

TRAVELLING IN WOMEN'S HISTORY WITH MICHÈLE ROBERTS'S NOVELS

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Michèle Roberts is one of the most prolific writers on the contemporary British scene. From her debut in 1978 with *A Piece of the Night*, to her most recent work to date, her memoir *Paper Houses* published in 2007, the half-English half-French author has explored the genres and forms of the novel, short narrative, poetry, drama, literary criticism and radio scripts. Soraya García-Sánchez's commitment to Roberts's oeuvre is both personal and intellectual. Her book is a very helpful addition to existing criticism of Roberts's work, which began in 2006 with Patricia Bastida Rodríguez's *Santa o hereje: la otra Teresa de Ávila en Impossible Saints de Michèle Roberts*, and was followed by Sarah Falcus's *Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories* (2007), a critical and thematic reading of Roberts's most successful novels till *Reader, I married Him*. In 2009 Susanne Gruss devoted *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text* to analyse the writer's production in the light of Angela Carter's work. García-Sánchez's study proposes, though, a literal and metaphorical journey along Roberts's long fiction with special attention to her memoir.

The book is divided into three parts. Part A focuses on the task of the novelist, highlighting Roberts's personal and literary background, and discussing her development as a writer in the context of her engagement with feminism. Part B explores Roberts's memoir in connection with her earlier fiction, and Part C comprises two interviews with the writer, previously published, intended to complete the discussion of the former sections.

From the beginning, García-Sánchez shows her interest in a number of set topics in Roberts's fiction which recur in her non-fictional writing, namely language, the female body, history and culture, travelling and the figure of the female *flâneur* (2011: 14). The author chooses the metaphor of travelling to illustrate her relationship with Roberts's work. Travelling is, then, both an individual and a collective experience, as the novelist focuses on single women's lives but also on the repercussions that individual existences have in the course of women's history. Part A, "Michèle Roberts, the novelist", is divided into different subsections according to thematic criteria. The first subsection serves as an introduction and enumerates recurrent motifs and issues in her production, like the use of pastiche and the creation of a woman's language invariably related to the body, following the notions of *l'écriture féminine* and *parler femme*, developed by French feminism. A general overview of Roberts's background and literary career is provided, and there are a few details about plot and main topics with special reference to those novels which dramatize the images of women in the Christian tradition, like *The Visitation*, *The Book of Mrs Noah*, or *Daughters of the House*. However, García-Sánchez chooses not to include in this discussion other novels relevant for the topic, such as *The Wild Girl* or *Impossible Saints*, or to use them to explain other related issues, like the figure of the woman writer (2011: 22). In the next section "Michèle Roberts and writing novels", the author focuses on various aspects and features in Roberts's fiction, like the outstanding presence of houses, the absence of omniscient narratorial figures, the importance of the unconscious, and the interrelation between story and history. Then, she reads Roberts's use of pastiche and *l'écriture féminine* as two postmodern forms and chooses her novels of the 1990s to illustrate the technique, on the grounds of her experimentation with narrative voices. García-Sánchez's allusion to the original meaning of the term in the semantic field of cooking could have been stretched further, though, by focusing on the relationship between writing and cooking in Roberts's production, present in stories like "The Bishop's Lunch", and novels such as *Impossible Saints*, *The Looking Glass* or more recently *Reader, I Married Him*, and that the writer herself delineated ironically in *Food, Sex and God*: "Writing feels like pulling something out of my insides; I've made it inside, now must draw it out, put it out. It's painful or pleasurable, depending on how the work's going, but it diminishes and empties me, I've lost part of myself, I become hungry" (Roberts 1998: 199-200).

García-Sánchez intertwines individual and collective lives in "Feminism: Women's History", to deal with the circumstances of Roberts's protagonists. She aptly claims that for them the personal is political (2011: 39). Writing becomes an essential part of their agendas, and García-Sánchez focuses accordingly on those heroines who are writers in the making, and who best exemplify proto-feminist or feminist attitudes: Mary Magdalene in *The Wild Girl*, Helen in *The Visitation*, Millicent in *The Looking Glass*, or Mrs Noah in *The Book of Mrs Noah*. Later, she evaluates the either/or

representation of femininity in Roberts's fiction and concurs that by playing with binaries the writer tries to deactivate the whole gender construction: "Roberts aims to end with that dichotomy that has separated women. Instead, this feminist writer explores the potential union of opposites in the same woman" (2011: 45). As a corollary to this debate, García-Sánchez centers on the mother-daughter bond, which she interprets as an autobiographical trace. It is perhaps here that Roberts's debt to French feminism becomes more evident, though this particular is not mentioned or developed any further in the analysis. The author pays attention to those figures who are committed to life giving in Roberts's fiction and then looks into three texts which could be easily read in the light of Julia Kristeva's theory about maternal *jouissance* (1986: 101): *A Piece of the Night*, *The Visitation* and *Flesh and Blood*. García-Sánchez is right to conclude that if mother and daughter come to terms very seldom in her fiction, the figure of the grandmother, so influential and pervasive in the writer's life, is chosen to foster relationships among women across generations (2011: 66). The topic of sex and religion is discussed in the book at different levels. García-Sánchez notes that Roberts attempts to neutralize power relations fostered by the Christian church by demystifying the figures of the saint and the prostitute in *The Wild Girl* (2011: 71-72). This project continues in *Daughters of the House* with the fictionalization of St Thérèse de Lisieux's life and culminates in *Impossible Saints*, Roberts's most choral novel. The lives of these saints portray them both as historical and individual characters.

Part B, entitled "Michèle Roberts, the memoirist", is significantly shorter and is devoted to the analysis of *Paper Houses*. This experimental text, which moves between fiction and non-fiction, constitutes Roberts's foray into the autobiographic genre: "Roberts's conscious past becomes constructive and active in this autobiographical work" (García-Sánchez 2011: 93). García-Sánchez argues perceptively that Roberts's act of reconstruction involves both the activation of memory and the introduction of fictive material. Her purpose in this section is to approach the study of the intertwining of the personal and the public in relation to Roberts's experiences, and an analysis of structure, relating it to its adherence to both modern and postmodern techniques. This is not dealt with further. She refers to Roberts's relationship with London, and elicits questions about female identity, playing the role of the *flâneur* and describing the stages of Roberts's life and career, as they are associated with particular London locations. The connection between the autobiographical mode and the figure of the female city stroller constitutes one of the most insightful proposals in García-Sánchez's study (2011: 101). She also claims that the memoir follows closely the nature of the feminist novel in so far as both focus on plot and identity (2011: 109). The text reinforces the connection between Roberts's biographical and professional landmarks by listing those chapters in the memoir that are set in significant London scenes. García-Sánchez's work proceeds, then, to compare literary writing and history and culture in the

1970s and 1980s, the period in which Roberts discovered her literary vocation and started to get involved with feminist politics. Those topics that recur in Roberts's production, like sexuality and the body, the role of the feminist writer, or language and form are also under scrutiny here. The encounter with feminism in particular is described as a journey and a search for home, a point of departure and a destination. She concludes this section with an index listing the writers and historical women mentioned in *Paper Houses*, together with the most relevant intertextual references in this work. This is followed by some final remarks and conclusions, in which García-Sánchez returns to her initial purpose of reading Roberts's novels as they cross the boundaries between the personal and the political, and informing the analysis of fiction with a keen eye on history. She stresses the importance of the choice of female characters that become the narrators of their own stories, some of which take the reader back to a historical past. A substantial part of the conclusions evaluates Roberts's *Paper Houses* and stresses the dual perspective in this memoir: those of the contemporary memoirist and of the female *flâneur*.

Finally, Part C comprises two already published interviews of the writer by García-Sánchez in 2003 and 2010. In the first one, she focuses on the importance of language for the novelist, her choice of particular characters and their portraits, and on the major influences in Roberts's work. In the second one, her intuitive questions concentrate on the recurrence of history in Roberts's later fiction and on the particular nature of her memoir. García-Sánchez's choice of the leading figure of the traveller as the guiding thread in Roberts's narrative and in her own book, proves to be most illuminating. *Travelling in Women's History with Michèle Roberts's Novels* offers a perceptive approach to the work of the British writer that will appeal to the growing number of scholars interested in this figure, but also to those working on contemporary women's fiction.

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Works cited

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