A nalyses
R ereadings
T heories

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Edited by:

Marta Goszczyńska

ISSN: 2353-6098

Analyses/Rereadings/Theories Journal 6 (2) 2020

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Łódź

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6 (2) 2020

The present issue was edited by: Marta Goszczyńska

WEBSITE http://analysesrereadingstheories.com/

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Initiating editor Katarzyna Smyczek
Typesetting Agent PR
Technical editor Elżbieta Rzymkowska

Published by Lodz University Press
First Edition W.10468.21.0.C
Publisher's sheets 6.5; printing sheets 8.0

ISSN 2353-6098

Lodz University Press
90-237 Łódź, 34A Jana Matejki St.
www.wydawnictwo.uni.lodz.pl
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phone +48 42 635 55 77

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https://doi.org/10.18778/2353-6098.6.07

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Preface

Ever since the publication of her first novel, *A Piece of the Night*, in 1978, Michèle Roberts has retained a significant presence on the literary scene in Britain. She has published fifteen novels, three collections of short stories and several books of poetry. She is also the author of two plays, a book of essays and two memoirs. She is Emeritus Professor of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Her fiction has been compared to such major writers as Toni Morrison (Luckhurst), Jean Rhys (Goyal), Angela Carter (White, Goyal), Jeanette Winterson (Stowers, White) and Margaret Atwood (Bertrand). She has also received prestigious literary awards and nominations for her novels. In particular, *Daughters of the House* (1992) won the W.H. Smith Literary Award and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and *Ignorance* (2012) was longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction.

Despite the awards, the prominence, and, most of all, the range, depth and intensity of her writing, Roberts's literary status has never been properly recognised, as if in corroboration of her own suspicion that "we only allow a space for one [great female writer] at a time, one per generation" (Roberts 11). As early as 1996, Roger Luckhurst referred to Roberts as "an important, but resolutely marginalized presence" and complained that her substantial *oeuvre* tended to be "shunted off into the area of programmatic feminist texts" (243). The view was reiterated over a decade later when Susanne Gruss described the author as "almost completely ignored by academia" (2). Today, after another ten years, the words could well be repeated. Indeed, Roberts's writing has come under critical scrutiny only in two extensive studies: Sarah Falcus's *Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories* (2007) and Susanne Gruss's *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text: Reading Michèle Roberts and Angela Carter* (2009). Though both books offer sensitive, in-depth readings of the author's work, they were published over a decade ago and, as such, they could not (and do not) include Roberts's notable recent work. What is more, they approach the author through the lens of feminist theory and focus almost exclusively on novels, with only occasional references to poetry and short fiction. Bearing all this in mind, there is clearly a need to engage anew in the academic debate on Roberts's literary achievement.

Given the size of this slight volume, it would be presumptuous to assume that the texts included here will mark a breakthrough in how Roberts is read. Still, they offer much needed new perspectives, filling in some of the gaps in existing criticism and deepening ongoing discussions. The two articles that open the issue focus, respectively, on Roberts's poetry and short fiction, the

Received: 20.03.2022. Revised: 1.04.2022. Accepted: 4.04.2022.

two aspects of her work that have so far been seriously neglected. Venturing into these largely unexplored territories, they have the potential to expand our understanding of Roberts's writing and to reveal more of its richness and complexity. The three articles that follow are devoted to individual novels—*Flesh and Blood* (1994), *Impossible Saints* (1997) and *Ignorance*—either revisiting previously acclaimed fiction or looking at narratives that have not yet been analysed by critics. All of them, I hope, offer welcome contributions to scholarship, rekindling and broadening the discussion of Roberts's writing.

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https://doi.org/10.18778/2353-6098.6.08

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"The Ecstasy of the Between-Us": Sharing the World in Michèle Roberts's Relational Poetics

Abstract

In *Through Vegetal Being*, Luce Irigaray writes about the importance of "cultivating and sharing life between all" as it will result in "the blossoming of all beings." This perspective seems to reside at the centre of Michèle Roberts's writing. Entangled in the natural world, her characters demonstrate an awareness of the necessity of grounding. Mud, this mixture of water and soil, is a recurrent motif, and a powerful symbol of remaining close to the earth. It also exemplifies the collapse of binaries frequently occurring in Roberts's texts, including the intertwining of human and nonhuman beings particularly present in her poetry. Offering a weave of the spiritual and the worldly, Roberts frequently foregrounds our corporeal existence, which constitutes a major theme in her work. Sensual and fleshly, her texts remain "in the tangle of brambles" (*The Heretic's Feast* 6), immersed in the shivering, shifting, changing world, with all its intensities and sensations.

This essay explores the significance of the vegetal and animal in the constitution of individual identity in Michèle Roberts's poetic work. The analysis will focus on the relation of the self with the world, established in the spirit of cultivating and sharing.

Keywords: Michèle Roberts, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, dehiscence, chiasm, Mitsein, corporeality

Michèle Roberts creates in many genres—fiction, poetry, essay—yet most critics focus on her novels and short stories, ignoring her poetic work. Even though she is recognised mostly for her work in fiction, in effect and in practice poetry has formed part of her writing career since the beginning. When her first novel, *A Piece of the Night*, was published in 1978, she had already had experience as poetry editor (1975–1977) at a radical feminist magazine, *Spare Rib*. A few years later she became poetry editor at *City Lights* (1981–1983). In 1982, she co-authored a volume, *Touch Papers: Three Women Poets*, with Michelene Wandor and Judith Kazantzis. In her two poetry collections, *The Mirror of the Mother* (1986) and *Psyche and the Hurricane* (1991), a selection of which was gathered in *All the Selves I Was: New and Selected Poems* (1995), Roberts recurrently explores the relational nature of existence, with a particular interest in a mother-daughter

Received: 4.06.2018. Revised: 14.11.2021. Accepted: 1.04.2022.

relationship, but also, more broadly, in the relation between the subject and the world through sensible transcendence. Two pamphlets, which appeared in a quick succession, *The Heretic's Feast* in 2012 and *The Hunter's House* in 2013, focus again on interrelations, foregrounding corporeality and the sensual realms of the world through abundant vegetal and animal metaphors, the poems remaining close to the earth.

Two decades ago, Roberts was described as "an important, but resolutely marginalized presence on the British literary scene, her work shunted off into the area of programmatic feminist texts" (Luckhurst 243). As Clare Hanson argues, Roberts's feminism plays a significant role in her writing, influencing her fiction (229). Being labelled "a feminist writer" may seem to be a simplistic pigeonholing for an author like Roberts. Her writing is often discussed in the context of feminist and poststructuralist theory, but the author herself denies that her novels are mere explanations of any theoretical texts or paradigms. It is important to note at this point that Roberts's work does not illustrate or follow feminist or other theory but explores the same problems in a fictional or poetic form. As she says in an interview, "There's a certain kind of academic person who thinks that if you are interested in theory, then a novel is somehow just an illustration of a theory, and I don't feel that. I feel like I'm working together with it" ("On Women" 96). This is an important confession in the light of what this chapter proposes. During my discussion, I shall employ theoretical and philosophical concepts; yet in doing this, I do not wish to suggest that Roberts's poetry *follows* philosophy or theory but that it *moves along* with it, it co-exists, offering creative insights which are impossible to access for philosophers and theoreticians. Roberts's writing is, for want of a better phrase, "theoretical," that is to say, concerned with exploring philosophical questions through poetic form. For that reason, I wish to attempt a reading of selected poems in the context of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's, Luce Irigaray's, and Hélène Cixous's philosophies as these approaches bear a particular relation to Roberts's writing in which sensual, corporeal relation with the world is frequently foregrounded and the styles of which are imbued with sensory richness. Thus, the discussion will focus on the relation of the self with the world, established in the spirit of cultivating and sharing, and concerned with concepts of being-with, hospitality, and givenness. I wish to focus mainly on the poems from *The Hunter's House* and *The Heretic's Feast* and argue that these collections continue some of the recurrent preoccupations in Roberts's work, while also constituting a new departure in terms of themes, motifs, and imagery, and bringing in more boldly images of the intertwining with the world. Before turning to the poems, I would like to introduce briefly the theoretical framework, explaining phenomenological concepts employed by Merleau-Ponty such as flesh, dehiscence, the chiasm and the intertwining.[1]

Through the Flesh of the World

"The body is the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein" (*Phenomenology* 84), writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for whom Being is a dialogic relationship of the embodied subject with the world, the former corporeally, sensorially, entangled in the latter. In an ontology of the intertwining, or the chiasm, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is an exploration of an embodied intersubjectivity, an incarnate life whereby the body orients the

[1] I employ some of the concepts presented here in the discussion on the poetry of John Burnside, Kathleen Jamie, Robin Robertson and Kenneth White in a book *Contemporary Scottish Poetry and the Natural World* (2019) and in an essay "'A Pinch of Unseen, Unguarded Dust': The World and Self in Thomas Hardy's Poems."

subject in the world through an envelopment in it, our flesh and the flesh of the world, the former self-sensing and the latter sensible, intertwined.

Merleau-Ponty's final, unfinished work, titled *The Visible and the Invisible*, develops his phenomenological concepts focused around the body and its immersion in the world through the senses. Corporeal sensations bridge the gap of alterity as the becoming subject strives to transcend the fragmentation of experience: "The body unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 136), where the two outlines are its sensible nature and openness. The body is a thing among things; it is of things (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 137): we are not separate from the world; we are *of* the world, we *are* the world. Everything is interlaced, forming the fabric of the world. The body belongs to the visible, which enables it to see and "open forth" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 154), as seeing is an act of opening. *Offenheit*, or openness, a concept he borrows from Husserl, who employs it to describe our relation to the earth, is the opening of our bodies to the world (Husserl 194–95). For Merleau-Ponty, it is a reciprocal relationship: as we are open to the world, the world is open to us. In order to describe that movement, he introduces the concept of "dehiscence." A term employed in botany, dehiscence means the opening of flower buds or fungi when they are ready to release their content. The spilling that occurs as a result may send the seeds or spores out and into the world. Thus, the body's "coupling with the flesh of the world" enriches the latter, while the act of "floating in Being with another life," of "making itself the outside of its inside and the inside of its outside" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 144) immerses the body in intersubjectivity. Living our creaturely lives, we are open to other beings.

Another concept employed by Merleau-Ponty is flesh, which goes beyond the capacity of language to denote, as there exists "no name in traditional philosophy to designate it" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 139). Flesh is very difficult to define as it is not matter or mind or substance, or a fact (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 139). The closest one can get to grasping it is by likening it to an element, in the same sense that we

> speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an "element of Being." (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 139)

Flesh does not begin from a union of body and spirit; for Merleau-Ponty, it signifies an attempt to transcend the dual perception of things, because, as he argues, flesh is not a compound of two substances (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 140). Its essential, defining quality is reversibility, "a reversibility of the seeing and the visible, of the touching and the touched" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 147), which suggests that the flesh of the world returns to itself (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 146). The reversibility of the visible and the tangible occurs for we see and are seen, we touch and are touched, which results in a creation of "an intercorporeal being" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 143). Reversibility means a doubling as speaking entails listening, seeing—being seen, perceiving—being perceived, and touching—being touched (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 264).

In the final completed chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, entitled "The Intertwining—the Chiasm" (130–55), Merleau-Ponty develops the concept of chiasm, which, together with flesh, constitutes the theoretical foundation of this study. The French word *chiasme* comes from the Greek *khiasmos*, which means "a crosswise arrangement." Thus, flesh turns back on itself, it crosses and merges the "flesh of the world" and the "flesh of the body," blending them into the "sensible" and the "self-sensing" ("sentient") (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 250). In his working notes, Merleau-Ponty writes, "Grasp this chiasm, this reversal. That is the mind" (*Visible* 199). The

chiasmic intertwining takes place when the seer and the seen merge to become "one sole explosion of Being" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 265), but neither loses its inherent qualities. The interweaving may exist in all orders of Being; yet we may gain access to this realisation through poetic expression which materialises, or bodies-forth, this communion in a verbal form, in poetry.

The phenomenal and material body is at the centre in the work of French feminist thinkers, particularly in Luce Irigaray's and Hélène Cixous's work. In her manifesto, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous underlines the importance of writing for women in order to express their selves in their own voices: "Woman must write her self" (875). Stating simply, "women are body" (886), Cixous emphasises a corporeal, sensual dimension of female experience. "Write your self. Your body must be heard," she urges (880). Writing through the body, the self creates a new language as a radical renewal of speech lies at the bottom of *parler femme*. Similarly to Cixous, Irigaray urges women to renew language:

> We must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover a language [*langage*] which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language [*langue*] attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal. ("Bodily Encounter" 420)

In the above passage, Irigaray emphasises the necessity to retrieve language which will remain close to the body. Both Cixous and Irigaray insist on writing through the body, which is self-sensing and reversible and thus results in the creation of "an intercorporeal being," to use Merleau-Ponty's expression again. To use words "which speak corporeal" is to inhabit the maternal relation of the co-belonging. This approach proposes a "feminine metaphysics" (Colebrook 137) whereby the body is not negated or excluded but is at the centre of a subject's experience of the world.

Being-in-the-World

The importance of grounding in Michèle Roberts's poetry is demonstrated in the insistence on sensual aspects of Being, highlighting our intertwining with the flesh of the world. In her poetry, Roberts foregrounds the significance of being that is embodied in the sensible world, where body is place. A corporeal existence is frequently emphasised by references to non-human animals. In her poems, the work is not just of illuminating and revealing the intertwinement between self and world. There is also a movement of reciprocal enfolding, and with that a sense of revenance, a remembering of the ghosts of the natural world. The subject is often being taken out of the house and back into the world or returns from the world to the house. Thus, the work of the poems is to remind the subject of the intertwining, and to bring her closer in touch with this aspect of being. Another aspect of this double chiasmic motion of fluidity is the frequent, interchangeable use of the "I" and "you," suggestive of a parallel intertwining, an immersion in the shivering, shifting world, with all its intensities and sensations, focused on the openness onto the other, "the ecstasy of the between-us" (Irigaray, *In the Beginning* 1). As I shall explore, Roberts proposes a new way of thinking based on a relational poetics, whereby the dehiscent subject transcends itself, emphasising the importance of "being with," or being "in circuit with others" (Merleau-Ponty, *Nature* 225).

Relations with the mother, the other, and the world are at the centre of Roberts's writing, foregrounding that being in relation constitutes the essence of what is human. Yet the radical otherness of another person cannot be reduced by attempts to categorise as it would destroy the unknowable alterity fundamental to their subjectivity. The other remains radically other, irreducible

and unknowable fully. On the path to a potential transcendental intersubjectivity, the subject must leave one's own world, "or rather to partly open its limits" (Irigaray, *Way of Love* 70), to become dehiscent in—and through—the encounter of the other. Constantly foregrounding the significance of the relational dimension of Being, Roberts focuses on dwelling with others whereby relations which are subject-object oriented yield to a vision of a subject in relation with another subject, in search of the intersubjective communion, or what Irigaray calls "the blossoming of all beings" ("Cultivating" 92). The binary of self and other is abolished for a non-hierarchical co-existence: "To experience this co-belonging implies leaving representative thought and letting oneself go in the co-belonging to Being which already inhabits us, constitutes us, surrounds us. It presupposes, in fact, dwelling 'there where we truly already are'" (Irigaray, *Way of Love* 70).

The first relation is the relationship with the mother, beginning in a complete corporeal entanglement, fundamental in the process of finding a renewed language, as Irigaray suggests and as Roberts demonstrates in her work. It is a psycho-corporeal bond, both physical and psychological, as well as emotional (phenomenological), which for Roberts has been a particularly fertile source as if proving Cixous's claim that "[t]here always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other—in particular, the other woman. In her, matrix, cradler; herself giver as her mother and child; she is her own sister-daughter" (881). Featuring prominently in her work, the figure of the mother in Roberts's writing has been of significant interest to critics (cf. for instance the work of Sarah Falcus, Sonia Villegas-Lopez and Susanne Gruss). According to Gruss, Roberts's "fictional survey of motherhood culminates" in *Flesh and Blood* (1994), demonstrating how "the theoretical impact of French feminism determines both the narrative and the design of the novel" (129). Roberts has also been exploring the maternal in her poetry, from the earliest volumes to the most recent ones.

This pre-verbal, semiotic mother-daughter bond is a recurrent theme in the earlier texts but appears later as well. Roberts addresses it by employing mythical narratives as a framework for speaking the semiotic radical otherness. Such narratives do not destroy alterity, because they become a medium of analogy for which there is otherwise no language and no representation of experience. In her first poetry collection, *The Mirror of the Mother*, this is represented in a series of poems on two mythological female figures, Demeter and Persephone. There are six poems creating the sequence and offering a revision of the Greek myth: "Persephone Descends to the Underworld," "Demeter Grieving," "Persephone Voyages," "Demeter Keeps Going," "Persephone Pays a Visit to Demeter," and "Persephone Gives Birth." Goddess of harvest and fertility, Demeter is cherished for her gift of soil and balmy weather to grow crops. The title of the volume foregrounds the identity-forming role of the mother. In the eponymous poem from *The Heretic's Feast* (3–4), the speaker addresses the mother using a number of religious images ("my saint," "ascending," "the tabernacle," "shrine," "the Book," "manna"). "The sinful girl / starved for a miracle," is waiting for a sign from the figure of a saint into whom she turned her mother. Nothing seems to happen until "fifty years on," during an unremarkable evening at home, the sign arrives. The final stanza brings an epiphany, as the speaker experiences a "transfiguration" when the mother begins "to pour out words" to her: a revelation takes place, a mother-daughter communion occurring through speech. The final two lines ("I catch you on my tongue / and in my hands") evoke once more a religious scene of accepting the wafer during the holy communion, thus endowing the mother with the sacred feminine. And so the daughter partakes in the communion with her mother, whose words become flesh.

In Roberts's work, the flesh of the mother, in the Merleau-Pontyan understanding of the word, constitutes the element of Being, its very essence. The mother-daughter intertwining is so

strong that when it arrives, the mother's death causes an irreconcilable rift in the self. The self/other paradigm is a matrix in the sense that one is always already enfolded in the mother (matrix) as other. Julia Kristeva describes this self/other entanglement which occurs at the earliest stage in development as the semiotic *chora*, where *chora* (or *khôra*), a term borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus*, eludes definition but may signify space, a vessel, matrix, a womb or uterus, in various translations. *Chora* is neither sensible nor intelligible and only becomes form in the coming into being of form. According to Kristeva, during the semiotic, pre-verbal stage, the child does not distinguish his/her self from the mother, or the world, and emotions, sensual perception and needs dominate (25–30). There occurs a distinct lack of boundaries when the self is fully immersed in the real, experiencing the world through two major drives: love and death. This is how Roberts writes about the pain experienced at the thought of the mother's dying moments:

> I could think of her being alive. I could think of her being dead. What I could not bear to think of was that moment when she died, was dying, died. When she crossed over from being alive to being dead. I couldn't join the two things up, I couldn't connect them, because at the point where they met and changed into each other was pain, my body caught in a vice, my bones twisted and wrenched, my guts torn apart. I gave birth to her dying. Violently she was pulled out of me. I felt I was dying too. I could hear an animal howling. It was me. ("God's House" 328)

The thought of the mother's dying feels like one's own death, emphasising the experience of an absolute interweaving of selves. When the mother dies, the daughter experiences a shock of identification felt simultaneously, paradoxically, as giving birth and as one's own death. The unthinkability of the event taking place brings—one would like to say breeds, gives birth to, engenders—contradictory emotions.

The figure of "Mother Nature," pervasive in "the so-called Western tradition," where "[t]he mother is seen as the earth substance which must be cultivated and inseminated so that it may bear fruit" (Irigaray, *Elemental Passions* 1) has been undermined by ecofeminist scholars. In Roberts's writing, it is rather an interconnected community of all beings living together than a nourishing motherly presence, once again suggestive of *chora*. The self's entanglement with the vegetal and animal world runs dark and deep in her texts, as there are recurrent scenes of the chiasmic intertwining with the surrounding world. One example would be a description in *The Book of Mrs Noah* of an interfolding with a tree, when Daphne experiences her "mouth . . . full of green sap, of green words" (52), foregrounding a reversible relation whereby the subject interchanges corporeally with the vegetal being. The emblem of poetry—the laurel branch from the tree-Daphne—became appropriated by Apollo, its true story nearly erased, "its forgotten words, trampled in the dust of the male scholars' sentences" (Roberts, *Book* 52). Yet, as Roberts writes, poetry is returned to women authors who are urged to "[p]ut your ear to the trunk and press it to the bark, which is Daphne's book, Daphne's body, and hear her speak" (*Book* 52). Hearing the laurel tree speak, knowing that language is there in the landscape, women may tell their own stories, may tell their selves, as Cixous wants.

Coming from Latin, the word *vegetus* (meaning "vigorous," "enlivened") suggests vitality, a real living presence, and Roberts's scenes of chiasmic intertwining with the vegetal world remind us what it is to be alive, on a biological, environmental, existential and spiritual level. Another such moment is depicted vividly in a passage coming from "God's House," where the speaker remembers a point when through perception she fused with the landscape, becoming one with it:

> I lay staring at the gnarled trunk of the vine, the weeds and grasses stirring about its root, the yellow flowers mixed in with them whose name I didn't know. Then it stopped being me looking at the vine,

> because I dissolved into it, became it. I left me behind. Human was the same as plant. The corner of the garden, the earth: one great warm breathing body that was all of us, that lived strongly, whose life I felt coursing inside me, sap blood juices of grass. (Roberts 329)

Being close to the ground, the self experiences direct contact with the world when she touches and is touched, sees and is seen. Initiated through vision—as expressed first in "I lay staring" and then in "it stopped being about me looking at the vine"—the experience of the transcendence of "I" ushers in the chiasm when the subject becomes plant. Fully dehiscent, the subject lets go of her self in a moment of the intertwining with the flesh of the world. Knowing the names of the plants becomes unimportant, a mere convention separating human from vegetal. In this moment of the interchange, sap and juices enter the body, filling it, turning into blood and becoming unified as the earth is "one great warm breathing body that was all of us." The quickening closeness of the vegetal world strengthens the sensual experience of the subject, entering in a communion with the flesh.

Being-With

Our intertwining with other beings is the highest form in which our being-in-the-world, or Heidegger's *Dasein*, and Merleau-Ponty's *être au monde*, may be realised. I wish to argue that Michèle Roberts's poetry is concerned with being-in-the-world as *Mitsein*, being-with, coexisting. *Pace* the late Heidegger, Being often means being in the world of modern technologies. They may remove us from what we perceive and conceptualise as the "natural world," keeping us in the realm of screens and keyboards, but we take the non-human environment with us. Even if many people lead digitally mediated lives, associations and comparisons with the living world seem inevitable. For instance, the poem titled "Mobile" (Roberts, *Hunter's House* 21) plays on the analogies between teletechnology and birds (and one insect). Holding a phone is "like holding a wren / in the palm of my hand / one finger stroking its feathers." Texts "chirrup," "zig- / zagging like swallows," "the train is an aviary of warbling, ringing tones." The speaker is "wingless." As the lover is away, she/he wishes that "the jays and magpies steal" the poems and "rip them up to make nests with." The accumulation of participles, those non-finite verb forms, emphasises the ceaseless, unending activity, a suspension in the virtual present. Among all those avian analogies, there is one non-bird reference to a cicada producing loud buzzing and clicking noises which can be heard over a kilometre away and amplified into an overpowering hum. The digital cicada in the poem remains silent, as if powerless despite the speaker's longing "for that jump and fizz."

While "Mobile" relies on parallels with the bird and insect world, the chiasmic relationship with the natural world is more pronounced in other poems. In some, the intertwining is present at the level of imagery. For instance, in "Your Land," the speaker experiences becoming-animal, feeling like a "happy honeymooning mole" at first, and then "clumsier & shyer than any mole," her gloved hands "broad spade-paws." The final lines read: "You release me / a middle-aged Persephone / dirty and sturdy as love" (Roberts, *Hunter's House* 26). Love resembles plants, sturdy, of strong and hardy growth (which brings to mind the phrase "my vegetable love" from Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress"). Continuing down this garden path, Irigaray's "Cultivating and Sharing Life between All" uses the expression "the blossoming of all beings" (92) to indicate the eternal vitality of beings, what Hildegard of Bingen called *viriditas*. As Irigaray argues, "We must start from life again as the only value that can be universally shareable and learn how to cultivate it with the preservation and the blossoming of all beings in mind" (92). The key verb in the above citation, "to cultivate," suggests care and labour, gardening, growing fruit or vegetables, but also reaching to a more distant proto-Indo-European root, "to inhabit." In Michèle Roberts's poem, the world is

a thriving, flourishing place abundant in growth, shared by the two people. The world of plants makes it possible for us to breathe, its hospitality redolent of the mother's womb. As Irigaray writes, after she was born, "[i]t was the vegetal world that ensured mothering care with the environment it arranged around me" ("Sharing" 21). The concept of hospitality has been explored by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and Luce Irigaray. The latter argues, "In some cultures, hospitality does not raise any problem. In these cultures, which are generally feminine ones, the world is open, as is life itself. All, men and women, are children of a mother, in particular of the mother as nature. Thus, peace governs, and also hospitality" ("Toward a Mutual Hospitality" 42).

Being-in-the-world entails dwelling, involved in making ourselves at home (Heidegger 148). Houses and homes constitute a recurring motif in Michèle Roberts's poetry. For instance, in "House-Hunting in the Mayenne" (Roberts, *All the Selves* 120), two lovers form a dwelling between them, being a house to one another: "you're my house / as I am yours," the speaker declares. Implicit throughout Roberts's work there is always a *chora* relationship. Through the process of poetic transmogrification, the body of the lover becomes a landscape in the phrase "the hillside at your back." Then, the rock of the outside becomes "soft walls of flesh" when in a radical dehiscence to one another, the lovers "open up / rooms of secret words." Similarly, the poem titled "You" (*Hunter's House* 10) evokes images of a dwelling that two lovers make for themselves. In this poem, the houses are made from elements of the natural world. The images of impermanent dwellings take different forms in every stanza, almost all bound to the atmospheric, vegetal and animal worlds. At times the dwelling is transient in its weather-dependence as in "a pavilion / of clouds and mist." At other times it is vegetal, as in an ephemeral "cave of leaves," or creaturely, as in "a den / of fur" or "honeycomb." The first stanza locates the couple "in the shivering forest." All those images are corporeal, save for the one appearing in the fourth, penultimate stanza:

> you fold me a paper
> shelter, pleated words
> packed-pocket tight

which creates a dwelling of language, the effect emphasised by the alliteration and sound effects: plosive consonants "p" and "t" mark a strong rhythm but are contrasted with the liquids "l" and "r." The image in the final stanza evokes the reversal of a birth: "closed as an egg / you pull me inside." This is a house closely bound with the animal world, including wild boar, bees and birds. These images emphasise our creatureliness: the inextricable connection existing between human and non-human animals. The images change, one into another, thanks to enjambments occurring in every line, which, together with the lack of punctuation marks, creates a smooth rhythm, and with that a sense of the dissolution of self/other boundaries, as self and world, and self and other, are revealed as porous. The sense of enfolding and wrapping dominates, suggesting an intimate envelopment. The sense of touch is foregrounded in various textures: from clouds and mist in the first stanza to fur and bristles in the next, to paper pleats in the third, to honeycomb, and skin. As Merleau-Ponty writes after Freud, "To sense is already to be human. To be flesh is already to be human. . . The body asks for something other than the body-thing or than its relations with itself. It is in circuit with others" (*Nature* 225). Life means being in circuit with the other, and the intertwining is emphasised in the final words of Roberts's poem: "our conversation, our smell / our house of skin," where the pronoun "our" foregrounds the entanglement of the speaker with the "you" of the poem. For Irigaray, this interlacing of beings is at the basis of the world, and she calls it "the ecstasy of the between-us" (*In the Beginning* 1). Ecstasy, or a state of rapture, requires one to step outside

oneself, causing a displacement, whereby the subject is put out of place. This moment allows the borders of self to be transcended into an experience of intersubjectivity. The verbs—"lift," "stroke," "fold," "wall," "wrap," "wave," "pull"—represent the second person. Even if the "you" seems to dominate the lines, egalitarianism is maintained in the repetition of the second-person pronoun which matches the number of times—six—the pronouns "my" and "me" appear. Symmetrically, the first-person plural "our" occurs three times in the last lines of the poem. This emphasises the image of "twoness" that Irigaray writes about, "a feminine transcendency, which is necessary to construct a valid female identity and non-hierarchical loving relationships between the sexes" (Irigaray, *Elemental Passions* 4).

Hauntings

From an intimate dwelling, we are moving now to a haunted house. Roberts's interest in hauntings of many kinds is prominent in her fiction. For instance, the story of *In the Red Kitchen* interweaves female experience, demonstrating a striking convergence which goes beyond time and place, where ghosts and spirits figure together with the displaced, the abandoned, and the forgotten. Hauntings return in Roberts's short stories, for instance, in "Emma Bovary's Ghost" from *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love* (2010), and again, in her 2017 novel, *The Walworth Beauty*. Ontologically undetermined, spectres occupy a third space, straddling the sphere in-between: neither here nor there, neither dead nor alive, offering "*the experience of the undecidable*" (xiv), as Julian Wolfreys argues. By the same token, the definition of spectrality "escapes . . . any positivist or constructivist logic, by emerging between, and yet not as part of, two negations: *neither, nor*" (Wolfreys x). A form of haunting occurs in the writing process as "writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live" (Cixous 883).

In "Haunted" (Roberts, *Heretic's Feast* 5–6), the house provides a shelter from the outside world, represented by "owls & bats," against which the "jumpy" speaker locks and shutters it. Yet it soon turns out (in line 4 to be precise) that hauntings do not come in the form of nocturnal birds and flying mammals but in the second person singular, and in the "mouth / distorted, snarling / let me back in." The house is affected by the haunting; chaos and disintegration start to rule:

> Next day the washing-machine
> broke down
> & the china stopper
> popped out of the cider
> bottle & the Velux
> blind would no longer draw
> a black veil over
> the view from the bedroom window.

The house is giving up the ghost of its artificiality, through the breakdown of the mechanical, and letting in the world, while forcing the subject out into that world, thereby implying a form of chiasm in the crossing of the threshold. The use of the word "stet" in line 24 ("No. Let it sit. *Stet*") introduces a textual reminder, drawing the reader into the house of language, strengthening "an irreducible nexus of language and materiality" (Vasseleu 25). Here a gesture of resistance, stet suggests the speaker's wish to return to the previous state of things. In their staccato rhythm, the five one-syllable words aim to bring back order. In the next stanza, the speaker leaves the house to look at the garden. An alliterated expression "cast-off corrugated iron," evoking a heavy piece of hard scrap metal, is contrasted with a swift one-syllable "hare" (6), a reminder of the natural world, which suddenly appears in the

garden, joining the vegetal world there. Both the hare and the garden belong to wilderness, as suggested by the words describing the garden left to run wild, "the tangle of brambles." The poem demonstrates how the self emerges through an entanglement of the verbal and the material: "As flesh, the interwovenness of language and materiality in perception is embraced as an irreducible complexity that is necessary for a sense of self" (Vasseleu 23). Gradually disintegrating, the dwelling in the poem slowly but inevitably returns to its originary state. At the same time, the house is disturbed; broken apart into plural "homes." There is something uncanny at work in the return of the nature/subject connection, because they are merely an expression of technology.

Givenness

Adjacent to the house, the garden may become a place of haunting as well. Gardens occupy an important place in Roberts's writing, at times becoming alive through the work of daemons, or demiurges, personified, or entwining with the subject as was discussed above. For instance, in the following passage from "God's House," the subject experiences an uncanny moment as she enters the garden: "The garden had seemed to know me, had taken me in without fuss. Leaving it, going outside and not coming back, would be like having my skin peeled off. I might die. Something was tearing me apart inside. It frightened me. I was a piece of paper being slowly ripped in two" (327–28). Far from being indifferent, the garden is a knowing presence, recognising and welcoming the subject who feels entangled in its flesh. A similar interlacing occurs in the eponymous poem from *The Hunter's House* (7–8), which is set in the midst of the summer season, as emphasised by vegetal imagery in the first stanza:

> Blazing wheel of midsummer:
> sweet-peas, poppies, love-in-a-mist.
> Crackle of grass mattresses
> shrivelled to
> yellow stalks and parched earth.

The phrase "blazing wheel" suggests both the disc of the sun and the seasonal cycle. The season is marked by the names of flowers: "sweet-peas, poppies, love-in-a-mist." The latter is a wonderfully evocative common name for *Nigella damascena*. The employment of the commonly used name (love-in-a-mist goes by many other, undeniably poetic names such as chase-the-devil, devil in the bush, kiss-me-twice-before-I-rise, love-in-a-puzzle, love-in-a-tangle, ragged lady, Bird's nest, blue crown, and blue spiderflower) grounds the poem in the everyday but also in a folkloric netherworld, slightly *unheimlich* and unfamiliar. The poetic self is entangled with the vegetal world, as indicated in the gardening metaphor from the second stanza when the speaker weeds out "lost flowers / out of my heart by the roots." There is already a sense of passing or folding, as the words "shrivelled" and "parched" indicate aridity. The dead emotions, like stray plants, are uprooted and thrown onto the compost. The third stanza announces an animal presence, a "lodger" who takes an avian form, all power and action as the verbs suggest: "thumps back," "crash landing," "scrambles," "hovers," "scratch." He enters the house every night, "his claws and feathers in," disrupting the inhabitant. His hovering presence is overpowering, as "he rummages about" and installs himself close to the speaker's bed, as his "pinions bristle, scratch, brush / my face in dreams." The lodger is then called "[m]y companion" and compared to Eros, as an expression of a dark desire. In the last two stanzas the speaker turns directly to the lover, addressing him: "You enter and change me / make me rise." This is a moment of transformation as the speaker becomes a bird "with concertinaed wings" and a cohabitation of subjects starts. The subject is transported to the hunter's

house, which occupies the outside world: "in your bright palace of stars / your black palace of sky." The pronoun "you" in the first two lines ("You arrive in August. / You enter and change me") turns to "me" repeated twice ("You enter and change me / make me rise"), to return in the fourth line with a preposition indicating togetherness ("With you up to the hunter's house"). The connection between the two lovers is emphasised in the next line ("We jostle"). In an expression of desire, the two are changed into a pair of nocturnal birds of prey. The energy of the attraction to the other transforms the self, and then is transformed into a poem.

Inhabiting the world truly means living with and experiencing its cycles. Seasons are frequently marked in Michèle Roberts's poems with vegetal references, which emphasise the natural rhythms of the world. For instance, the poem in *The Hunter's House* titled "Solstice" (17) joins a number of other poems on the solstice, marking a threshold, a transition between seasons. The frequency of references to perennial temporal moments demonstrates how embedded this poetry is in the seasons, focused on a close observation of the changes and the significance of living with them. Another summer poem, titled "Harvest Poem" (Roberts, *Hunter's House* 9), evokes an image of ripeness and abundance at its wistful end. The opening stanza calls up an image of ripeness with its early autumn signs: "[b]unches of black / muscat grapes," "[s]weet chestnuts fall," "apples plump," "scarred pears." It is a season tipping towards winter, a time of scarcity and austerity, felt acutely by the speaker who prepares "an elegiac soup" with "the last of the basil, tarragon, beans." The final lines of the poem further stress the sense of something ending: "I shut and shutter my house / The roses are gone. Your wine is stoppered up." The gestures of closing and saying farewell to the time of abundance is strengthened by two words "good bye" repeated four times. During the lover's absence, "[t]he words of letters are not flesh enough. / So the morning glory opens blue / eyes, cries."

The poem's rhythm relies on enjambments and occasional rhymes, further foregrounded by the refrain, slightly modified each time, thus performatively expressing the conceptual theme of the natural rhythms of the world. First it is the idiomatic "*ça donne*" repeated three times, which turns into the second person "*tu donnes*," as if conjugating backwards. The final refrain is "*je veux donner, donner, donner*." The returning refrain in the form of the conjugation of the verb *donner*, or give: *ça donne*, it gives, and *tu donnes*, you give. The third one differs from the other two in the form: here *donner* is preceded by the verb *vouloir*, to want, thus *je veux donner* I want to give. The present situation in the first two is juxtaposed with a desire to give. As Irigaray writes, desire "is a question of establishing, keeping and cultivating the between-us" (*In the Beginning* 18). Givenness entails dehiscence, an openness taking place on a corporeal, sensual level as "[t]he words of letters are not flesh enough." The poem's sensuality is foregrounded by the use of touch and textures ("plump to my palms," "scarred," "prickle") in the first stanza and taste in the second (the ingredients for the elegiac soup, and the reference to "your . . . mouth"). The third stanza of "Harvest Poem" is devoid of sensual elements except for a vision, replete with longing for corporeal experience. The appeal in the final line, "Gather me in,"[2] expresses a profound yearning and refers to the title of the poem, the speaker aligning herself with the vegetal world. The preposition stresses a yearning to be taken inside, enclosed, in circuit with the other since to love is "to watch-think-seek the other in the other" (Cixous 893).

[2] This brings to mind the use of the noun *recueillement* by Luce Irigaray in *I Love to You*, a word which comes from the verb *recueillir*, meaning "to gather in" or "to collect." Her translator, Alison Martin, explains in a note that Irigaray suggests "the return into the self, being with the self, and the notion of realization," adding, "[i]ts meaning may be situated within a Hegelian dialectical process (albeit a non-teleological one), and it draws upon Nietzsche's return and Heidegger's *legein*, *logos* and *mitsein*" (41).

At the centre of Roberts's poetry is an intimate being-with with other human and non-human entities in a world established through cultivating and sharing. As they reveal a sensual dimension of experience, her poems underline a corporeal relation with the world which emerges from the images of sensory abundance, thus emphasising the givenness and hospitality of the earth as a house where plant, animal and human cohabit. The poetic self becomes radically, vegetally dehiscent, unfolding in an openness onto the other and creating a plurality of the joined space of "the between-us." Phenomenologically entwined in this manner, the self remains in an intimate envelopment, dynamically apprehending the world in the process of chiasmic intertwining, together forming Merleau-Ponty's "intercorporeal being."

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"It's a Pagan Communion, and We Are the Priests": Plenitude in Michèle Roberts's Short Fiction

Abstract

Roberts's short stories have not received extensive scholarly attention, yet they make up a substantial part of her *œuvre*. Her output of short stories is configured in a particular and coherent way, one that overlaps with her novels, but is consistent in itself. This configuration is summed up by the term plenitude. Abundance is noted in: genre and mood—in genre shifts and in a mixture of the comic and the dark; characters and settings—the range of female figures presented in the short fiction, and of time and place settings; character morphology—the recurrence of motifs of emotional excess, of longing, desire, and passion, in the shaping of characters (gender shifting is also relevant here); and language—the recurrence of motifs of excess on the level of language, the list, metaphoricity and self-referentiality, and the interpenetration of a variety of discourses. In her short fiction, Roberts conflates the spiritual and sensual, meals and wild gardens, the dark and the light. The plenitude of her created world and its language are entries to redemptive or consolatory experiences.

Keywords: Michèle Roberts, short fiction, genre, character, gender, passion, language

Michèle Roberts's short fiction has not been extensively discussed by critics. This is scarcely surprising as British short fiction is still a widely-ignored form in Britain, and one that publishers and, to some extent, literary journals and review sections of newspapers disdain.[1] Roberts's short stories form only a small part of her output, but it is a part that is of some substance: it comprises three collections, *During Mother's Absence* (1993), *Playing Sardines* (2001), and *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love* (2010). In total, these collections contain forty-one stories. This is comparable in quantity to the work of writers, such as John McGahern or Ian McEwan, who are well-known for their short fiction and whose short fiction forms an important part of their *œuvre*. Roberts's stories certainly have admirers. Sarah J. Falcus writes of her "rich and often poetic short fiction" ("Roberts" 359). In a review of *During Mother's Absence*, Eavan Boland notes the coherence of the collection, and remarks approvingly of the author's reworking of fable material. "It is a daring and demanding project", Boland writes, "one that makes for exciting reading." In a very positive review of *Mud:*

[1] See, in this respect, Malcolm 51–53 and Maunder vi–vii.

Received: 5.08.2018. Revised: 18.03.2022. Accepted: 1.04.2022.

Stories of Sex and Love, Stevie Davies writes, "The short story is an intimate, subtle and enigmatic form: Michèle Roberts reminds us in this virtuoso collection that she is one of our foremost practitioners of the art." Elaine Feinstein lauds *Mud* as follows: "This is a delicious book, to be savoured mouthful by mouthful like caviar. . . . There is nothing predictable about the plots. . . . We are engulfed by these stories, and in them we remember our own lives."

Indeed, although scholarly discussion of Roberts's short fiction is not extensive, it does exist. Laura Maria Lojo Rodríguez writes about "Charity" (from *During Mother's Absence*) as a presentation of a complex mother-daughter relationship (33–47). Monika Szuba examines the stories in *Mud* as involving feminist appropriations of silenced and occluded female voices (75–89). Marta Goszczyńska also addresses the stories in *Mud* in terms of their re-cycling, re-writing, and re-imagining major texts in the European literary tradition (89–96).[2]

Despite such exceptions and recommendations, Roberts's short fiction is, to a degree, ignored in commentary on her work. A good example is the long and illuminating interview between Roberts and Jenny Newman from 2003, published in *Cercles* in 2004, which contains not a single reference to either *During Mother's Absence or Playing Sardines*. Falcus suggests that Roberts's novels "often blur the boundaries between the novel and the short story," for example in *Flesh and Blood, The Book of Mrs Noah*, and *Impossible Saints* ("Roberts" 359). Thus, it could be argued that critics write of her short stories, even if they do not know they are doing so. Certainly, the short fiction is thematically closely linked to the novels. The central thematic concerns of Roberts's longer fiction—female religious figures (Falcus, "Roberts" 359), mothers (Cain 408–09), domestic activities and skills (Falcus, "Her Odyssey" 240; Federici 132), food, cooking, and communion (secular and religious) (Sceats 127, 129–30, 133, 136)—are equally central to her short stories. Thus, it could be argued, discussion of them is redundant, or, at best, offers only a footnote to the more serious business of the novels.

However, I wish to suggest that Roberts's output of short stories is configured in a particular and coherent way, one that certainly overlaps with individual novels, but is to a degree concentrated and consistent in itself. This configuration is best formulated in terms of plenitude and abundance.[3] In what follows, I outline four aspects of this *foison*:

1. genre and mood—that is, the genre shifts that Roberts's stories enact within a collection and within individual texts, and also the mixture of the comic and the dark in the stories' created worlds;
2. characters and settings—that is, the range of female figures presented in the short fiction, and of the time and place settings in which they are located;
3. character morphology—that is, the recurrence of emotional excess, of longing, desire and passion, in the shaping of characters; gender shifting is also relevant here;
4. language—that is, the recurrence of motifs of excess on the level of language; examples are: the list, a clear metaphoricity and self-referentiality of language, and the interpenetration of a variety of discourses (religious, sensuous, and secular).

[2] The observations in Szuba's and Goszczyńska's essays are well-made and, indeed, germane to the central issue of my essay. However, the authors focus on one collection and do not attempt the overview of Roberts's output of short fiction that I do.

[3] It is here that I believe Szuba's and Goszczyńska's comments on re-writing seem relevant to my essay. After all, the re-imagining and appropriation that they discuss add to an already existing textual plenitude.

Genre and Mood

Roberts's short fiction operates predominantly within the conventions of social-psychological fiction. The protocols of the realist text are largely observed: there are no ghosts, social and material minutiae are noted, places are documented, and the text's aim is to present a psychology in isolation or in interaction with others. The vast majority of her stories throughout the three volumes of short fiction lie within these conventions. For example, from *During Mother's Absence*, "Fish" is a short study of a few hours in a small child's life, during which she watches her father leave home in the morning and watches her mother begin to make a fish sauce and then abandon it. The child (whose gender is not specified, but I find it more probable she is a girl) walks out on the beach, sits by the sea, buys some fish, and returns to find her mother and father in good spirits, although they have quarrelled earlier. The story is narrated by the unnamed child and only her point of view is offered in the text. The child's mind and imaginings are at the centre of the piece.

The text is set in a recognizable and documented world. The mother has had her hair cut in Ipswich the previous day (64); the narrator's home, the houses along the promenade, the beach, and the sea are all rendered in verisimilar detail (66, 67). The mother's cooking (64), the appearance and contents of her purse (67), the feel of her newly cut hair and the contours and movements of her face are given in the closely sensed detail that would be a child's (64). Language is idiomatic and approximates real speech. "Bloody hell. We haven't got any bloody fish because your bloody father was supposed to go and get it before breakfast and he bloody well forgot," the mother remarks (65). The child is clearly an imaginative one, and when the reader learns of her invisible dog or the cable she holds that draws her into the sea or the sea to her, one is clearly meant to see these as her creative fantasies (67, 69). Indeed, the child's perspective on things is always provided without adult comment. Thus, with impeccable but perverse logic, she destroys what is obviously a cherished drawing of the mother because it is no longer accurate (67).

However, even in this firmly social-psychological, fundamentally realist text, there is an element of genre unsteadiness. The story begins in a fable-like fashion. "There was a giant on the causeway," declares the child narrator. "The causeway trembled as he pounded along it and the gulls wheeled off over his bristling black hair" (63). However, almost immediately the narrator shrinks her departing father "to human size," and the reader realizes that the observation is the act of an imaginative child. The father's size (from a child's perspective) recurs at the story's end when "my giant father" stretches out on the sofa with his feet hanging over its end (70).

Within *During Mother's Absence*, the majority of stories function within the social-psychological conventions observed in "Fish." This is true of stories with quite disparate story materials, characters, and settings: "Charity," "Your Shoes," "The Bishop's Lunch," "Taking It Easy," "God's House," and even—finally—"*Une Glossaire*/A Glossary." However, this last story should alert the reader to the genre shifts contained within the collection. "*Une Glossaire*/A Glossary" is, indeed, about the complex relations within an Anglo-French family, and the personal fates of Grandmère, Grandpère, Monique (the narrator's mother), and Brigitte (the narrator's aunt), and a host of other relatives, and about a French town, its festivals, a family's home, its store cupboards, its linens. But it is also a glossary, focused on persons, experiences, words, and objects, and an elliptical and non-chronological narrative. "Laundry" is a fable and *fabliau*, a bawdy tale set in the French medieval past, about an enterprising peasant girl who becomes a laundress, a prioress and a saint. "Anger" is replete with folk-tale and supernatural motifs of disappearance, transformation and restoration (24–29). It starts with "Once upon a time" (1) and moves between a harsh peasant tale of unhappy marriages and a version of the Melusine legend.

The interplay of genre is even more complex in *Playing Sardines*, both within the collection and within individual texts. As in *During Mother's Absence*, the majority of texts uses a variety of the conventions of social-psychological fiction. For example, "The Sheets" is a story of summer romantic entanglements among expatriate English in the French countryside. The narrator cleans and looks after a holiday *gîte* for Mrs Bertie. A writer much admired by Mrs Bertie comes to stay for six weeks, and Mrs Bertie puts forward her best efforts to allure him. He falls for her cleaner, however. After six weeks, he goes back to London, and proprietrix and help return to things as they were. The realist, social-psychological conventions are observed throughout. Indeed, the story has strong elements of social satire. Mrs Bertie's rather too youthful outfits and never-say-die demeanour are rendered in detail (49), as is the faux *décor* she deploys to win over her easily deluded guests (49). The narrator sets out the economics of Mrs Bertie's dealings in dodgy antiques (50), and offers an observation of men and flowers that roots the story in a known and probable world (55). The story is amusing as Mrs Bertie's efforts to win her glamorous writer come to naught, and he opts for the cleaner. A further comic sting in the tail of this piece (not revealed until the second-last page) is, however, that the house-cleaner is male and called Simon (59). Mrs Bertie's longing for her writer, although always strong—indeed, at the end she is discovered lying naked between his sheets (59)—was always doomed.

Of the eighteen stories in *Playing Sardines*, fifteen contain strong elements of social-psychological fiction. This is true (despite titles that might suggest otherwise) of "Playing Sardines," "Monsieur Mallarmé Changes Names," "No Hands," "Les Menus Plaisirs," "The Sheets," "A Feast for Catherine," "The Cookery Lesson," "Lists," "Blathering Frights," "The Easter Egg Hunt," "The Miracle," "Just One More Saturday Night," "Ma Semblable Ma Soeur," and "Hypsipyle to Jason." Even "A Bodice Rips," which for most of its length is a pastiche woman's romance, turns into a story about young girls' erotic and adventurous fantasies (149–50). Indeed, its subtitle is "A Novel in Seven Chapters," which indicates a rich variation on the level of a higher category than that of genre (short story/mini-novel). But just as some titles ("The Miracle" or "Hypsipyle to Jason," for example) suggest a rather different type of text than what one gets, the genre oscillation of the collection is marked. "Fluency" may look like a study of longing, but it involves an important supernatural shift of place (72–74). "The Cookery Lesson" develops into a Gothic tale of insanity, longing, and revenge (99). "Blathering Frights" does the same in a movement from social satire to Gothic excess and madness. "Lists" is not a traditional narrative at all, and moves towards a murder-story conclusion. "A Story for Hallowe'en" proceeds in the opposite direction and segues from ghost story into the social-sexual comic.

Similar genre diversity is seen in *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*. "Honeymoon Blues" is a powerful study of grief in which Maud returns to Venice where she spent her honeymoon with her now dead partner in the 1970s. It is an exposure of the rawness of loss through a focalized third-person narration, mostly in present simple, which flows in and out of free indirect and free direct speech. Like all of Roberts's fiction, it is also fascinated with the material stuff of life: drunk girls and their colourful vomit (79–80), the advertisements in Venice airport (80), the reception area in Maud's hotel (82), and bedroom *décor* (85). The piece is, thus, rooted in social-psychological and realist conventions. Even Maud's delusions about bedroom and *loggia* are shown as precisely that (94–95).

Almost all stories in the collection have a marked social-psychological, realist framework, although there is often a genre fluctuation that adds a dimension to this. Thus, "Collette Looks Back," "Emma Bovary's Ghost," "Remembering George Sand," and "Sleepers" are all pieces of historical fiction, with marked meta-literary and intertextual components. "Sleepers," for example, develops characters and situations from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. "Vegetarian in France"

morphs from social comedy and satire on English insularity into a murder story. "Flâneuse" involves unexplained movement in time; it is unresolved as to whether the protagonist's excursions into the eighteenth-century past are real or delusional. "The Lay of Bee Wolf" advertises its legendary and fabulous provenance. Even the searingly disturbing "Easy as ABC" starts off as a folk tale before becoming a story about wretched prostitution and people trafficking.

The three collections' richness in terms of genres is reflected in their shifting moods. Many of the stories in *During Mother's Absence* are dark pieces: "Charity," in which the narrator survives loss and a complicated upbringing; "Your Shoes," the monologue of a mother whose daughter has run away from home; and "God's House," in which the young narrator attempts to recover from her mother's death. "*Une Glossaire*/A Glossary" is a celebration of community and family communion, but also a reflective piece on illness, death, and transience. However, "The Bishop's Lunch," "Taking It Easy," and "Laundry" are comic celebrations of female resourcefulness, and (in the last two stories) of sexuality. The balance is different in *Playing Sardines*, in which the majority of stories is comic (or at least benign), however dark the matters they touch upon, as in "Playing Sardines" (betrayal, male patronizing, disdain, and wrong-footing of women), "Blathering Frights" (insane self-obsession), "The Easter Egg Hunt" (illness, death, loss) and "The Miracle" (dealing with a close friend's choice of a glamorous partner who is evidently superior to oneself). But some stories are unambiguously dark—"A Feast for Catherine" (coping with an unreliable lover), for example—and others take on a dark tint despite their comedy: "The Cookery Lesson" is about unfulfillable, deranged longing, and in "Lists" the poor notetaker's plucky but futile attempts to deal with her idiotic, snoring, and perfidious partner, indifferent offspring, and an unappreciative world cast a pall over the humour of the piece. The balance of dark and light shifts again in *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*. There are comic and finally positive stories: "Mud," "Vegetarian in France" (ultimately, although Nicolette's years of marriage to an insular boor seem an awful waste) and "The Lay of Bee Wolf" (bloody though it be). "Colette Looks Back," "Annunciation," and "On the Beach at Trouville" all involve female survival and creation. But many stories in this collection show very dark sides of life. "Tristram and Isolde," for example, seems to be about two lovers, but is really, it turns out, about a very disturbed young girl's devotion to her father. It ends in intimations of imminent suicide. "The Dead Mother's Club" is a long and moving meditation on the loss of a parent.

But the richness and variation—of genre, of mood—are there, part of an overall amplitude in Roberts's short fiction.

Characters and Settings

While this issue is important, it can be set out relatively succinctly. Roberts's short stories are rich in their variety of female figures, and in their temporal and spatial settings. For example, in the nine stories of *During Mother's Absence*, the reader moves from nineteenth-century rural France ("Anger") through twentieth-century England ("Charity," "Fish," "Your Shoes") and twentieth-century France ("The Bishop's Lunch"). Later stories shift between twentieth-century England and France—"Taking It Easy," "God's House," and "*Une Glossaire*/A Glossary" (although the largest parts of these texts are set in France, and England is a distant presence)—while "Laundry" is set in rural medieval France. The central figures (narrators and protagonists) are all female (in "Fish" this is unclear, but a female narrator is perhaps more likely) and range from French peasant women (Bertrande and Melusine in "Anger," Austreberthe in "Laundry"), to modern English children ("Fish," "God's House," the narrator of "*Une Glossaire*/Glossary"), and to grown-up

French and English women (the mother in "Your Shoes," Brigitte in "*Une Glossaire*/A Glossary"). Nuns recur ("The Bishop's Lunch" and "Laundry") and Roman Catholicism plays a formative role in the lives of the characters in six of the nine texts. Only in "Fish," "Shoes" and "Taking It Easy" is it absent. The range is substantial and is repeated in the later collections.

Patterns are observable, however. Place settings in all collections move from England, with London as a particularly recurrent locale, to rural, largely northern France. Italy recurs in later stories ("Honeymoon Blues" and "Remembering George Sand"), while "Easy as ABC" is partly set in an unnamed Central European country, and "The Lay of Bee Wolf" takes place in an unspecified fabulous land of dragons. Time settings are equally rich: more or less contemporary times in France, Italy and England, nineteenth-century France (and Italy) and earlier. Particularly striking is Robert's capturing of relatively long periods of time, with their changes, such as in "*Une Glossaire*/A Glossary," "In My Shoes" and "Annunciation."

Despite a varied richness, patterns are also observable in terms of the figures (narrators and protagonists). Above all, they are almost all female. Even when they are not, the protagonist is a cross-dresser (in "Monsieur Mallarmé Changes Names") or is feminized by social and sexual roles (Simon in "The Sheets"). Roberts's children, girls, and more mature figures do have certain features in common. Many survive in the face of considerable damage (inflicted by careless or malign men) or loss (illness, death). This is the case in stories like "No Hands," "A Feast for Catherine" (*Playing Sardines*), and "Mud," "Vegetarian in France," "Honeymoon Blues," and "Sleepers" (*Mud*). It is hard to see how Eva in "Easy as ABC" can be said to be dealing with her appalling situation, but in a fashion she is. Tensions and complications in mother-daughter relationships underlie several stories, for example, "Charity," "God's House" (*During Mother's Absence*) and "The Easter Egg Hunt" (*Playing Sardines*), and "Tristram and Isolde" and "The Dead Mother's Club" (*Mud*).

In addition, Roberts is interested in women who are insane or at the edge of insanity. This is apparent, for example, in the comic-not-so-comic stories "The Cookery Lesson" and "Blathering Frights" (*Playing Sardines*) and in the much darker "Tristram and Isolde" and "Easy as ABC" (*Mud*). A further recurrent aspect of Roberts's female figures (and not only her narrators and protagonists) is that they are often in domestic roles. For example, the protagonist in "Playing Sardines" loves and excels in cooking, and is despised for that by her snooty lover. As she penetrates her host's *palazzo* outside Venice, she comes across the kitchen and the women who have prepared the superb meal that the guests have enjoyed. She takes instruction from them and example by them. Félicité is a maid in "Emma Bovary's Ghost," Giulia is a nursing auxiliary in "Remembering George Sand," and the narrator of "Sleepers" is a nursery maid (*Mud*). Brigitte in "*Une Glossaire*/A Glossary" is a dynamic and independent woman; she also runs a good home with a fine kitchen (*During Mother's Absence*).[4]

Thus, a richness is present on the level of diversity of character and setting, a richness that is not diminished by strong patterning.

Character Morphology: Excess and Gender Shifting

Gender shifting in Roberts's short stories is really limited to "Monsieur Mallarmé Changes Names" (in which the great poet dons his wife's, daughter's, and mistress's clothes to write ground-breaking verse) in *Mud*. The narrator of "The Sheets" is a gay male from the beginning of the story. But the reader does not know that, and the revelation that he is not a woman comes as

[4] See, in this respect, Falcus, "Her Odyssey" 240–41.

something akin to a gender shift. However, the excess, the abundance, the uberty implicit in gender shifting and cross-dressing—not one identity, but at least two—is present in the motifs of longing, desire, and intense passion that govern so many characters, their situations, and the action of so many stories. Emotional intensity drives much of the action in Roberts's short fiction.

In *During Mother's Absence*, one notes this in Bertrande's loathing of her husband and her dropping her child in the fire (8–9), and in the village schoolmaster's obsession with Melusine's secrets (22) ("Anger"). In "Charity," the intensity of Marie's sense of loss at her aunt's death is striking, as is the redemption her friend achieves for her in the story's conclusion (61–62). "Your Shoes" is a despairing monologue for a lost child. Lily's distress at her mother's death haunts her throughout "God's House." The narrator's deep affection for her French family is evident throughout "*Une Glossaire*/A Glossary," as is her profound sense of passing time and loss, and what might stave those off temporarily: the rituals of the town, the joyous family meals (133–37, 147, 175–76).

The motif of intense passion is evident in *Playing Sardines* too. This is the narrator of "Fluency" on love:

> I was thinking about love, how it creeps upon you and grabs you and knocks you out before you're aware of what's happening. Love the stalker. Love the mugger, the boxer, the bruiser. Love the poacher, setting you traps, throwing a net over your head and capturing you in a fierce grip. Love like a force of nature that cannot be checked, an avalanche, a mudslide, breaching your carefully built defences, flooding through you and possessing you. (67)

Indeed, it is strong enough to bring about a magical shift of place: London suddenly becomes Paris (72). "The Cookery Lesson" is about culinary, erotic and murderous obsession and madness, "The Easter Egg Hunt" about intense love and loss, while "A Bodice Rips" is a non-stop sequence of genre-appropriate emotional highs, and that, of course, is why Maria and Nanda play their games based on those characters and situations (149–50).

The stories of *Mud*, too, revel in intense *jouissances* of varying kinds. This is the ecstasy that the narrator of "Mud" feels on a walk in the country:

> Yes I could have eaten a handful of earth, dry-damp-delicious in my mouth, and I could have eaten the long woven hedges and the bright grass and the black thorns glossy as silver. I wanted to lick all of it, taste it and swallow it and be one with it. And then, dissolving, I wasn't myself, I wasn't myself any more. I'd gone. I was just part of the mud, fresh in the rain and the sun and I was fed by the world, mouth open, full, churning with joy. (4)

Of herself, she says: "I wanted too much of everything: too much pleasure; my mouth opened to the world to kiss it and take it in" (2). She achieves this plenitude with her lover: "I could taste mud and I mouthed to the artist and nibbled and licked him and we were each other's camembert red wine mud feast" (6). Many of the remaining stories in the collection are of equally passionate feelings and encounters: Colette's with Jean-Luc ("Colette Looks Back"), Félicité's fascination with Emma Bovary, a woman herself driven by powerful feelings ("Emma Bovary's Ghost"), Izzy's destructive (heading for a *Liebestod*?) devotion to her father ("Tristram and Isolde"), Maud's grief at Tom's death ("Honeymoon Blues"), and Giulia's love for her cousin and her fascination with Sand and de Musset, themselves far from calm figures ("Remembering George Sand"). Eva in "Easy As ABC" is betrayed and debased beyond tolerable limits, while for Polly in "Flâneuse," the intensity of her out-of-normal-time experience offers a release from a chilly exploitative relationship. "The Dead Mother's Club" is a powerful evocation of complex and intense grief.

Passionate plenitude permeates Roberts's short fiction.

Language

Motifs of excess and abundance recur on the level of language. They do so through Roberts's fondness for lists, metaphoricity and self-referentiality of language, and the interpenetration of religious and sensuous and secular lexis and discourse.

The list is a clear discursive sign of excess; you only make them if you have a lot to do, see, or worry about. Roberts's fiction is full of lists. They are predominantly lists of foods and objects; menus, bric-à-brac and detritus abound. The list recurs in a rudimentary and shorter form in many stories, for example, in "Charity" (50), but full-blown lists are common. For example, in "Fish," the narrator notes her finds on the shore:

> I started to look for shells and the green bits of broken bottle, rubbed smooth by the sea, that I called jewels. I found a lot of pebbles covered with sticky black tar, a couple of dry cuttlefish, a dead seagull, several rotting fish-heads. I found just one good stone, a lump of pink quartz still glistening with sea water. (68)

In "God's House," Lily constantly makes inventory of what she sees—in a garden (101–02), in a cemetery (103), and in the abandoned priest's house:

> A corridor wound around the ground floor. I passed a store-room full of old furniture and carpentry things, a wine cellar lined with empty metal racks, a poky lavatory with decorated blue titles going up the wall. I picked my way up an open wooden staircase, like a ladder, to the salon and the bedrooms above. The salon was empty, grand as a ballroom but desolate. Striped blue and gold wallpaper hung down in curly strips, exposing the plaster and laths behind. . . . The bedrooms were dusty and dark, falls of soot piled i the fireplaces. Old stained mattresses rested on broken-down springs, old books, parched covers stiff with dirt, sprawled face down on the lino, old chairs with cracked backs and seats were mixed up anyhow with rolls of lino, split satin cushions. (109)

"*Une Glossaire*/A Glossary" is full of listings (indeed, a glossary itself is a list of sorts). See, for example, the list of cutlery (132), of dessert items (135), and, as in "Fish," of the detritus on a beach at low tide (180–81).

These cases are drawn from *During Mother's Absence*, but many other such examples can be found in *Playing Sardines*: the presentation of the wild garden in "No Hands" (33), the objects of the narrator's shopping forays in "The Cookery Lesson" (92–93), the items in a meal in "The Miracle" (152). Detailed lists occur, too, in *Mud*: George Sand's rooms (102–03) and George Sand herself. "Now, if I try to remember her, to describe her, I end up making a list" (104), the narrator remarks in "Remembering George Sand." A very different kind of list recurs in "Easy As ABC," that of the men who have intercourse with Eva: "Adam, Abel, Adrian, Alexei, Amos, Angelo, Apollo, Arthur, Aziz, Ben, Benoit, Bill, Brian, Bruno, Cain, Cal, Carl, Charles, Clarence, Clive, Christopher, Dan, David, Dinos, Edward, Eugene," (131). Such sobering and comprehensive lists return (133, 137, 139, 140) through to "Zebedee," and the story ends in a comma (to be continued?), not a full stop. More amiable lists run throughout "The Dead Mothers' Club": for example, the plants in Louise's mother's garden are itemized (196), as are the contents of the strata of London's earth: ". . . down through the dark layers of history, down to a mulch of broken Saxon pots, fragments of wicker coffins, drifts of human ashes, shards of animal bones, down to that place where everyone becomes part of everybody else; part of mud, part of coal" (209).

Roberts's lists are predominantly drawn from three fields: food and meals, gardens and detritus. These fields indicate the sources of richness in her created world: women's domestic labour and care in kitchen (there is only one male cook in her short fiction, in "The Cookery Lesson," and he disappoints) and in garden, and nature's providence that creates a wild garden

or tosses bric-à-brac on the shore. But whatever the provenance of the material of the world, that world is rich indeed.

Linguistically, the plenitude of things is marked by self-advertising metaphoricity (an adding of meaning beyond denotation) and self-referentiality (an attention-drawing embellishment) of language. Thus, the reader is encouraged to see the artichoke in "*Une Glossaire*/A Glossary" as a metaphor of the world's and the narrator's French family's plenty:

> ARTICHAUTS
> Artichokes. Big, fat and green, with closely packed pointed leaves. The inside ones are violet, almost transparent. We eat them, boiled, for supper, pulling off the leaves one by one and dipping them into hot cream, before scraping them between your teeth. The heart is the best, mashed up in the cream. Grandpère eats them with vinaigrette. (133)

In "No Hands," the narrator sees her wild French garden as a metaphor of the possible rich benevolence of life: "One of the things I loved about the garden was the way it kept giving us gifts" (33). When Colette enters the forest on her way to her assignation with Jean-Luc, she enters a richly sensuous world, but one that clearly embodies the uncertainties of her situation and future, and yet, too, the possibilities of escape. It is, of course, a literal French forest, but it is richly figurative too:

> . . . greyness muffled the world. Fog hung under the trees. I stepped carefully: I could hardly see a metre ahead. The world shrunk to impenetrable grey mist. On either side of the deep rutted track enormous toadstools sprouted, red ones with white spots, luminous blue-mauve ones, fluted like trumpets. The air, steeped in moisture, put clammy hands to my face. I smelled wet earth, wet leaf-mould. Such silence! (23)

As Louise reflects on the multiple layers of London earth, her image of the small neo-classical church that once stood there is elaborately metaphorical: "a holy submarine cruising the sewers and the underground tunnels of the city. The parson in his black coat and white bands clutches the edge of his pulpit, his ship's wheel, steers his church-boat, his stone ark. . . ." (209).

Roberts's language is also frequently highly self-referential, drawing attention to itself by the embellishments of syntactic repetition and phonological patterning. In "Easy As ABC," these devices are used forcefully to express psychological disturbance:

> You see, Nana, ha ha, they don't find the youngest doll of all because she hides inside her bigger sister. Screw my sister not me! They seize her, hands grip her waist, untwist her, yank her this way and that, pull her apart. Smash and grab job. Into her insides. They throw the two wooden halves onto the floor. Like two halves of a walnut shell. She's their succulent nut dipped in salt then crunched between their teeth. They want to swallow her down she wants to spit them out. (132)

The syntactic parallelisms here are clear ("They seize her. . . ."), as is the chiasmus of the last sentence. The bitter paronomasia of "screw" is apparent in a wider context. But the multiple phonological chiming of this passage is also marked: "h**ide**s/ins**ide**," "b**igg**e**r** s**ist**e**r**," "Sm**a**sh and gr**a**b jo**b**," "s**u**cculent n**u**t"). A more genial example of such organization can be found in "Une *Glossaire*/A Glossary": "Calvados. Brandy made from cider apples. Sipped, in tiny glasses, after Sunday lunch. Made on the Spriets' farm, and named after Falstaff, who is supposed to have once stayed there" (150). Most of the entry consists of syntactically parallel structures: "made/Sipped/Made/named." Notice, too, the recurrent /s/ sounds of "**c**ider apple**s**. **S**ipped, in tiny gla**sse**s, after **S**unday lunch."

These examples must serve for many others. See, for example, the conclusion of "Hypsipyle to Jason," which deploys the same linguistic devices as the above example. One should remember

that Roberts is a fine, if underrated, poet, and her collection *All the Selves I Was* (1995) deserves much wider discussion and recognition. Her short stories frequently drift purposefully toward the kind of language more associated with poetry than prose. Thus, on a linguistic level—through the device of listing, through metaphoricity and self-referentiality—Roberts's stories encapsulate the richness of things, and enact this plenitude themselves.

The final way in which her stories embody an amplitude—primarily on a linguistic level, although, in consequence, thematically too—is in a recurrent interpenetration of religious/spiritual and secular lexis.[5] The merging of food, sanctity, and love is evident in "A Feast for Catherine." Catherine has been let down by her feckless lover. She speculates on love, and on St Catherine of Sienna, whose effigy she has seen in a church. She restores herself from grief by ordering a splendid (perhaps a marvellous) meal that brings together both saint and modern Catherine (84). "In God's House," Lily achieves the same kind of secular-existential-spiritual relief in the wild garden of the priest's abandoned house (119). In "Fluency," love assails one like the Holy Spirit, transforms one's life, achieves magic (67–68). Transubstantiation is secularized in "The Dead Mothers' Club." Louise reflects on the priest's vestments: "green for ordinary Sundays, purple for Lent and Advent, white for joy. Brocade copes embroidered with costly gold thread. . . . All through the week he [the priest] just wears black. Then on Sundays he throws off his disguise and bursts into colour: a magical totem suddenly displaying his true costume" (205).

The merging of the secular and the religious is very clear in "*Une Glossaire*/A Glossary." This story is a celebration of the narrator's French family, of her memories of childhood, of an arcadian locale brimming with wonders, but it is also a reflection on transience, illness and death. These are kept at bay, never defeated, but staved off by the marvels of the world and by social and family occasions. These are secular, and sensuous, but are given a potent spiritual dimension in the text. "The present is full of pain and change," the narrator notes. "We concoct these timeless meals to keep it at bay" (147). Earlier, she has spoken of her admission to the world of women, her aunts, in the kitchen. "The kitchen is the sanctuary," she says, "the tabernacle of the women, where the superlative feast is prepared by their hands alone, while the men talk to the priest next door" (135).

Towards the end of the text, the narrator writes of the "PAIN BÉNI DES HOMMES" (the men's blessed bread), which women do not receive, but which they can consume since it is not actually the body of Christ. But an enriching, a transubstantiation, does take place. She remarks: "It's a pagan communion, and we are the priests" (178). Secular and spiritual meld. This can stand as a motto for Roberts's conflation in her short stories of spiritual and sensual, for meals, wild gardens, the plenitude of the world and language are all entries to redemptive or consolatory experiences.

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[5] This has been noted by Sceats 133. See also Roberts's *Cercles* interview, in which the author roots mystical experience in the body.

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https://doi.org/10.18778/2353-6098.6.10

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Michèle Roberts's *Flesh and Blood* as an Example of *Écriture Feminine*

Abstract

The essay offers an analysis of *Flesh and Blood*, a novel by Michèle Roberts, first published in 1994. It discusses the book from the vantage point of French feminist criticism, especially *écriture feminine,* as well as gynocritics. The theory serves as a reference point for a better understanding of the novel's structure, language and plot. In the opening paragraphs, the essay delineates the main premises of *écriture feminine,* a French feminist theory represented primarily by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, and gynocritics, a concept developed by the American feminist scholar Elaine Showalter. It then moves on to portray *Flesh and Blood* as an example of *écriture feminine,* analysing the aspects of the novel that mirror the theories of the French feminist critics: characters, motifs, structure, formal ploys and language.

Keywords: Michèle Roberts, *Flesh and Blood, écriture feminine*, gynocritics, feminist criticism, French feminism, women's writing

The following essay belongs to a larger project that focuses on the narratological experimentalism of Michèle Roberts's prose fiction through the lens of feminist criticism. The text analyses *Flesh and Blood* (1994) from the vantage point of French feminist criticism as an example of *écriture feminine*. However, to provide a more thorough analysis of the novel, I also refer to ideas within American gynocritics, which constitutes a complement to the French theory. Roberts's writing is often read alongside feminist theories, as she herself acknowledges her fascination with French feminism. In an interview with Patricia Bastida Rodríguez, the author claims that she does not perceive her writing as merely an "illustration of theory," but rather as "working together with it" (Roberts, "On Women" 96). Therefore, the reading applied here will use theory as a reference point to understand the novel better and to analyse its structure, language and plot more thoroughly.

The term *écriture feminine* might be translated as "women's writing" or, literally, as "feminine writing." It was coined by Hélène Cixous, who, together with Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, is seen as a leading proponent of the concept (Burzyńska 402). *Écriture feminine* refers to a style of writing whose distinctive elements include indeterminacy, inconsistency, sensuousness and corporeality. This kind of writing is believed to have its source in the unconscious, and, as such, enables the expression of the untold. An analogous theory, which originated in the United States, is gynocritics (or gynocriticism) introduced by Elaine Showalter in the late 1970s. This criticism arose

Received: 15.06.2018. Revised: 9.04.2022. Accepted: 14.04.2022.

as an opposition to earlier revisionist strains in feminist scholarship, which tended to investigate misogynistic practises in existing literary discourse, and to read female writing alongside the male-dominated canon. In her seminal essay, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981), Showalter expresses the need to abandon "the feminist obsession with correcting, modifying, supplementing, revising, humanizing, or even attacking male critical theory" (183) as it prevents the emergence of perspectives which would appeal to female experiences. Her view, in other words, is that the development of feminist scholarship is restrained by adhering to androcentric models. Instead, she advocates a shift of focus that would allow feminist criticism to explore women's literature in all its aspects: "the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition" (184–85). To define such a revolutionary critical discourse, Showalter coins the term "gynocritics." The fundamental question which gynocritics poses is the question of distinctiveness of women's writing. According to Showalter, there are currently four "models of difference" that theories of women's writing draw upon: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural (186).

Biological criticism emphasises the inseparability of the body and writing. Although Showalter points to certain threats such theories may pose, including a return to essentialism (187–88), some French critics argue that biological differences constitute the source of writing. In her landmark manifesto, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), Hélène Cixous states: "Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (880). Thus, for Cixous, the body constitutes the source of the unconscious, and the unconscious seems to be the source of women's writing. Moreover, she claims that writing "her self" will enable women to undergo a process of liberation and, on the individual level, help them reclaim their bodies. She states that female bodies were confiscated and used as a token of oppression, that women were taught to deny their corporeality and ignore their bodily needs. In her view, such deprivation is tantamount to deprivation of speech. She writes: "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (880). Therefore, a woman whose body is disciplined is mute.

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous suggests a link between the corporeal aspect of women's writing and the linguistic one. The area of linguistics is also crucial in the second model of differentiating the qualities of women's writing proposed by Showalter. This model foregrounds such questions as: whether men and women use language differently, whether those differences can be conceptualised, and, finally, whether activities such as speaking, reading and writing are gender marked (Showalter 190). Cixous seems to leave no room for doubts in this regard as she states: "I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as *marked* writing" (879). As she explains, writing has been claimed by men and used solely for their advantage, not only depriving women of their turn to speak, but also appropriating this space to perpetuate the repression of women. She believes the manoeuvre to be particularly detrimental as fiction has the potential of disguising it as something innocuous or even appealing. What makes it even more irremissible is the fact that writing can change the dynamics in the fight for liberating the female voice, inasmuch as it can be "a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (879).

The most salient issue raised by linguistic feminist theories, however, is the idea of women creating a language of their own.[1] This concept is particularly prevalent among French feminists. Cixous claims that a female language can be found within the body:

[1] As Showalter states in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," the concept of creating a women's language dates back to ancient times and has its origins in folklore and myths (191–92).

> Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word "silence," the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word "impossible" and writes it as "the end." (886)

Therefore, from the vantage point of French feminist theory, female corporeality and language are inseparable: "women are body. More body, hence more writing" (Cixous 886). This is reflected in Roberts's writing where bodily matters are a recurrent motif. In fact, the author openly acknowledges that she wants to "rescue the body and cherish it and love it and touch it and smell it and make it into language" ("*January* Talks"). Feminist critics also believe that having a language of their own will enable women to break the silence they have been exiled into. They also argue that such a language will liberate women from using speech, which—being male-oriented or, as Cixous puts it, "governed by the phallus" (881)—is unable to inscribe either their selves or their experiences. Another advocate of *écriture feminine*, Monique Wittig, expresses this idea even more emphatically: "The women say, the language you speak poisons your glottis tongue palate lips. They say, the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you. They say, the language you speak is made up of signs that rightly speaking designate what men have appropriated" (114). For Wittig, such phallogocentric language presents reality from the male perspective and, consequently, maintains the discriminative practises against women.

The third model of difference discussed by Showalter is psychoanalytic feminist criticism, which assumes that the distinctive qualities of women's writing stem from the author's psyche and the relation between gender and writing (193). Such theories simultaneously draw on and challenge the phallocentric psychoanalysis of Freud and Lacan. French feminist critics, in particular, frequently refer to Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts, such as, for example, his three stages of human development. Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray reinterpret Lacan's ideas by refuting these which they believe to be the source of female oppression. They disagree, for instance, with Lacan's thought of imposing on women male-oriented language and the symbolic order. They also counter the symbolic figure of the father with that of the mother (Burzyńska 418–19). The relationship between mother and daughter is of particular interest to Irigaray, who is the author of a concept she refers to as "the bodily encounter with the mother." In a lecture delivered in Montreal in 1981, Irigaray elaborates upon the significance of the maternal and juxtaposes it with the figure of the father. She unequivocally states that the mother is essential to maintaining social order and fulfilling both individual and collective desires, though her own desires are constantly suppressed by the law of the father. Later, Irigaray enters into a dispute over the Freudian concept of the primal killing of the father as she points to an even more archaic murder, namely that of the mother, which imposes a certain order in a community. Thus, Irigaray's claim is that it is the primal matricide that underlies the functioning of society and culture (36). As a result, she claims, both society and culture are to a considerable extent phallocentric, attempting to exclude the mother: "The father forbids the bodily encounter with the mother" (39). Irigaray's plea is not to commit this matricide again (since the mother has already been sacrificed once, at the beginning of our culture), but, instead, to bring her back to life, to let her into society, and to protect her from the law of the father (43). What is particularly interesting in Irigaray's perception is how she intertwines the maternal with the concept of women's language and the corporeal:

> We must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationships with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover a language [*langage*]

> which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language [*langue*] attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal. (43)

Hence, Irigaray combines multiple aspects which are of interest to feminist criticism and constructs her own psychoanalytical theory, which stands in opposition to the traditional, phallocentric theories of Freud and Lacan. She refutes the absolute power of the patriarchal father and revives the glory of the mother.

Finally, the fourth model discussed by Showalter, the culture-based theory, can be seen as including all these models, as it touches upon ideas of female corporeality, language and psyche, and analyses them from the standpoint of their social contexts (197). Unlike the previous models, cultural feminism acknowledges such determinants as class, race, nationality, and history to be equally important as gender. Still, it sees gender as the factor that connects women from different backgrounds. As Showalter points out: "women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space" (197). In Western culture, women have always been marginalised and put in the position of the Other. The dominant androcentric culture muted women and exiled them to the margin, leaving them a limited space which they could call their own. This space, in Cixous's theory, is referred to as "the Dark Continent" (884). Like other feminist critics, Cixous wants this space to be the locus of women's difference, a place where they could speak and write in their own language.

Feminist theory has not managed to avoid criticism, and the two main accusations it currently faces are connected with its tendency towards essentialism and gender isolationism. The latter accusation, centred around the idea that feminist criticism forces women writers into a ghetto, may perhaps explain why two esteemed nineteenth-century authors, Mary Ann Evans (better known as George Eliot) and Louisa May Alcott (whose early texts were written under the pseudonym of A.M. Barnard), seemed to dislike the concept of "women's writing." They refused to be pigeonholed solely on the grounds of their gender, as it automatically categorised them as "the other." Similarly, although she accepts being referred to as a woman writer, Michèle Roberts refutes the essentialist notion that, being a woman, she writes differently from a man ("Michèle Roberts").

In fact, *écriture feminine* offers an interesting perspective to writers of both genders.[2] What the theory rejects is not men in general, but the forms which were invented by them and traditionally associated with male writing. This kind of writing has not only been a source of female oppression, but it has also denied equal status to women writers. Thus, following Cixous's ideas, women's writing rejects reason and male-centred discourse that is focused on the masculine viewpoint which has so far dominated Western literature. Instead, it embraces writing that appeals to the unconscious.

Michèle Roberts's work has demonstrated interest in women's writing on numerous occasions. This is perhaps most explicitly illustrated in her 1987 novel, *The Book of Mrs Noah.* The narrative concerns a group of women writers called Sybils, who set up a writing group and embark on an imaginary ark. Mrs Noah's ark constitutes the female space, Cixous's Dark Continent, where the Sybils tell their stories. In her own witty way, Roberts describes the various obstacles women writers have been struggling with, echoing Cixous's point that there is no such thing as a universal woman. She introduces the character of Gaffer, who symbolises God the Father and the male writer, thus embodying the ultimate patriarchal being who denies Sybils their ability to write:

[2] For example, James Joyce is one of the male writers considered to have practised *ériture feminine*. For more details, see Childers and Hentzi 93.

> Women writers, well, they're like leaky wombs, aren't they, letting out the odd streams of verbiage, the odd undisciplined shriek. They don't *create.* They just spill things out of that great empty space inside. It's babies they hold, not books. It's only frustrated neurotic women who write, women who can't have children, or who are scared of their normal feminine fulfilment … But I'm convinced you can write properly only when you rise above your bodies and forget them, when you get to the proper height from which you can survey the whole human race and speak for it, when you become, yes, androgynous. (Roberts, *Book* 56)

In this highly humorous passage, Roberts addresses various reasons behind discriminatory practises against women writers. By using humour, she immediately discredits detrimental, misogynistic preconceptions, which is exactly what feminist critics have been striving to do. *The Book of Mrs Noah* is a tale of women writers, female spaces and *écriture feminine*.[3]

Another work which concerns women as storytellers is *Flesh and Blood.* To demonstrate how Michèle Roberts's writing does inscribe into the premises of *écriture feminine*, this particular novel will be analysed, with the primary focus on its structure, language, characters and plot.

Flesh and Blood, first published in 1994, tells the eternal story of a relationship between a mother and daughter, especially revolving around the separation from one another. It consists of several narratives, and although there seems to be no coherence between these stories, they all touch upon the same theme of being separated from the mother. Some narratives approach the theme more straightforwardly (for instance, by featuring a literal disappearance of the mother in the narrative of Rosa), whereas others treat the concept of separation more metaphorically, for example, as a rejection of an emotional bond, or an attempt to develop a relationship with God the Mother (portrayed in chapters "Eugénie" and "Federigo," respectively). The impossibility to remain inseparable seems to be the source of all human distress in the novel. The fact that mother and daughter are initially one being, who is then torn apart through the act of birth, seems to shape not only their future relationship, but their whole lives. The mutual dissatisfaction of becoming separate beings causes them to antagonise, and the narrative turns into "an elegy for the mother I lost, when the skin that bound us ripped away, our separate skins tore off and we were miserable being two beings so different she couldn't like me being so unlike herself" (Roberts 173). Unless mended, the antagonistic relationship between mother and daughter will continuously leave a mark on their lives. This exploration of the rift in the relationship between mother and daughter can easily be linked to Irigaray's concept of matricide as the foundation of both society and culture.

The story of mother and daughter seems to be the most primal of all stories. The universality of the concept of mother-daughter separation is enforced by the fact that the narratives take the reader through different epochs, places, spaces and genres, with the key component remaining invariable. In the opening chapter, the reader is introduced to a character who has just confessed to having murdered her mother. Thus, the reader's initial assumption might be that the novel is a contemporary detective story. Only after gaining the complete picture of the narrative, that is to say, after combining all the pieces and filling in the ruptures, it becomes apparent that the murder was of a symbolic kind, or, as Sarah Falcus puts it, "a literal interpretation of the psychoanalytic paradigm of separation" (130).

Each of the multiple narratives in *Flesh and Blood* consists of two chapters, and only after becoming familiar with both of them, the reader gains the whole perspective, as the pairs of chapters usually provide the reader with complementary insights. For example, in Chapter Three, the reader meets George Mannot, an English painter who, in a later chapter that returns to this particular

[3] For an insightful reading of *The Book of Mrs Noah*, see Falcus 73–87.

narrative, turns out to be a woman who, on failing to create a satisfying bond with her mother, develops an alternate personality and becomes split into George/Georgina. Thus, in order to make sense of the story, the reader needs to put its two pieces together.

With each chapter, the reader is taken on a journey through different times and spaces, and the further we go, the more fragmented the stories become. The narratives are set in contemporary England, a French province of the nineteenth century, Italy of the Inquisition, as well as in fictional and mythical places, such as Paradise. As the story progresses, it becomes more obscure and less integrated until it reaches its climax, which is the chapter titled "Anon." From this point forward, the novel becomes more optimistic and its meaning becomes clearer. As time and space change, so do the characters and the narrative perspective. From adults to children, from the bourgeoisie to peasants, from mothers to daughters, the perspectives switch, providing the reader with more insight into the characters' thoughts and feelings.

In her writing, Roberts frequently focuses on female characters. In *Flesh and Blood*, the reader meets sibyls, mother goddesses, abbesses, nuns, priestesses, housewives, mothers, daughters and midwives. This selection of characters enables the author to present a variety of female perspectives and portray different aspects of femininity. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous makes a statement that female experience has yet to be thoroughly depicted in literature. In fact, she claims that "with a few rare exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity" (878).[4] The question remains, however, how to do it properly. Cixous does not provide a straightforward answer to this question, as she believes women's imagination to be inexhaustible. *Flesh and Blood* explores various dimensions of femininity, often within one character. When the reader is first introduced to the character of Fred, her gender is not explicit. The reader is deliberately misled and caught in the trap of stereotypical thinking imposed by societal norms and expectations. In fact, cultural preconceptions might lead to the conclusion that Fred is a man: the reader learns her name on the opening page, but the name is usually given to men, and there are no signals which could make the reader think otherwise. In fact, as Falcus points out, the text itself seems to encourage such an assumption, presenting Fred as masculine and out of place in a typically feminine space, a clothes shop, which resembles her mother's wardrobe (153). According to Falcus, the symbolic matricide, which is referred to at the very beginning of the narrative, is an inevitable course of events, since murdering the mother is necessary to assert the daughter's development (153). While in the shop, Fred changes her men's clothes, which she had worn to escape from her parents' house, and puts on a feminine dress. This marks her transformation from the state of denial into acceptance of the feminine. As Falcus puts it, "[l]eaving behind (murdering) the mother allows Fred to take on a new identity, as in the psychoanalytic model where the movement to symbolic identity is predicated on the loss of the maternal body" (153).

In the next chapter, titled "Freddy," the reader gains a fuller picture of the character, as they follow young Freddy on her way to puberty. Her identity is not yet fully established, and she struggles to come to terms with her femininity. This is particularly emphasised when she starts menstruating:

> When I took off my wet things I found there was blood coming from between my legs … Some girls called it a curse. It would have to be kept a secret from my sensitive and fastidious father. I knew all about it from the magazines and from the dour hints my mother had let drop. But I'd assumed it couldn't possibly happen to me. (15)

[4] As one of the exceptions, Cixous mentions Colette, who has been a major source of inspiration for Michèle Roberts, as the author herself admits in an interview with Linda Richards ("*January* Talks").

This fragment indicates that in spite of her knowledge of female anatomy, Freddy finds it impossible that her own body should ever menstruate. It might suggest that the character is in denial of her own femininity. Moreover, the passage shows the adults' attitudes towards the physical changes of a female body. The father unequivocally separates himself from any engagement in the matter, whereas the mother depicts the menstrual cycle as something ominous and unwelcome: "I do call that a bad sign, *I* didn't start till I was much older" (15). Thus, the only source of information Freddy can refer to are women's magazines, which offer an unrealistic image of womanhood. Apart from this, her environment presents few depictions of women which could have a positive influence on a young girl who is still struggling to define herself. Apart from the magazines, Freddy only has access to Old Masters' female nudes and pornography. In fact, the only genuine image of a woman, which is the image of her own mother, is out of reach. As Falcus remarks, Freddy's mother literally denies her daughter access to the maternal body, when she closes the bathroom door behind her (157). Deprived of access to the maternal body, Freddy turns to religion in her search of an ideal woman. Copying her mother's behaviour, she builds up a shrine for the Virgin Mary, using her mother's everyday objects as relics. According to Falcus, this is Freddy's attempt to relate to the denied maternal body. Moreover, as the critic goes on to argue, the girl confuses her own mother with the mother of God, and turns her "into an ideal object" (158). Nevertheless, this highlights the failure of communication between the mother and daughter. This inability to communicate resonates with Irigaray's claim that women need to invent a language that expresses the archaic relationship with the maternal body.

Due to the cyclical structure of the novel, the reader revisits Freddy's narrative in sections devoted to her as "Frederica." In her final story, which also serves as the closing chapter, the character eventually reconciles with her mother, as she is expecting a daughter of her own. The reconciliation is symbolic and yet it liberates Frederica and allows her to finally accept herself as a woman. The process of developing the character's identity is also reflected in the names. When she strives to hide her identity as a woman, she uses a man's name, Fred. The second name she is known under, Freddy, indicates immaturity and indeterminacy, as it is a diminutive that can be used by both men and women (even though, given the previous chapter, the reader is most likely to assume it to be a diminutive of Fred). Finally, in the last chapter, she is presented as Frederica, and the use of her full, unequivocally female name indicates her emotional maturity and acceptance of her self.

The novel offers a whole spectrum of distinctive female characters who represent different aspects of femininity. There are, for instance, Eugénie and Rosa, girls who stand for yet indeterminate gender identity. Deprived of a relationship with her mother, Eugénie is schooled in a convent, which leaves her with a heavily distorted one-dimensional image of womanhood. She is then forced to be married to a substantially older and violent man whose dominant position will supress any development of her own identity. Rosa, on the other hand, feels compelled to assume the maternal role after her mother's disappearance. She takes care of her young siblings, dresses in her mother's clothes, and even develops a fear of becoming her father's sex object. She loses her own identity and regains it only after her mother's miraculous return. The mothers also seem conflicted in performing their maternal function. Freddy's mother, Louise, is torn between blaming herself and blaming her daughter for their inability to communicate. However, perhaps the most intriguing exploration of female identity is presented in the continuation of Eugénie's narrative, titled "Marie-Jeanne." As a result of her enforced separation from her daughter, Marie-Jeanne's identity splits: "We found we were two in that small room in the nuns' jail, just as the child got born. We tore in two" (149). Being unable to reconcile with the loss, Marie-Jeanne falls into madness. Even after she finds Eugénie and assumes the role of her mother, the psychological damage remains irreversible.

In her writing, Roberts often presents characters who have been deprived of their own voice, as it has been considered irrelevant. This idea of not acknowledging someone's voice is not a novelty for women's writers and women in general, as it can easily echo the cultural muting of women in patriarchal societies. As Cixous puts it, "[m]uffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts" (886). Roberts gives voice to the unvoiced, thus offering them an opportunity to tell their stories. She acknowledges to be "interested in trying to find and invent voices and stories of people who haven't been seen as important" ("Michèle Roberts"). From the standpoint of feminist criticism, the author makes room for female voices by giving them a chance to express themselves and make an appearance in both history and literature.

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous rejects the concept of a universal woman, claiming that no two women are identical, as they all experience the world in their own way (876). This may suggest she opposes Showalter, who emphasises the importance of collective experience which women writers share (197). Nevertheless, the ideas of the two critics are not mutually exclusive. When Showalter acknowledges common experiences which bind women together, she does not refute the fact that these experiences may be expressed differently. Thus, the number of stories women can produce is infinite. Femininity is impossible to categorise, and so is the feminine practise of writing. According to Cixous, "this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist" (883). Cixous compares the practice to "a flow," "an outburst" and "a stream" (876), and shows it as lacking any restrictions or limitations. She characterises it as fluid and limitless, in opposition to the rigid frames and strict rules favoured by the Western canon, claiming that women "burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames" (876).

Interestingly, Roberts makes use of analogous metaphors in exploring women's experiences. In the narrative about Félicité, this is how the author describes a sexual encounter: "She lost consciousness of everything but George's hand and eyes, she surged forward in a great flow, the heat and sweetness tunnelled through her, she was the beach, she was the underground river, she was La Fontaine erupting with a loud cry then thrown back on the pebbles" (53). The female orgasm is compared to a "flow," an "underground river," and "La Fontaine erupting," foregrounding the fluidity and ineffability of the female experience. The limitlessness and impalpability of women's writing resonates in this passage, emphasising the indeterminacy of female sexuality and, consequently, femininity itself. Significantly, it is a lesbian encounter, since, as the reader later discovers, George Mannot is actually a woman. As such, it can be linked to Irigaray's view that women are indissolubly connected with homosexuality, inasmuch as their initial bodily encounter is that with the maternal body, whereas their first love is the love of the mother (39). Irigaray believes that love between women is necessary for their liberation from the phallus, encouraging women to discover their sexual identity. To achieve this, she argues, women need to become aware of a model of pleasure that is both different from the one offered by the phallic order and more compatible with their bodies and gender. This idea resonates in the passage quoted above, since, although she is not aware of her lover's true identity, Félicité does notice that this experience is different from what she is used to in sexual encounters: "It didn't hurt, which surprised her, it didn't hurt at all. The ache she had felt earlier was now being taken care of" (52). This scene is later juxtaposed with a violent act of rape which is inflicted on Félicité by her fiancé. The juxtaposition of these two encounters seems to support Irigaray's claim that the phallic model of pleasure has been imposed on women, distorting their sexual identity.

The elusiveness of women's writing is reflected not only in the novel's language but also in its structure. The author herself refers to *Flesh and Blood* as her "most experimental" and "most original novel" ("Michèle Roberts"), drawing attention to its unique structure. The novel consists of fifteen chapters, each of which is named after the protagonist of a particular story. Each chapter ends in a manner suggesting a continuation of the narrative, which, however, is not picked up until the second half of the book. Thus, at the start of each new chapter, the reader's assumptions are proven wrong and their expectations are not met, as they find themselves in an apparently different narrative. Because of the sudden ruptures of the narrative, the plot is distorted and non-linear. Falcus reads the novel's nonlinear composition in the light of Kristeva's belief, expressed in "Women's Time," that cyclical and monumental temporalities relate to female subjectivity (16–17). As a result, the critic suggests a link between the novel's "cyclical and dual structure that avoids narrative closure," its concern with the maternal, and Kristeva's conviction that "women are connected to cyclical time by virtue of their reproductive capacities" (152). As Falcus argues, Kristeva's monumental time is reflected in the characters' experiences, as they are "connected across temporal and spatial boundaries in a way that suggests an eternal timescale or space" (152). The rejection of linearity seems compliant with the theory of *écriture feminine*, which discards strict rules, categories, and all the cohesive narrative techniques favoured by realist writers, embracing a freer, more unrestricted and fragmented style of writing. Each chapter of the novel offers the reader glimpses of a particular character's experiences, providing them with temporary access to their inner thoughts and feelings. However, the fragments are not randomly scattered pieces of narratives; on the contrary, they conform to a particular pattern. As a result, Falcus sees the novel as "an exploration of the imagination and the unconscious of Freddy" (129). Although such an interpretation seems plausible, I would rather read it as a tale of collective female experiences inscribed into stories of women coming from different times and spaces. This would support the argument I have made earlier that, although there is no such thing as a universal woman, all women share common experiences.

The novel's structure requires participation on the part of the reader, since it is the reader's task to recognise and follow the pattern that the narrative adheres to in order to make sense of it. Therefore, it is an active and self-conscious reader who constitutes the crucial component for the novel's existence. Michèle Roberts invites the reader to participate in a sort of a game of her own invention. The reader is presented with fragments of narratives which need to be put back together like a jigsaw puzzle. The structure of the novel is a metaphor, the meaning of which seems compliant with the meaning that is reflected in the plot, which revolves around the theme of separation from the mother: the rupture and the subsequent reconciliation. Mother and daughter become torn apart, and so does the novel. Roberts described this correspondence in the following words: "Something was broken between you, so the novel's broken" ("Michèle Roberts"). Once the reader gets through the first half of the book, they begin a journey back, going through chapters that complete previously abandoned stories in reverse order. In an interview, Roberts compares the novel's composition to a zip: "you're zipping it up as you go" ("Michèle Roberts").

Michèle Roberts's language is perhaps the most elusive and yet distinctive element of her writing: it is both lyrical and sensuous, allowing the reader to experience the narrative on an emotional level. This enables the author to render experiences seemingly impossible to express with words. Literary critics frequently refer to her language as "sensuous" and "voluptuous" ("*January* Talks"). According to Roberts, such language can capture human emotions and experiences, thus making the text more real to the reader. It is the kind of language which, to quote Cixous again, "does not contain" (889). Instead, "it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible" (889).

Moreover, Roberts rejects the tradition of writing that appeals solely to the mind and creates language that speaks the body. Her narratives frequently revolve around bodily pleasures and yearnings, especially sex and food, as indispensable elements of human existence. To render how some people experience the world, she uses descriptions that appeal to different senses and creates a synaesthetic effect. In *Flesh and Blood*, for instance, a description of a dress becomes a feast for the sense of touch: "Whispery touch of chiffon and gauze, of silk lining, crackle of tough buckram. It slithered over me coolly" (5). Elsewhere in the novel, to bring the idea of Paradise closer to the reader, the author appeals to their sense of smell: "Sweat sluices you as you walk. You smell the peppery scent of freshly cut grass, the spicy clove perfume of the carnations, the green breath of the pines, the aniseed tang of wild fennel, the aromatic exhalations of rosemary and thyme" (106). Through these highly poetic passages, Roberts creates evocative and yet elusive imagery of space. Using a combination of familiar scents and sounds, she captures the impenetrable space of Paradise, enabling the reader to envisage the scene and fully experience her writing.

Paradise constitutes a particularly interesting space in *Flesh and Blood,* both linguistically and spatially. First of all, in this section of the text, there is another shift of perspective, but this time the narrative is delivered by Cherubina, an angel and a homodiegetic narrator who, at the same time, seems to be omniscient about her world as she is a native of Paradise. The place is portrayed as lost, yet sought after by certain people and "it might be traced in the secret language women use for talking to each other when they think no one in authority is listening" (104). Hence, Paradise may be read as a female sphere, Cixous's Dark Continent, where "groups of women sit under the trees" (106). In fact, it is a passageway to experiencing the Irigarayan bodily encounter with the mother. Within Paradise there is a massage room where a maternal masseuse figure (with "silvery stretch-marks on her stomach") awaits you and "slaps you, like wet clay, into shape" (108). This maternal figure interweaves the linguistic with the corporeal to tell, in a chapter entitled "Anon," the most archaic story. With this narrative, *Flesh and Blood* reaches its peak, both in terms of plot and structure. "Anon" is the central chapter in the novel and the only one that does not have its counterpart and continuation. It is constructed from mere fragments of sentences and words, which is not to say that it is deprived of meaning. Falcus describes it as a narrative poem which rejects writing conventions and rules of grammar (162). What the section attempts to do is to illustrate the literal reunion of mother and daughter as they become one again: they become "mamabébé" (Roberts 109–110). The narrative can be said to originate from what Irigaray describes as "a primal womb . . . where the child was whole, the mother whole" (38). Paradise is the only space in the novel where mother and daughter seem to speak the same language, namely the "secret language of mamabébé" (Roberts 173). It is a language that expresses their unity and asserts communication between them. The name of the chapter also carries an important meaning. Anon, an abbreviation for "anonymous," implies the universality of the story it conveys. Unlike other narratives in the novel, which are presented from the characters' perspective, the final narrative is not attributed to any specific character narrator, as it constitutes the most primal, the most universal, of all narratives. It might be experienced by the reader on different levels of response, as it stimulates the sense of touch. It is a narrative written by tracing one's finger on the body. I would risk the statement that the narrative is a visual experience as well as a bodily one: "On your blissful skin the hands of the masseuse play a writing game. They spell out, in fingertalk, words and phrases, they trace love messages for your shut eyes to read" (108). The language that Roberts creates in her narrative incorporates all the elements Irigaray refers to in "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother": it speaks about the most archaic relationship with the maternal body;

it explains the bond between mother and daughter; and, finally, it does not reject the corporeal but speaks through it. In this regard, Roberts discovers the language of women.

Reading Michèle Roberts alongside French feminist criticism (especially that of *écriture feminine* and Irigarayan psychoanalysis) offers an interesting insight into her writing. It is particularly compelling in the case of *Flesh and Blood,* which may be analysed on three different levels, that is the semantic, the linguistic and the structural. The semantic level encompasses various motifs which are significant from the vantage point of French feminist criticism, the exploration of the maternal being perhaps the most prevalent. Theoretical concepts developed by Irigaray and Kristeva provide useful analytical tools, which may help the reader to understand the characters' motivations and the plot development. The novel is also concerned with female spaces, female bonding, sexual identity and femininity. Despite Cixous's belief that most literature has failed to inscribe femininity successfully, it can be argued that Roberts's writing offers one of the "few rare exceptions" (878). As for the language, Roberts introduces women characters and enables them to regain their voices. Her novel constitutes a platform for women storytellers where they can speak without any restraint. She grants them a space where they can communicate freely in a language of their own and where their voices will be heard. The language she employs is not the language of foregrounding reason—as it has been claimed by men writers—but the language of the body. It renders the body and all its experiences into the text, making it more real than any realist writing. It appeals to the sensual sphere, allowing the reader to experience the text through the senses, rather than through the intellect. Roberts says she wants to "put the body always into language" ("*January* Talks") and she succeeds. Looking at the structural solutions used in Roberts's writing, we can also see that she rejects rigid frames and categories. Instead, she creates her own original forms, which, as in the case of *Flesh and Blood,* require the reader to take an active part in the production of meaning. The innovative and unique structures escape categorising, hence vindicating Cixous's claim that women's writing is impossible to put up in frames. By creating new forms and introducing the language of the corporeal, Roberts offers her audience fresh perspectives on reading and experiencing literature. Her readers are asked to employ intuitive forms of interpretation rather than following a strict set of rules. Such an approach may result in adapting a new approach to literature of both women and men.

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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

Received: 28.10.2021. Revised: 10.12.2021. Accepted: 1.04.2022.

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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https://doi.org/10.18778/2353-6098.6.12

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Secret Rooms, Locked Doors and Hidden Stories: Retelling "Bluebeard" as a Holocaust Narrative in Michèle Roberts's *Ignorance*

Abstract

One of the most grisly European fairy tales, "Bluebeard" is also a story that has proved immensely productive, spawning numerous variants, adaptations and rewritings. This essay offers a reading of Michèle Roberts's *Ignorance* (2012) as one such retelling. Roberts employs "Bluebeard" to construct a story that utilises the format of a dual coming-of-age novel but is gradually revealed as a Holocaust narrative. Set in a provincial town in Vichy France, *Ignorance* makes repeated use of "Bluebeard" motifs to explore the complicity of individuals in Nazi crimes against their Jewish neighbours. Featuring secret rooms, forbidden chambers, locked doors and embedded narratives, the novel tells the story of Jeanne Nérin as she comes to terms with her Jewish identity and accepts her responsibilities as a Holocaust survivor. This account is complemented by several other stories, the most important of which is that of Jeanne's childhood companion, Marie-Angèle, whose *Bildung* ends in emotional and ethical failure. Fascinated with the life of bourgeois comfort and respectability, Marie-Angèle embraces what Nancy Tuana describes as "wilful ignorance," and becomes increasingly complicit in the acts of injustice, exploitation and crime she witnesses.

Keywords: Michèle Roberts, "Bluebeard," Maria Tatar, George Steiner, Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Giorgio Agamben, Holocaust

One of the most grisly European fairy tales, "Bluebeard" has spawned numerous variants, adaptations and rewritings. Many of these are discussed in Maria Tatar's *Secrets beyond the Door* (2004). Analysing such diverse titles as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946) and Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), Tatar draws attention to different uses that the fairy tale has been put to, arguing that "Bluebeard" is "not one story but many stories, multiple scripts competing with each other" (66). As a result of this complexity, she says, the tale is extremely pliable, capable of transforming itself and re-emerging in new cultural contexts. Most typically, its elements have helped to create narratives about "troubled marriages" (8), but some of its retellings are more surprising. In Chapter Four of her book, for instance, Tatar examines the resurgence of "Bluebeard"

Received: 25.02.2022. Revised: 14.04.2022. Accepted: 11.05.2022.

motifs in late twentieth-century German literature and film, revealing how the fairy tale has served to explore the most troubling aspects of German history and identity. As the critic explains,

> The Bluebeard story . . . presents itself as a map for thinking about issues broader than romance, power, and marriage. In the last decades of the twentieth century, Bluebeard was a tale to which a number of German writers resorted in their efforts to come to terms with a past that could not be worked through or mastered. Faced with crimes so heinous that they defied representation, some writers found that the only way to write about Germany's past was to return to the "simple form" of the fairy tale, to begin with "once upon a time," as did Günter Grass in *The Tin Drum*. It didn't take long for Bluebeard's chamber of horrors to emerge as an apt metaphor for the gas chambers and other atrocities of World War II. (Tatar 126)

As this essay will argue, the story of Bluebeard serves a rather similar purpose in Michèle Roberts's *Ignorance* (2012). Set in a provincial town in Vichy France, the novel makes repeated references to the tale to investigate what is undoubtedly the darkest period in modern European history. In particular, it explores the complicity of individuals in Nazi crimes against local Jewish communities, revealing, in the words of Helen Dunmore, "what happens in small towns when the population faces hunger, terror, coercion and bribery."

Explaining the cultural significance of "Bluebeard," Tatar emphasises the patriarchal character of the conflict at the heart of the story. She reads the fairy tale as having its roots among foundational narratives of European culture, in Greek mythology and the Bible. In doing so, she points to its affinities with the story of Adam and Eve and the myth of Prometheus. All three texts, she observes, speak about "the seductions of forbidden knowledge" (3) and can be read as commentaries on "the moral dimensions of intellectual inquiry" (2). What they reveal, however, are powerful "gender asymmetries" that testify to women's "problematic relationship to knowledge" (3). As Tatar explains, "Eve's curiosity, for example, installs sin, mortality, and suffering into the human condition, while Prometheus's sacrilege becomes a positive foundation for the arts and crafts that produce civilization" (3). While "Bluebeard" seems to follow the biblical paradigm in focusing on the consequences of female (rather than male) curiosity, and in depicting a woman's desire for knowledge in terms of a curse (rather than a chance), Tatar draws attention to the glimmer of hope that the story offers when the wife of the bloody villain survives his death, remarries and lives on "happily ever after" (3). In fact, it may well be the suggestion of this mysterious afterlife, extending beyond the story's closure and largely unaccounted for, that has led so many authors to return to and reimagine the story.

In reviews published shortly after its publication, *Ignorance* was repeatedly compared to Roberts's 1992 novel, *Daughters of the House* (cf. McDowell, Holland, Hagestadt). Indeed, the two novels show interesting parallels. Both rely on a similar geographic and temporal setting, and both investigate "the impact and legacy of the Holocaust in France" (Parker 90). What they also share is that they can be read as following the format of a dual coming-of-age novel. This generic provenance, as well as the presence of "Bluebeard" motifs, might suggest a plot development that should lead its characters from childish naivety and immaturity towards responsibility and knowledge. In *Ignorance*, however, this trajectory is only followed by its central heroine, Jeanne Nérin, but not by her childhood companion and the second major figure in the novel, Marie-Angèle Baudry. Jeanne—a half orphan, whose mother converted from Judaism to Catholicism to escape anti-Semitic persecution—is depicted as an avid reader and a self-learner, who develops a passion for painting and grows into a mature, self-conscious adult. In the case of Marie-Angèle, a daughter of *petit-bourgeois* shop owners, the path to adulthood seems to lead, not to knowledge, but rather to what the American feminist philosopher, Nancy Tuana, refers to as "wilful ignorance" (11). Tuana defines the concept as

referring to "a systematic process of self-deception, a wilful embrace of ignorance that infects those who are in positions of privilege, an active ignoring of the oppression of others and one's role in that exploitation" (11), and Roberts's novel shows how Marie-Angèle brings this strategy to perfection. As a schoolgirl, she destroys "nasty notes" passed in the classroom: "you tore them up," she reflects, "If necessary you put the tiny pieces into your mouth and swallowed them . . . Then you could deny they'd ever existed" (Roberts 76). During the war, she also chooses such seemingly innocuous gestures to turn a blind eye to acts of injustice, exploitation and crime she witnesses. If "Bluebeard" emphasises the negative effects of female curiosity, Roberts's novel speaks about the dangers of its opposite, revealing, in Marie-Angèle, the moral consequences of a deliberate refusal to know. At the same time, the central narrative of the novel, which focuses on Jeanne, can be read as an attempt to provide a more positive rewriting of the fairy tale where female curiosity is celebrated rather than condemned, and depicted as an ethically constructive attitude.

The cultural critic George Steiner has used the motif of Bluebeard's chamber to argue that the pursuit of knowledge is deeply instilled in human nature. In "Tomorrow," one of the essays included in *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971), he claims:

> We cannot turn back. We cannot choose the dreams of unknowing. We shall, I expect, open the last door in the castle, even if it leads, perhaps *because* it leads, onto realities which are beyond the reach of human comprehension and control. We shall do so with that desolate clairvoyance . . . , because opening doors is the tragic merit of our identity. (140)

Yet, as Steiner makes clear in another essay in the same volume, "A Season in Hell," the behaviour of the overwhelming majority of European citizens during the Second World War demonstrates the persistence of such "dreams of unknowing." Steiner recognises these dreams in attempts at "collaboratively unknowing" and includes them among attitudes that paved the way for the Holocaust (35). He discusses them under the rubric of "active indifference," a term that seems to correspond to what Tuana identifies as "wilful ignorance." Whatever the preferred label, it is the historical reality of this phenomenon that comes under scrutiny in Roberts's novel, and it is analysed through motifs borrowed from "Bluebeard."

The fairy tale is evoked for the first time in the opening pages of *Ignorance* as Marie-Angèle's mother walks the two girls to a convent school where they are to become full-time boarders. As Jeanne looks in the direction of the house adjoining the school, she is introduced to the story of its sole inhabitant and owner, Monsieur Jacquotet. The man is a successful, recognised painter, but Marie-Angèle refers to him as "the Mad Hermit." What Jeanne learns about Jacquotet on that day is that he is "a misfit" who comes "from a foreign background," eats "strange food" and refuses to "mix up with the neighbours." She also hears that he had "a beautiful young wife," whom he "kept . . . hidden away" and who died "mysteriously" (Roberts 11). It is at this point in the novel that Marie-Angèle actually refers to the man as Bluebeard. As Jeanne tries to remember the fairy tale, her words signal to the reader that it is not only the death of his wife that may have earned the man the nickname "Bluebeard" but also his Jewishness. Even before his story is recounted, the painter is identified as Jewish through comments that expose anti-Semitic attitudes of both Marie-Angèle, who laughs at his big nose, and her mother, whose description turns into a violent anti-Semitic tirade: "He does all right for himself. All right for some. They know how to manage, those Jews. We let them in, we let them have jobs. And now, the money that they've got squirreled away" (9). Steiner associates European anti-Semitism with "the long tradition of *petit-bourgeois* resentment against a seemingly aloof, prospering minority" (34), and Madame Baudry's derogatory remarks offer an apt illustration of his words.

To explain the link between Monsieur Jacquotet's Jewish background and his reputation as Bluebeard, the narrative evokes pictorial representations of the fairy-tale figure—threatening, powerful and exotic—to be found in children's books. As Jeanne recalls her experience of reading the story, her memory is filled with images of a "huge Blackamoor" with "black eyes [that] shot red sparks" and a dishevelled beard (Roberts 11–12). Other details of the villain's description also point to the racial prejudice inherent in the pictures as Jeanne remembers "a gilded purple turban, a gold coat and gathered gold trousers, slippers with curled-up toes" and a "curved scimitar" (12). Her words clearly allude to nineteenth-century illustrations of the fairy tale, many of which showed Bluebeard as a dark-skinned, dark-eyed Oriental tyrant "in sharp physiognomic contrast" with the "sandy-haired" knights who come to their sister's rescue (Tatar 32). A good example of such a representation can be found in Walter Crane's *Toy Books* (1875), where, in Tatar's words, the villain displays "the stereotypical features of the wicked Jew, bearded, robed, hook nosed, with satanic furrows in his brow" (32).[1] By introducing Jacquotet to the novel as an object of idle gossip that stems from prejudice, fear, envy, and crude racial stereotyping that belongs to the realm of myth and fairy tale, *Ignorance* provides a troubling insight into anti-Semitic sentiments prevalent in early twentieth-century European societies. What is more, by showing how such attitudes are present in, and disseminated through, important products of culture (such as illustrations for a canonical European fairy tale), it forces the reader to consider whether, as Manfred Gerstenfeld has suggested, anti-Jewish "hate and discrimination" should not be seen "as inherent to European culture and a part of European 'values'" (3).

The "Bluebeard" scenario envisaged in this early scene of the novel is continued soon afterwards, when Jeanne and Marie-Angèle find themselves inside Monsieur Jacquotet's house. As the three play hide-and-seek, the man allows the girls to "go anywhere you like, hide anywhere you like, but not to the top of the house" (Roberts 22). The forbidden room is the painter's studio, and when Jeanne and Marie-Angèle disobey and break the rule, what they find inside is a series of paintings depicting "the same dark-eyed woman in a red frock again and again" (23), which Jeanne—in another echo of "Bluebeard"—describes as "a red chorus" of wives (24). When inside the studio, the painter also shows the girls a cupboard, which he claims to allow a secret passage to the attic over their dormitory. The escapade ends when during a game of play-acting, Marie-Angèle adopts a sexually explicit pose, and the man gets so angry with her that Jeanne thinks he might attack her with a palette knife he is holding in his hand. As he approaches the girls, the two run away.

As they are later interviewed by the nuns about the events, Jeanne has a feeling that she is expected to corroborate "the story they wanted me to tell," a story where the painter, now described as "Bluebeard-the-Jew," "made us do it" (19). What the "it" means is never clarified, but the transgression is serious enough for the nuns to threaten to inform the gendarmes while also promising to "keep an eye" on Jacquotet in the future. In spite of these declarations, however, an official complaint is never made, and the girls are actually forbidden to discuss the event with their parents and schoolmates. Contrary to what the nuns imagine, and to what one reviewer spells out when she discerns "a hint of paedophilia" in the painter's behaviour (McDowell), Jeanne's narrative clearly shows that the accusation is unfounded. The only paedophile that the girls need to confront

[1] If these representations seem to conflate the Jew, the Turk and the Arab into a single image of "the oriental Other," the move can be explained by looking at recent critical discourse on the role of the Jews in Western constructions of the Orient. Kalmar and Penslar, for instance, argue that "orientalism has always been not only about the Muslims but also about the Jews" since "the Western image of the Muslim Orient has been formed, and continues to be formed, in inextricable conjunction with Western perceptions of the Jewish people" (xiii).

is the local priest, whose story further testifies to the tendency of Catholic Church representatives to squelch potential scandals, as he is hastily transferred to another parish. The painter, on the other hand, has no intention of stepping into the role of a fairy-tale villain. Rather, if we follow Steiner's reading of "Bluebeard" as a narrative about the pursuit of knowledge, the relationship that later develops between Jacquotet and Jeanne positions him an anti-Bluebeard figure. When Jeanne returns to his house as an adolescent, he teaches her to paint and introduces her to Jewish history. He stimulates her emotional and intellectual growth. Still, even though the essence of the Bluebeard tale is absent from the opening narrative, it is filled with numerous trappings associated with the story: dead wives, locked rooms, secret passages. All these elements will re-emerge in subsequent appearances of the forbidden chamber in the novel.

One of such secret rooms is the shed situated in the yard behind the shop that belongs to Marie-Angèle's parents. During the war, when food is scarce and a rationing system is introduced, the shed is used as a hiding place for contraband goods, which the Baudrys sell from under the counter in their shop. Stacked in the shed, "in locked boxes" (Roberts 52), these wartime luxuries—"not just food but also big bundles of firewood, bicycle tyres, laundry soap" (44)—are sneaked to the family by Maurice Blanchard, a black-marketeer who supervises the whole operation.

Marie-Angèle becomes infatuated with Maurice. In particular, she is impressed by the aura of wealth that surrounds him, by his knowingness and resourcefulness. Maurice stands in sharp contrast to the overwhelming gloom of wartime austerity. He is immaculately dressed in cashmere, wears a gold signet ring on his finger and smells of lemon verbena soap, exuding, in Marie-Angèle's words, "aliveness, a smell of money and newness and cleanliness" (40). He introduces himself as a self-made man and defines business as "a question of seizing opportunities" (41). His job at the town hall gives him access to information, an advantage he has every intention of exploiting:

> Maurice simply had the wits to organise things. He knew how to bargain, what prices to pay . . . Maurice knew all the back ways; how to avoid checkpoints. I asked him: how do you manage to get hold of petrol? He winked. Business contacts. I didn't ask for details. I trusted him to know what he was doing. . . Not just groceries and petrol. Information too, if necessary. Papers. Documents. Whatever people needed. (43–44)

If Bluebeard epitomises "a superiority that depends on knowledge from which others are expressly excluded" (Lewis 221), Maurice is a worthy reincarnation. An ardent believer in the bourgeois values of self-interest, materialism and upward mobility, he exemplifies Michel Foucault's insights on the inseparability of knowledge and power (as envisaged in the composite notion of *pouvoir*/*savoir*). In an often-quoted passage, Foucault argues:

> Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power . . . It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power. (52)

By showing how access to municipal records allows Maurice to emerge from the war with "a dragon's hoard of gold" (Dunmore), the novel confirms the validity of these assertions. At the same time, it casts Marie-Angèle into the role of Bluebeard's dutiful wife. Unlike the actual fairy-tale heroine, whose curiosity pushes her to discover her husband's secrets and, thus, to redress the imbalance of power/knowledge between them, the young woman in Roberts's novel is quite content with her subordinate status. Although she realises that Maurice hides things from her, she is quite happy to be "protected . . . from knowing too much" (Roberts 60).

The degree of the young woman's wilful ignorance is tested in a scene that is set in June 1942, the very month when, as we learn from Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, Himmler's

directive to implement the "final solution" reached France (161). As Marie-Angèle goes to the shed in the backyard, a "big iron key" in her hand (Roberts 52), she resembles her fairy-tale predecessor, about to discover a life-changing secret. To her surprise, the door is already unlocked and, inside, she finds a local Jewish family, Mrs Fauchon and her two youngest children. Their hair is bleached with peroxide, and all their belongings are packed into three suitcases. The Fauchons repeatedly proved to be trustworthy neighbours and had strong ties within the community: the man fought with the French army during the Nazi invasion of France; the woman opened her door for the bodies of a baker's family killed in a German air raid, inviting her Christian neighbours to come and pray at her house (35). Marie-Angèle, however, shows little sympathy for the family in hiding. Her instinct tells her to get rid of the unwelcome visitors. She considers calling the gendarmes but decides otherwise, fearing that they would discover the secret boxes of contraband goods. Reluctant to confront the problem, she chooses to lock the family "back into darkness," the gesture signalling her refusal to take action and accept responsibility. She does not speak to the woman and finds herself unable to pronounce her name: "I pretended not to recognise her under her disguise. Her eyes spoke to me. Her eyes told me that Maurice had hidden her and her children in our shed. Her eyes wanted to tell me more. I turned my eyes away" (54). As elsewhere in the novel, Roberts employs the symbolism of eyes and doors to communicate a character's capacity for empathy and ethical identification. As Marie-Angèle averts her gaze from the plight of the family and locks the door behind her back, the scene indicates her selfishness and disregard for the suffering of others. What she exercises in the scene is the self-deceptive blindness that Tuana identifies as wilful ignorance.

This practice of turning eyes away and refusing to draw the most obvious conclusions becomes a staple behaviour for Marie-Angèle. She never wonders about the source of Maurice's increasing wealth. She readily accepts his lavish gifts. She prefers to see the two of them as "heroes hoodwinking the Germans" (44), failing to take note of his ruthless indifference as he objectifies the desperate Jewish family by referring to them as "another form of contraband. Just a package to smuggle out" (57). As they drop the vulnerable Jewish mother and her two young children near the local railway station, she shows little concern for what happens to them later. In doing so, she refuses to acknowledge what is obvious to Jeanne: Maurice is a villain who profits from the war by preying on human tragedy and "screwing [people] for money and sex" (190). Unlike Jeanne, however, Marie-Angèle opts for blindness even though this wilful ignorance requires of her increasingly more dubious moral compromises.

The third, and the most traumatic, evocation of the Bluebeard chamber in the novel returns the reader to where the story begins, back to the secret door that connects Monsieur Jacquotet's house and the attic room above the school dormitory. As the Fauchon family attempt to flee Nazi-occupied France, Jeanne escorts their two older children to what she believes to be the safety of the convent school. As they enter the building, she comes across Maurice as he is leaving the house of the painter. The description of this encounter is filled, again, with symbolic references to doors, and eyes, opening and closing:

> I close my eyes. Open them. I'm a child too: I turn away my head so that I haven't seen Maurice and therefore he hasn't seen me. Nor the two children. Their yellow stars blaze. Maurice goes inside and closes the door. (193)

Soon afterwards, two gendarmes arrive to have a private word with Reverend Mother. They have clearly been informed by Maurice about the Jewish children and the secret door connecting the two houses as they announce their intention of taking the children away using that entrance. The whole operation is to be executed under cover of darkness. Only Reverend Mother and Sister Dolly know

what is planned for the night. The children are put to bed in their clothes and told that their father will come to pick them up. In a scene that mirrors (but also reverses) the childhood escapade of Jeanne and Marie-Angèle, they are told that this is all a secret, that they will play a game of hide-and-seek, and are asked to be silent. Indeed, the children stay quiet as the gendarmes enter from the neighbouring house and take them to a truck parked outside where they disappear into the hands outstretched from below the tarpaulin. On the very next day, the opening in the attic cupboard is sealed up, and the events of the night never enter the collective memory of the community. Like the nasty notes that Marie-Angèle used to swallow as a schoolgirl, they are relegated to oblivion as if they never really existed.

Reading *Ignorance* is no easy task. Fragmentary, incoherent and chronologically misleading, the novel is divided into seven separate accounts where sections narrated by Jeanne alternate with stories ascribed to three other female characters: Marie-Angèle, Andreé (Jeanne's daughter) and Sister Dolly. As it moves between these narratives, the novel takes considerable leaps in time and space. Internally, the sections are no less chaotic: all of them take the form of interior monologues whose linear progression is repeatedly (and increasingly) interrupted with flashbacks and flashforwards. What complicates the reading further is that the different sections seem to exist in isolation, which means that the same events and settings are revisited from different, autonomous perspectives and a single character can be referred to with multiple names. Marie-Angèle's father, for instance, functions as "Papa" in her account and then reappears as "Monsieur Baudry" in Sister Dolly's story. The same applies to objects—houses, paintings, pieces of jewellery or clothing—which also "migrate" from one narrative to another. The significance of these travels is never acknowledged: the objects are mentioned in apparently casual comments, which seem to provide no more than circumstantial detail typically found in historical novels. Still, the connections we make between them matter, functioning like the lines the night gazer draws between stars in Wolfgang Iser's famous metaphor for the process by which the reader interacts with the text to create its meaning (282).[2] This refers, for instance, to the clothes Maurice brings to the local brothel—"A white poplin blouse with black buttons. A green crepe de Chine frock. A red silk dress. A white satin evening frock" (Roberts 187)—which are clearly the same outfits that Jeanne wore when she posed for Monsieur Jacquotet in scenes that occurred nearly a hundred pages earlier (102). Similarly, the painting that Maurice deposits in the Baudrys' shed (69) is probably the same one which Jacquotet has in mind when he reveals to Jeanne that he bought his freedom with a painting (177). There are further connections to be made between Jeanne's seemingly casual reference to Madame Fauchon's flower-shaped gold and pearl earrings (94), her later observation of "the red spot where her earring had been" (175), her mother's information that the Fauchons have spent all their savings to buy forged papers for their escape (171), and the gifts of expensive gold jewellery that Maurice presents to the Baudrys (63, 68) and Andreé glimpses many years later (126). The journeys these objects make across the narratives are stories in themselves, hidden, unless the reader takes the trouble to fish them out from the mass of circumstantial detail that fills the novel. The most shocking of these hidden stories can be extricated when the reader realises that the house which Maurice buys for Marie-Angèle as a wedding gift is the house that belonged to the Jewish painter. In her narrative, Marie-Angèle misleadingly describes it as "*an* abandoned house at the top of town" (68; emphasis added), and the connection can only be made when it is clearly identified in Dolly's account (210).

[2] The quote reads: "Two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable."

Given the multiplicity of narrative voices, *Ignorance* can be described as what Mikhail Bakhtin envisaged as a "polyphonic novel" and defined as a narrative offering "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (6). Such a text requires the absence of an authoritative third-person narrator, as in *Ignorance* (where no third-person narrator appears) or in Fyodor Dostoevsky's fiction (where, as Bakhtin argues, the third-person narrator is granted no privileged status and is simply seen "as one orientation among other orientations" [98]). The effect, in both cases, is similar: the reader is confronted with "a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (6) where different characters enjoy "equal rights" (6) and speak from "equally authoritative ideological positions" (18). Such a text, no doubt, places heavy demands on the reader, as the characters often represent "disparate, contradictory philosophical stances" (5) and their voices cannot be reconciled to tell a single, unified story. What it amounts to in practical terms can well be seen in *Ignorance* where the reader cannot arrive at any sustained interpretation of the novel without deciding which voices to trust and approach as reliable and which to treat with reserve and caution. In effect, the process of reading is highly contingent, forcing us to adjust our views of the characters and to re-evaluate previous events and comments in the light of emerging new details. To give just one example, when Marie-Angèle announces that Maurice has bought an abandoned house, the information seems quite harmless, but it acquires ominous gravity when we piece it together not just with what we glimpse from Jeanne's and Dolly's stories, but also with what we know of the historical realities of Vichy France, whose government, on 22 July 1941, implemented laws allowing the state to confiscate Jewish property (Marrus and Paxton 63). Subsequently, Maurice can be identified as representing the "several hundred thousand" French citizens, who—according to Marrus and Paxton—"helped rob Jews of their property, sold off at throwaway prices, or who denounced Jews in hiding or carrying false papers" (265).

"Reading books," Tatar explains, "we stand on the threshold of new worlds, opening doors that take us into the hidden chambers of unfamiliar mansions and into the secret spaces of other minds" (171). The comment also encapsulates the experience of reading *Ignorance* as narrative curiosity is central to understanding the characters and their motivation. Most importantly, perhaps, the reader's curiosity is also essential in interpreting the novel as a Holocaust narrative, since the theme, like the barbed wire on the book's cover, is drawn so subtly that it can easily be overlooked. That this actually happens can be inferred from the novel's reviews: some contain no references to the persecution of Jews (cf. Holland), while others depict it in a sketchy and selective manner (cf. Leonard, McDowell, Hagestadt), often misrepresenting the essential elements of the story.[3] The reason is that the theme is never tackled directly and can only be glimpsed from allusions, oblique comments and understatements. In consequence, even though the novel makes no explicit mention of concentration camps or gas chambers, their shadows loom large over the narrative. They are unmistakably present in the scene when gendarmes take the Fauchon children away wearing only slippers and hand their boots back to Sister Dolly, explaining that "they won't need these" (Roberts 210). The boots—which may be an echo of the "Shoes on the Danube" memorial in Budapest, commemorating the Jews shot on the banks of the river in the winter of 1944–1945—survive the war

[3] Michael Leonard mentions the family hidden in the shed, but he accepts Marie-Angèle's account of the events at face value, failing to notice anything untoward in Maurice's actions. Emma Hagestadt and Lesley McDowell are more perceptive: they comment on Maurice's dubious motives in helping Madame Fauchon but make no reference to the plight of her older children. At the same time, the reviewers make a number of factual errors: Jessica Holland described Marie-Angèle as having "Jewish blood" while Leonard sees Jeanne as "a woman who betrays her country" and celebrates Marie-Angèle's marriage as a testimony to "the enduring power of real love."

and are found, many years later, by Andreé. At this point, however, they are stripped of all meaning and reduced to an empty signifier as there is no surviving witness willing to tell their story.

Situating the reader as an active "producer" rather than a passive "consumer" of meaning, *Ignorance* comes close to Roland Barthes's "writerly text" (4). Composed of mere "fragments of stories, bits and pieces of information" (Roberts 103), the narrative relies on the reader to construct rather than discover its meaning. Its distance from a "classic" realist novel (or what Barthes also calls a "readerly" text) can also be measured in that it resists closure and offers no sense of poetic justice. As *Ignorance* reaches its end, many of the questions it raises remain unanswered. We never learn, for instance, whether Madame Fauchon and her two youngest children succeed in escaping to Spain. Nor are we informed about what happens to her husband and Jacquotet. Do the two children captured by Germans join their father as they have been told? Are these his hands that hold them as they are loaded onto the truck? The narrative remains silent on all these questions. What we do know, however, is chillingly disturbing. Maurice and Marie-Angèle are never exposed as German collaborators. As the war ends, they enjoy the status of respectable citizens within their Catholic community. They prosper, much like the girl in Angela Carter's "Werewolf," another retelling of a canonical European fairy tale which features a wolfish villain who sends an innocent person to death, takes over their house and creates a false story where she disguises her bourgeois aspirations "in a scabby coat of sheepskin" (Carter 127).[4] Jeanne, on the other hand, is falsely accused of working as a prostitute for German soldiers, paraded as a *femme tondue* through the streets of the town, separated from her baby daughter and exiled to Britain, to ensure that the Blanchards' privileged bourgeois existence remains unthreatened.

As the novel reaches its end, we see Jeanne pondering about how much of her past she should reveal to her newly-met English friends. She constructs several possible versions of her story and presents them in the form of cooking recipes. One of them reads: "Take as many Jews as you like, crack them whip them beat them put into the oven turn on the gas wait till they're well crisped throw into the rubbish pit take another batch start again" (Roberts 230). This short passage plays an important role in the novel. First of all, it is the closest that *Ignorance* gets to mentioning the Holocaust. Second, it demonstrates Jeanne's growing readiness to break the silence about her wartime experiences. She tries to tell the story, not so much for her sake, but for the "lost ones." As she attempts to put words together, they "[totter] like a baby trying to walk" (230).

The ending of the story thus sends the reader back to the beginning, suggesting that the narrative we have been pursuing is precisely that: Jeanne's retrospective attempt to reconstruct what happened during the war, a debt she owes to those she loved and lost. It is also her attempt to understand others. Interestingly, even the sections which are apparently narrated by Dolly, Marie-Angèle and Andreé are preceded by comments suggesting that they, too, may come from Jeanne herself. The final sentence in Jeanne's opening narrative, immediately before the novel switches to Marie-Angèle's first-person perspective, reads: "But I did try to imagine what Marie-Angèle's account might be like" (30). Similarly, before Andreé takes over as the narrator, Jeanne imagines the future in which she reconnects with her daughter and attempts to "coax the words out of her"

[4] Apart from references to "Bluebeard," the novel often alludes to other European fairy tales, such as "Hansel and Gretel," "The Three Little Pigs," "Beauty and the Beast" and "Cinderella." Maurice is frequently compared to fairy-tale characters, for instance, when he is described as "a black-haired prince . . . who turned into an ogre once midnight struck" (184) or a "glittery-eyed wolf" (185). Marie-Angèle's heartlessness is suggested by portraying her as the prince's "blonde fiancée, dressed in white organza, [who] sat at home, drinking hot chocolate . . . [and] approaching her soles to the red scorch of the flames" (185), and also by repeatedly depicting her in expensive furs and leather gloves that bring to mind the Countess in Carter's "The Snow Child."

(109). Finally, Sister Dolly's account also begins after Jeanne pictures "Dolly, later in her life, talking to a friend" and tries to understand how the nun might "shape her version of these times" and "what she might say" (198).

In view of these comments, Jeanne emerges as an author figure, lending her voice to others, and harnessing her imagination to create a series of embedded narratives that engage with their experiences. Earlier in the novel, while still in France, Jeanne mentions the presence of "a dark book inside me, listing the names of the lost." At this stage, however, she is not ready to respond: "I noted the book's existence, then shut it, pushed it deep down under snow and ice" (196). The ending of the novel registers a change in her: as she feels surrounded by ghosts, requesting "to hear them out" and "to become their witness," she can now fulfil her duty, meeting their pleas with compassion and hope (230). If the narrative she finally creates is riddled with silences, it is due to the nature of the material confronted, illustrating the problems mentioned in Giorgio Agamben's discussion of testimonies left by actual Holocaust survivors:

> . . . the value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority. The "true" witnesses, the "complete witnesses," are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness . . . The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony. (34)

Since what she truly wishes to recount is a Holocaust narrative that defies representation, Jeanne can only approach the task by dispersing this unspeakable story within her own account and the accounts of Marie-Angèle, Andreé and Dolly as those who have not slipped into what Dori Laub refers to as "the gaping hole of genocide and the gaping hole of silence" (65). The final effect takes the shape of a novel that is riddled with silences and heavily fragmented, and where the harrowing wartime reality is filtered through comforting paradigms of well-established genres (such as the Bildungsroman) and centuries-old fairy tales (such as "Bluebeard").

In its opening scenes that trace Jeanne and Marie-Angèle's childhood experiences, *Ignorance* announces its generic affinity with the dual "coming-of-age" novel. This paradigm is never quite abandoned as the narrative, for all its complexity and fragmentation, continues to follow the experiences of the two young women as they move to maturity. It registers Jeanne's emotional and moral growth, chronicling the process that allows her to come to terms with her Jewish identity and to accept her responsibilities as a Holocaust survivor. On the other hand, it reveals Marie-Angèle's story as a failed *Bildung*. Emphasising her fascination with bourgeois comfort and respectability, *Ignorance* depicts Marie-Angèle as an embodiment of "wilful ignorance," showing her growing complicity in her husband's crimes. In doing so, the novel employs some of the best known "Bluebeard" motifs—hidden rooms, forbidden chambers and suppressed narratives—which are also used to identify Jeanne's story as illustrating Steiner's claim that the pursuit of knowledge and the act of "opening doors is the tragic merit of [human] identity" (140). Most importantly, however, the same motifs also allow us to read *Ignorance* as a Holocaust narrative as their subsequent occurrences bring together the presence of anti-Semitic attitudes in pre-war Europe, the complicity of its citizens in Nazi crimes, and the annihilation of its Jewish communities.

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