[s] in sensual joy” (194). The convent is divided into two sections: while one of them follows the Christian tradition in being devoted to spirituality and contemplation, the other is more subversive and concentrates on carnal indulgence. The women’s fulfilment is related not only to a sexual sphere, but extends also to other activities, such as cooking: “The kitchen would be the chapel. The altar would be the table on which they prepared food. Mass would be a question simply of cooking a good dinner. *They would not need priests* because they would all learn to cook” (193; emphasis added). By means of its emphasis on sensuality, and feminine sensuality at that, Josephine’s theology is heretical mostly because it marginalizes the patriarchal structures of the Catholic Church.

The manner in which the patriarchal doctrine of the Catholic Church structures the cultural values of Western civilisation can be viewed in the context of Lacanian understanding of the symbolic order and its formative influence upon the subject. For Lacan, the subject is inevitably split as a result of a process he dubs the symbolic castration, which takes place before the child can enter into language. This split is effected by the Name-of-the-Father (or Father's "No!"; French "Nom-du-Père" and "Non-du-Père" are conveniently homonymic), a paternal interdiction introduced through language into the primal imaginary order and taking the place of *jouissance*. The Name-of-the-Father is "the basis of the symbolic function which, since the dawn of historical time, has identified [the father] with the figure of the law" (Lacan, *Écrits* 230). Determined by the paternal authority, the child has to reorganize themselves according to the standards of the symbolic order, the world of language, law and social conventions. Lacan also postulates that the moral law, or "the presence of the moral agency in our activity," "affirms itself in opposition to pleasure" (*Seminar VII* 23). This closely corresponds to the Christian tradition of deprecating worldly delights, as well as to the male-centred hierarchy of the Church discussed above. Subjugation to the norms of the symbolic order can be seen in Josephine's decision to write an account of her visions in a way which negates her true experience: "she protected herself from accusations of heresy by lying and dissembling. By speaking the language they [the Church officials] understood" (33). In this context, the "language" of the Church also refers to the Lacanian symbolic order, "that foreign language that we are born into and must learn to speak if we are to articulate our own desire" (Homer 70). Josephine's paternal authority is not only her own father but also, symbolically, God the Father, the Christian divinity imprinted in her mind in a necessarily masculine form: "Before everything, God was. There was nothing and no one before him. God was a man. An invisible one. A spirit with no body, but male nonetheless" (36). Being ascribed this primary, initializing position, God functions as the "paternal metaphor" (Lacan, *Écrits* 463), an unconscious concept anchoring Josephine within the symbolic network of signification, determining her secondary and alienated position. This fundamental understanding of God is also accentuated in the novel by its evocation of the Lord's Prayer, effectively a declaration of subservience to the paternal authority, which Josephine has to learn by rote in her early childhood.

Yet, at the same time, the novel also introduces an entirely different metaphoric dimension of God, which it juxtaposes with the regulatory and tyrannical image of deity rooted in the Judeo-Christian paternal pattern. This alternative concept of the divine is propagated most intensely through indirections and indeterminacies present in Josephine's mystic visions. In them, she perceives God not as a being external to her, but as an inseparable and constitutive part of herself, a "feeling she called God" which "burned and shivered and danced up and down her spine" (35). Her encounter with divinity is not strictly a spiritual occurrence, but also has its carnal aspect. After she leaves the Catholic convent, the mainstay of the oppressive "spirituality" of the Church, to live in Magdalena's house, the hub of bodily fulfilment, during a visit to a city cathedral Josephine perceives the presence of God as a highly sensual, even orgasmic, experience: "God was blackness, darkness, sweetness, limited to no one shape but part of everything. . . . God both soft and fierce, destroying you then letting you fly, God flooding through you so fast and violently you thought you were dying" (182). The theological perspective arising from those visions seems to comply with Luce Irigaray's concept of divinity, understood not as a speculative metaphysical idea, but rather as a more tangible entity that partakes in human existence and anchors it in the natural world. The French philosopher advocates the immanent and corporeal dimension of the divine: "Why do we assume that God must always remain inaccessible transcendence rather than a realization—here and now—in and through the body?" (Irigaray 124).

Expressed in Lacanian terms, the divide between the two conflicting conceptions of religion—a systemic, institutionalizing and restrictive “masculine” one versus a subversive, sensual and unconfined “feminine” one—corresponds to the opposition between the Name-of-the-Father and *jouissance*. Lacan postulates that “jouissance is prohibited to whoever speaks” (*Écrits* 696), implying that the incorporation of the Law (of the Father) into the subject, which warrants its entry in the domain of language, is obtained at the price of forfeiting *jouissance*. Likewise, Josephine’s final decision to conform to the authoritarian domain of the Church necessitates that she reject a rapport with God, achieved previously through corporality in the convent she has established. The bodily dimension of the divine, manifesting in the emancipatory communal experience of women in her convent, greatly contrasts with the traditionally established, regulatory character of religiosity, found in the Catholic convent that Josephine earlier abandons.

When Irigaray deliberates on the nature of the divine and its relation to femininity, she also examines the position of female mystics. She regards their testimony as genuine and consequential, discerning that they, in Morny Joy’s phrasing, “manifest, by means of their bodies, an eloquent protest against the strictures that have forbidden them access to education and independence” (222; emphasis added). Michèle Roberts’s critique of the traditional patriarchal framework of the Catholic Church, strongly based in feminist thought, undermines Christian deprecatory perception of the human, and particularly feminine, body. Through her revisionary retelling of the lives of female saints, the novelist castigates the Church’s endorsement of self-mortification and martyrdom. Her “impossible” female saints, as well as the women from Josephine’s subversive convent, express a protest against the constricting and oppressive structures erected by men, which culminate in the male-centred institution of the Catholic Church legitimized by the paternal metaphor of God.

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