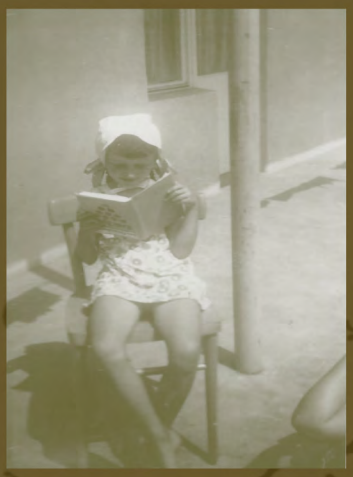

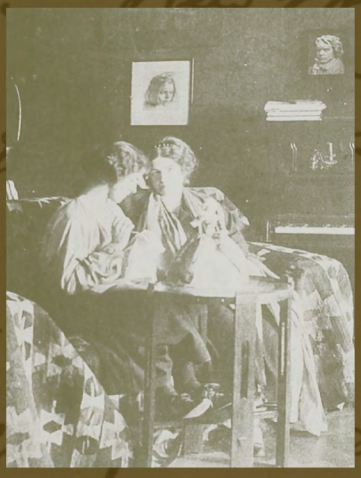

"CURATORS OF MEMORY": WOMEN'S VOICES IN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

edited by:
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Katarzyna Bronk
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Wydział Anglistyki UAM

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upper row, from the left: Liliana Sikorska (by permission of the author), Stanisława Strzelczyk (née Piątkowska 1914-1982) (from Liliana Sikorska's private collection by permission of the owner), Jadwiga Kasprowicz-Przybyszewska (née Gąsowska 1869-1927) with her daughter Janina Małaczyńska (née Kasprowicz 1893-1980) (from Janina Sikorska's private collection by permission of the owner), Anna Jarocka (née Kasprowicz 1914-1982) (from Janina Sikorska's private collection by permission of the owner), Eileen Cox (1918-2014) and Sharon Maas (from Sharon Maas' private collection by permission of the owner), Eileen Cox (from Sharon Maas' private collection by permission of the owner)

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To Our Mothers and Grandmothers

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INTRODUCTION, OR ON WOMEN, WRITERS AND THEIR WORK

LILIANA SIKORSKA AND KATARZYNA BRONK

In the Polish film *Seksmisja* [Sexmission] (1983, directed by Juliusz Machulski, screenplay Juliusz Machulski, Jolanta Hartwig and Pavel Hajný) the world in 2043 is deprived of men. Following a nuclear conflict, what was left of the human race moved underground, into the former coal mines and with time created a new society ruled by women only. Like all other totalitarian regimes, of which this one is quite clearly a parody, the Poland of the future also tries to rectify the past. Thus, the new generations of women, born out of tubes and without the presence of men in their lives, are taught that men were intolerable and never-changing oppressors, violent and dominating. What is more, they are led to understand that Copernicus and Einstein were women. The mishaps and adventures involving two male characters found and revived from induced cryonic sleep are hilariously funny, and the subtext of the movie is that of re-creating men as, once again, part of the human race. The new world women who are afraid of touch and do not know anything about the sensual pleasures of eating are predictably depicted as sex starved weaklings, despite all of their power of self-government. Not to mention the fact that her Excellency, the great ruler, is, in fact, a man. If read in the context of 1980s right wing politics, the movie is straightforward anti-feminist propaganda. Seen not as an anti-totalitarian but an anti-feminist work, the film is a good example of cultural backlash, very much in the style later described by Susan Faludi, which just like the earliest anti-suffragette movements, belittles and ridicules the feminist cause. One can be quite certain, that the authors of the screenplay were not familiar with Marilyn Stone's *When God was a woman* (1976), a work in which the author searches for the genesis of the mythical Great Goddess of the early matri-

archal societies and analyses the suppression of women's religious power, which, incidentally is also the main area of interest of Michele Roberts' works, especially in *The wild girl* (1984). Likewise, Mieke Bal's *Lethal love, Feminist literary readings of Biblical love stories* (1987) in her reading of Genesis shows how mistaken translations rewrote the Biblical story of Creation to give rise to the blatant anti-female sentiments in the centuries to follow.

As has been mentioned, Faludi's *Backlash* (1991) charts the development of hostile reactions to many forms of feminist movements. Feminist criticism has always been perceived as political discourse, more than a cultural or a critical practice utilized in the struggle against patriarchy and sexism. Concentrated on the study of institutional and personal power relations between the sexes feminist criticism was used to analyze symbolic language (psychoanalysis), language (sociolinguistics), as well as literature and culture (literary texts and films). Various feminist authors have seen these areas as subject to patriarchal ideology, as outlined by Gerda Lerner in her *Creation of patriarchy* (1986) and *The creation of feminist consciousness* (1993). The early work of Dale Spender's *Man made language* (1980) demonstrates how language encodes the inferior position of women in society, making them victims of their own subordination. Even if for today's readers, such statements could be read as extreme, Dale's work was an inspiration for Deborah Cameron, whose *Verbal hygiene* (1995) and then *The feminist critique of language* (1998) engage in discussions on ways and methods of controlling language, and like feminist criticism, assume writing from anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist positions. What is more, feminist work on Freud and Lacan, for which one of the milestones was the thought of Luce Irigaray in her *Speculum of the other woman* (1985), *This sex which is not one* (1985) and *An ethics of sexual difference* (1993) interpreted femininity as a patriarchal construct of docile and obedient wives and daughters. Such an approach was buttressed by the demand to equal access to the symbolic order. This assumed biological inequality has been scrutinized by Carol Pateman in her *Sexual contract* (1988). Pateman used Rousseau's and Locke's idea of the social contract and showed its contradictions in reference to contracts involving women, most notably the marriage contract. It has been frequently asserted that while "female" and "male" are reserved for purely biological aspects of sexual difference, the notions of "feminine" and "masculine" are social constructs. Likewise Judith Butler's *Gender trouble* (1990) was

seminal in understanding the working of gender and gender politics. The differentiation between the tradition of "female" writers as opposed to "feminist" writers is also discussed in the present volume. While Michèle Roberts' work is decidedly feminist, Sharon Maas' is more in line with a female tradition of writing. In other words, as in Toril Moi's definitions: "feminist" writing engages in the analysis of discourses which create and uphold patriarchal structures, "female" discusses the tradition of women's writing in literature and investigates the question of femininity in literature and culture (Moi 1997: 104-116).

The twentieth century tradition of re-claiming women writers has resulted in the rehabilitation of previously forgotten and marginalized authors hitherto deemed "minor", for example, medieval women mystics. As a consequence, in fair Poznań where we laid our scene, to paraphrase the well known dramatist – in what has been entitled the *New Ordo Virtutum* a few of such women were commemorated and celebrated as an introduction to the 9th Literature in English Symposium (April 2013). The Poznań *Ordo Virtutum* pays tribute to women saints and women writers who for centuries were silenced and excluded from the official religious discourses and whose endeavours to write and speak publicly were most brutally quelled. Although not all of them are English, most of their works were brought into England and translated into English already in the Middle Ages.

Known to her contemporaries as the "Sybil of the Rhine" Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) wrote the script of the original *Ordo Virtutum* to be performed by her nuns in church. Hildegard was the tenth child of a wealthy family and was given to the Church as a tithe. At the age of eight she entered a Benedictine convent at Disibodenberg to become a writer, composer, philosopher, poet, a Christian mystic and a nun. Throughout her life she suffered from migraines, which inspired her medical works. Her major mystical work in Latin is *Scivias* (*Scito vias Domini,* [Know the ways of the Lord]). She founded the monasteries of Rupertsberg and Eibingen and also fought with the authorities to have her nuns dressed in white robes and golden crowns as beautiful brides of Christ. Although never formally canonized, she was recognized for her achievements and was given the title of "Doctor of the Church" by Pope Benedict XVI in May 2012.

Margaret of Cortona (1247-1297) was an Italian penitent of the Third Order of St. Francis. Margaret came from a lower class family and accepted the position of being a lover of an upper class man. Proud,

wealthy, well-dressed and beautiful, she bore an illegitimate son and lived in sin for ten years before her male patron was killed or died in a riding accident. Margaret gave back all the gifts she had ever received from her lover and as a penitent went to Cortona, where she began her ascetic practices, including lack of washing her body, extreme fasts, and frequent public confessions of her sins. She established a hospital for the sick, homeless and impoverished at Cortona and was canonized in 1728 by Pope Benedict XIII.

Angela of Foligno (1248-1309) was wife and mother in an affluent Umbrian family in Foligno. She lost her husband, sons and mother in the plague. She experienced a profound conversion and discarded her rich clothes, perfumes and other luxuries. Having received a vision of St. Francis of Assisi, she placed herself in the hands of the Franciscan friar, Arnoldo. Walking through the streets of Foligno completely naked, carrying a dead fish and hunks of rotting meat around her neck, she confessed her sins to the public. She described her inner journey in her *Memorial*. Later she established a community of Sisters at Foligno. She was beatified in 1701 by Pope Clement XI.

Marguerite Porète (d. 1310), a beguine who was allegedly involved in the movement of the heresy of the Free Spirit. Marguerite was a French mystic and the author of *Le mirour des simples ames* (*The mirror of simple souls*), a work of Christian spirituality dealing with the power of Divine Love. In her view the human soul did not need the Church to worship God, the adoring soul could blend with the divine in a lasting union, thereby itself becoming divine. As she refused both to recant her views and cease the circulation of her book and her teachings, she was burnt at the stake in Paris in 1310 as a relapsed heretic.

Saint Catherine of Sienna was born Catherine Benincasa (1347-1380). As a young girl she witnessed the death of her older sister in childbirth. She refused to marry her sister's widower and instead started a life of prayer and fasting. She became a tertiary of the Dominican Order. Catherine is the most documented case of anorexia, the onset of which is traditionally attributed to Catherine's drinking the cancerous puss from the breast of a woman she was taking care of. Her main work is *The orchard of Syon*, she also left a considerable bulk of letters written to various important people of her times, including ones to Pope Gregory XI in Avignon. She was canonized in 1461 by Pope Pius II and was proclaimed a

Doctor of the Church in 1970 by Pope Paul VI. In 1999, Pope John Paul II made her one of Europe's patron saints.

Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), was a mystic and an anchoress. She was thirty when she prayed for three wounds and received a nearly fatal illness. Some researchers speculate that she might have lost her family, except for her mother, during the plague and hence exhibited a powerful death wish. She received sixteen revelations, which were written down in two versions. In *The short text*, she is conscious of the dangers of being an "unlettyrd" woman writer. *The long text*, more polished and theologically correct, was supposedly written some twenty years later when she was already an anchoress in Norwich. Some of her claims are dangerously close to those of Marguerite Porète, and so the scribe of Sloane 2499 warns the readers "not to accept one thing according to your desire and pleasure, and ignore another, for that is the behaviour of a heretic. Accept everything with everything else, understanding it all truly" (1966: 213).

Dorothea of Montau (1347-1394), was a citizen of the Teutonic Order Knight's territory. A mother of nine children, she came from a merchant family and thought herself destined for a religious life, but her brother married her off to an older wealthy armourer from Gdańsk, a violent drunkard. Her life story is one of the first documented instances of an abused wife. In order to atone for their sins, Dorothea and her husband left Marienwerder and travelled to Aachen and later to Rome as poor pilgrims. Following his death she entered an anchorage at Kwidzyń, built especially for her. She died a year later. Her confessor, Johannes of Marienwerder, who had supported her spiritual development, spent all his life and riches trying to have her canonized. Unfortunately due to the war between Poland and the Order of the Teutonic Knights, the papers sent to Rome were misplaced and she almost disappeared from history. Her anchorage has been reconstructed in the cathedral in Kwidzyń.

Margery Kempe (c. 1373 - d. after 1438) was an English mystic, a wife and a mother of fourteen children. After a spell of madness, cured by Christ's love, she readily exchanged her wifely duties for the pilgrim's mantel and ring. Having secured the consent for a "spiritual marriage", she travelled extensively in England and then in Europe. She also went to the Holy Land. In 1410 she visited Gdańsk, but because of imminent war between Poland and the Teutonic Order, she did not spend much time there. Her *Book of Margery Kempe*, is not only the first autobiography in

the English language but also a travel book and a catalogue of shrines and important religious sites of the late medieval world.

Far from claiming the position of a woman writer, Anna Maria Marchocka (1603-1652) was a Polish Carmelite nun, known as Sister Theresa of Jesus, whose work is an interesting example of the Polish post-Reformation religiosity, negotiated through its newly established bonds with Rome. Although chronologically belonging in the seventeenth century, Marchocka's thought is closer to her medieval predecessors than her contemporaries. Born in the household of minor gentry, she was given a meagre education save for the books she read at home, such as the ones by Teresa of Avila. Having entered the cloister in Lvov (now Lviv, in Ukraine), she felt unworthy of her "chosen state". One of her self-imposed forms of penance was to lick the convent floors of dirt and spiders. When Lvov was threatened by the Cossack invasion, Marchocka, then a prioress, fled with her nuns to Warsaw and established a second convent. Her miraculous escape and exceptional piety are described in her written confession, her *Mystical autobiography*, the text which also testifies to growing sympathies of the Counter-Reformation in Poland.

All of the above mentioned women and many who followed their steps were the sources of inspiration for Sara Salih who worked on the ideas on virginity in her *Versions of virginity in late medieval England* (2001). Together with Anke Bernau and Ruth Evans she also edited a book on *Medieval virginities* (2003). She is also the author of a book on *Judith Butler* (2002). At the 9th Literature in English Symposium (LIES) she delivered a plenary lecture entitled: "Hagiography: A medieval genre and its surprising afterlife". Her work as well as the work of Michele Roberts and Sharon Maas has to be placed in the context of the long line of women writers that continued what the mystics began: the incessant struggle for the position of women in the literary scene.

Another woman who dared to claim the position of an author was Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), the Duchess of Newcastle, who was treated as an oddity of sorts by her contemporaries. Being the wife of an influential Duke who was the leader of Charles I's army, she could have devoted her life to leisure and a pleasurable existence of little public significance. However, instead of being a silent addition to her husband's household, she devoted much of her life to writing *and publishing* her works. Judged by contemporary scholars as positively audacious – rather than mad as she came to be known in the seventeenth century – she pub-

lished 14 works of various length (Folger 1995: 9). Although aware of the popular, negative reputation of female literary creativity – or any artistic endeavour for that matter – Cavendish was nevertheless extremely proud of her achievements. She vehemently defended her right to write, though never claimed to have any extraordinary talent. In the Preface to *Observations upon experimental philosophy* (1666), Cavendish responded to inevitable criticism thus:

> It is probable, some will say, that my much writing is a disease; but what disease they will judg it to be, I cannot tell; I do verily believe they will take it to be a disease of the Brain …: Perhaps they will say, it is an extravagant, or at least a Fantastical disease; but I hope they will rather call it a desease of wit. … but to be infected with the same disease, which the devoutests, wisest, wittiest, subtilest, most learned and eloquent men have been troubled withal, is no disgrace, but the greatest honour of being thus infected … (Folger 1995: 13).[1]

Whether one sees in such a statement a cleverly negotiated literary sociotechnique or just knowing banter with the prospective reader, Cavendish clearly implied that she has the same right to artistic self-expression as men do.

A few decades later, Cavendish's call for equality in the private and public sphere was still valid. In *Some reflections on marriage* Mary Astell stated: "perhaps I've said more than most Men will thank me for, I cannot help it, for how much soever I may be their Friend and humble Servant, I am more a Friend to Truth" (Astell 1996: 78). The philosopher's long essay was devoted not only to an analysis of the state of marriage at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, but it also elaborated on Astell's vision of the inequality of sexes in all areas of life. As many later proto-feminists, she not only critically commented on what Howard Bloch calls "twin essentializations of woman as absolute evil and absolute good" (Bloch 1991: 165), but, more importantly, she pointed to the fact that women have been belittled and, resultantly, subjugated, due to lack of proper education, which imprisoned them in a world of trivialities – a reality that men have later on used against their greater involvement in both public and private spheres. Astell therefore suggested: "if according to the Tradition of our Fathers, (who having had Posses-

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[1] Spelling and grammar in original.

sion of the Pen, thought they had also the best Right to it,) Woman's Understanding is but small, and Men's Partiality adds no Weight to the Observation, ought not the more care to be taken to improve them?" (Astell 1996: 62-63). Speaking as writers and philosophers, Cavendish and Astell already breached the boundaries placed on them by patriarchy, and thus 'shamelessly' and 'unchapperoned' contributed to the now long history of feminism and women's writing. Remembered more than many of their predecessors, they both showed what both education and the power of the pen can do to change the fate of women.

Thus, even before the pacifist and more militant actions carried out by the suffragettes as well as the stipulations of liberal, Marxist, radical and multicultural feminists, the proto-feminists such as Astell, but also the playwright Aphra Behn and the novelist and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft, demanded equality, freedom[2] and the gender-free right to self-expression; consequently *writing* the then not-yet-academically-codified discipline of women's history. As Alexandra Shepard and Garthine Walker (2009: 2) state: "[h]istories of women inspired by feminism sought both to chart the changes over time that brought women to their present circumstances and to create change in the present in order to produce a future for them that was different from their past". Progressively achieving their goals, and filling the missing gaps in *his*tories with female characters and new perspectives, the past and present female writers and their works have become the 'curators of memory' of the historically silenced sex in various temporal and spacial contexts, resultantly re-writing their present and envisioning new and possible futures. Eventually, as Barbara Caine (2002: 44) states, while in the previous periods, and in the eighteenth century in particular, the discussion of "women's rights was frequently met with hostility and contempt, the wrongs of woman had become almost the staple subject-matter of fiction". Subsequently, more and more female writers and artists have been re-discovered by feminist scholars, and literature, and prose in particular, has gained many more "mothers".

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[2] Of course, one must be aware of the fact that their 'rebellion' or their feminist agenda was quite ambiguous, as they "simultaneously attempted to imagine gender anew, reinventing masculinity as well as femininity, while at the same time remaining immersed in prevailing and traditional gender ideals and values" (Caine 2002: 46). Wollstonecraft in particular became the object of criticism, although her reputation was tainted by stories concerning her personal life.

The present volume of essays joins this literary and academic debate on the value and power of female voices in literature and beyond, offering a multifaceted selection of writerly and academic perspectives on themes, such as various types of femininities, *Écriture féminine*, storytelling and memory, gender and ethnic identity, socialisation of women, violence against, and by, women, female bodies, madness and hysteria, sexism and religion, etc. The essays collected in the present volume *re-member* historical/actual and fictional women and their fate in various historical and literary periods, allowing the reader to see diachronic changes to the perception of femininity as well as writing by women. Despite the fact that the authors contributing to "*Curators of memory*" focus only on literature in English and that many of the essays explore British culture, in essence, they do show the "heterogenity of female experience" (Shepard and Walker 2009: 9), and their research will hopefully open up more areas to investigate and initiate even more in-depth discussions. Moreover, the authors themselves represent many countries (England, Poland, Italy, Egypt, Jordan and Guyana), broadening both the geographic and disciplinary scope of the present volume. The volume is divided into three sections[3], the first one being *Et Dieu ... crèa la femme ... And God ... created the woman…* which is, of course the title of the well known film directed by Roger Vadim (1956), starring Brigitte Bardot. Since the first section is devoted to the work of Michèle Roberts, the double title is the tribute Roberts' English-French background and her undying fascination with women saints and religion. The second part is devoted to women in the history of English literature and is entitled "Re-membered through writing: women and writing in English literature" so as to show that their lives and works are almost literally re-assembled and re-called. The third part analyses the undisclosed lives of women in literature in English, hence the Latin phrase *sub rosa*, which means the place of secrets. It focuses on the writings of the Guyanese-English writer Sharon Maas, and a number of other (post-colonial) women writers writing in English.

* * *

In 1795 Maria Edgeworth judged that "women of literature are much more numerous of late than they were a few years ago. They make a class

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[3] Although the titles are entirely my responsibility [LS], the division was suggested by Marta Frątczak.

in society, they fill the public eye, and have acquired a degree of consequence and an appropriate character" (Edgeworth 2007: 49). This new status gave them an opportunity to present "the range of ways in which could be thought about, allowing the potential to explore not only female sensibility" but also "to expand the range of attributes exhibited by women and to focus on women as subjects with their own point of view" (Caine 2002: 45). This, of course, has been one of the primary goals of many female writers, and in particular of feminist fiction. The present volume is dedicated to one of the most important feminist authors, Michèle Roberts, to honour not only her career as a writer and poet but also as one of the many activists who fought for women's right to speak their mind and express themselves by means of art. As such, their art helped to raise consciousness about what eventually became a more formal feminist agenda.

To shed more light on Roberts' achievements for feminism and the power of her storytelling, in "*Encore des mots toujour des mots*[4] ... Michèle Roberts' art of storytelling", Liliana Sikorska elaborates on the author's literary and critical works as well as her heroines. She presents a very detailed analysis of Roberts' biography and its reflection in her works and recurring themes, in order to show how feminist consciousness is seen to develop in her novels. Sikorska thus shows how Roberts' feminist writing traces "its advancement from the early stages of defiance towards the socially imposed norms to later more mature ways in which women writers have challenged the ideologies of sex and gender, thereby altering the places historically and culturally assigned to them". In Sikorska's critical and celebratory preface, Roberts herself is introduced as "a feminist even when the word lost its political, and therefore popular resonance", and the author herself confirms it in her own "Oh you storyteller: On fiction and memoir". Roberts' almost physical craving for writing is nowhere more visible than in her memoir, *Paper houses*. Reenvisioning her beginnings as an author and a feminist, Roberts remembers that writing became her "soul-saver". She explains: "Like so many other young women, I had to rebel. It was speak out and leave and live differently and write – or die psychically" (Roberts 2008: 55). What has

[4] This and the other French phrase concerning words and language come from the song "Parole, parole" (1972), written by Gianni Ferrio, Leo Chiosso, Giancarlo Del Re and sung by Dalida and Alain Delon.

been inspiring but also driving her as an author she further explains in her essay – herein Roberts introduces both her-Self as well as her writing-Self, which are not always conjoined. Offering an autobiographical and literary auto-analysis, she discusses the positioning and the significance of the "I" in fiction. Robert explains in her contribution:

> Using 'I' in fiction, writing fiction in the first person, you can play with possible and alternative selves, you can hold up a mask and speak through it, you can time travel, you can become possessed, you can abandon yourself, you can run away from home, you can play-act and ventriloquize, become somebody else.

She then unravels how her imagination allows her to create her fictional heroines, such as Mrs Noah, but also bring back to a new and altered literary life women such as Mary Magdalen, George Sand and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Being the witness, active participant and commentator on the political platform of the second wave of feminism, Roberts proposed many possible scenarios via her prose. She achieves this, to quote the next author, Monika Szuba, by means of "feminist reading strategies … [which] involve gender-blending and genre-bending: breaking conventions and recasting historical and literary figures in contemporary world". Thus, in Szuba's "Playing with mud: Literary ghosts in Michèle Roberts' prose writing", she returns to the idea and power of storytelling by a feminist writer and points to the intertextual links of such writing, all of which allows us to see the elaborate network of themes that women writers have creatively commented on. Szuba's detailed analysis of the short story collection, *Mud: Stories of love and sex* exemplifies Roberts' role as one of the curators of (literary) memory. This title requires Roberts' reader to decode the intertexts she is utilising. Szuba states: "Active readers will easily recognise the palimpsest of texts that comes into making Roberts' prose writing, after the undergoing numerous playful metamorphoses". The author finally shows that within her fiction Roberts indeed is a *flâneuse* – as Szuba terms her. And for the literary world and history of feminist criticism she is something much more – a repository of stories on what is meant, means and will mean to be a woman.

The second section of the volume also investigates such implications. The essays collected look into the past in order to give examples of femininities approved but also disapproved by patriarchy. Conflict between sex-

es is what lies at the heart of the first essay in this section. Titled "Gender and representational violence in Old English *Judith*", Jacek Olesiejko introduces Judith, a Jewish widow, who used seduction to eventually decapitate the leader of the Assyrians, Holofernes, who besieged Bethulia. Immortalized for instance in Artemisia Gentileschi's painting[5], the first female artist to achieve success in the seventeenth century, Judith became an allegorical symbol for Judaism winning over its enemies. Olesiejko interprets *Judith*, the only Anglo-Saxon heroic poem that features a female figure, and one so directly engaged in a political and military conflict. What makes the poem special is that, in contrast to early poetry imagining women, Judith here is a warrior and she does not display typically feminine virtues – such as chastity – to be applauded. As Olesiejko suggests: "Judith's virtue is not essential to her identity in the Old English poem. Instead, she is unwomanised in the poem. In contrast to her heroic behaviour, the Assyrians and their chief Holofernes, who invaded Bethulia, Judith's native city, are demasculinised and represented as weaklings". Using theories of Derrida, Jakobson and Butler, Olesiejko analyses Judith's heroism and its representation, showing how the typically masculine features such as prudence, courage and wisdom are negotiated by the heroine and the anonymous author of the poem. His contribution to the volume shows that "Judith is characterised in accordance with the heroic tradition as a protagonist, who is in constant control of his mind and is praised for the integrity of intention and performance". Judith's subversive behaviour, however, is not to be commended in any other circumstances than the warfare presented in the poem. Thus, such defiance of gender norms and objection to the sociocultural expectations placed on women remains enclosed by the metaphorical and metonymic strictures of the poem.

Patriarchal discourse, no matter the century, advocated a triumvirate of feminine features, namely chastity, silence and obedience, to use Suzanne

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5 For more, see: "Violence and virtue: Artemisia Gentileschi's 'Judith slaying Holofernes'" (http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/violence-and-virtue-artemisia-gentileschi-s-judith-slaying-holofernes) (date of access: 1st Aug 2015). As the authors remind us, this painting is quite original in terms of its aesthetics and the way Judith is painted. Gentileschi is one of the many female artists who has been rediscovered by feminist criticism. Her life is of significance in interpreting this artistic rendition of Judith as Gentileschi is said to have been raped by Tassi, and created the painting during or soon after a very humiliating trial.

W. Hull's book title,[6] and subsequently needed to police the proper performance of these seemingly natural virtues. Silence in matters of theology was even more propounded. Although some denominations and sects allowed women to speak in the name of God, the number of legitimate female theologians preserved in history is rather limited. One of such women, who paid a high price for the right to speak her mind on religious topics was the sixteenth-century Reformer, Anne Askew. Deemed a heretic, she refused to recant her beliefs and even expressed them in public. Giada Goracci looks into the life and writings of Askew, seeing in her religious non-conformism as a sign of (feminist) rebellion. Goracci explores this "distinctly Protestant saint" (Andersen 2004: 139) through two prose narratives, *The examinations of Anne Askew* by John Bale and "A ballad of Anne Askew", commonly attributed to Askew. Presenting Askew in cultural context, she shows how the woman challenged "cultural and social strictures about gender: she spoke out against her husband in public, left him raise their children, challenged her accusers and defended her faith until she died". However, Goracci also proves that "the doctrinal polemic on which Anne Askew embarked outlines how verbal performances can undermine otherwise stable gender boundaries, and so the same 'Ballad' mirrors the appropriation of Askew's female voice into Foxe's and Bale's male texts". Her trial was not only to punish her body but to publicly shame her, forcing her to accept the Church's version of religious truth. She engaged in a battle of words and ideas, and paid the highest price for her subversion.

Askew's self-fashioning and self-determination was unimaginable and undesired, because it did not serve the patriarchal agenda. Historically, after all, it was men's prerogative to mould women into what the standing ideology considered as appropriate femininity. Paraliterary conduct texts, most of them written by men, exemplify such a cultural practice of socialising women into masculine ideals – both in terms of physical and mental features. Katarzyna Bronk's essay, "'All in a wife is the work of her husband': William Cobbett's not-so-incidental advice on finding and recognising the perfect woman", offers a close analysis of one such manual. *Advice to young men and (incidentally) to young women in the middle and higher ranks of life. In a series of letters* written by William Cobbett, the radical

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[6] The book in question is Suzanne W. Hull's *Chaste, silent and obedient: English books for women 1475-1640* (1988) published by Huntington Library.

politician and writer, constitutes a peculiar recipe not only for a satisfying life of a middle class man but also a blueprint for the selection and creation of his perfect companion. Bronk analyses most of the cardinal features of an ideal wife – namely "1. chastity; 2. sobriety; 3. industry; 4. frugality; 5. cleanliness; 6. knowledge of domestic affairs; 7. good temper; 8. beauty (*Letter III*, 89, 71)" – presenting Cobbett's very autobiographical study of why such features are necessary in a well-functioning home of a prosperous young man and the pride of his country. Although many of Cobbett's requirements seem over the top – if not ridiculous – such reasoning is only partially unusual for conduct texts aimed at women.

While early feminist criticism focused on recovering the silenced voices of female authors and protagonists from the annals of *his*tory, and feminist writers created new and more complex female heroines, more contemporary authors and critics commented on the multiplicities of feminisms as well as their multicultural aspects. The third and final section is devoted to storytelling and its exploration of covert lives of various women – writers, activists and fictional heroines. Telling real and imagined lives is the domain of the second of this volume's celebrated authors, Sharon Maas. This Guyanese-born writer has divided her life between her home town, Georgetown, and various European countries, to finally find home in Germany. While travelling extensively in her past, working as a journalist, she eventually (almost)[7] put down new roots and began writing fiction. Among other themes, she writes about what has been closest to her heart – Guyana – as well as family, the tumultuous process of growing up and finding one's way, one's true home and voice. Thus, she touches upon this volume's main theme, that is women and their (extra)ordinary lives. Just like with Roberts before, in "Telling stories, telling lives: Sharon Maas and her work", Sikorska offers to the reader a meticulously detailed journey through Maas' prose, while at the same time introducing the heroine of the author's own contribution to this volume, her late mother, Eileen Cox. In "The woman who walked the walk" Maas remembers her mother as "an icon in Guyana, a role model people of all persuasions looked up to". As such, the two contributions reflect not only on women's writing but also celebrate the life of an actual activist, who, to use Maas' own words, "was not typical of her generation of women". Although not everyone may know of Maas' mother's achievements, her val-

[7] While living in Germany, Maas continues to travel homewards whenever she can.

uable contribution to the betterment of her people is yet another example of what a woman can do once she objects to patriarchal limitations. Maas recollects Eileen Cox as her *mother*, while others, such as Guyana Public Service Union (GPSU), have acknowledged her women-oriented accomplishments: "She blazed a trail through uncharted territory and defied all odds in her drive to advocate for the consumer and improve the standing of all women".[8] As Maas' tribute shows, her mother managed to shape her own life, despite personal difficulties, and be the person she imagined *herself* to be.

Seeking one's true self, establishing one's actual and literary identity as well as madness in a postcolonial and feminist context are notions examined in Marta Frątczak's essay, titled "Seeking one's (Guyanese) self: *Web of secrets* (1996) by Denise Harris and *Buxton spice* (1999) by Oonya Kempadoo". The author takes us back to Maas' homeland and explores the ways and means of Guyanese authors' autobiographical writing. Frątczak says:

> The authors / protagonists of the said novels, though born in different socio-political realities, are poignantly forced to confront their complex national heritage, as well as their familial and personal traumas, and to compromise between their various conflicted identities as the Africans, the East-Indians and the Guyanese.

Offering a close reading of the two novels, Frątczak traces the differing trajectories of their authors' roads towards self-discovery. Looking at the protagonists of Harris' novel, which won the Guyana Prize in 1996, Frątczak adds to the feminist discussion on the (post)colonial perception of 'madwomen', while delving into family trauma and mystery of the *Web of secrets*' saga. Studying Kempadoo's Lula she investigates the questions of childhood, belonging and disidentification as well as violence which becomes the inevitable result of national and familial tensions in the storylines of both narratives. Though Frątczak's essay features two female protagonists, the notions posited in her study pertain to all individuals oppressed within unstable socio-political realities, and yet the fact that it is

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[8] For more, see: "GPSU honours the indefatigable Eileen Cox – after years of dedication to consumer advocacy" (http://guyanachronicle.com/gpsu-honours-the-indefatigable-eileen-cox-after-years-of-dedication-to-consumer-advocacy/) (date of access: 1st Aug 2015).

women who negotiate their identities as individuals adds another interpretative layer to the study of the postcolonial Self. Both novels analysed by Frątczak imagine, to use Gay Alden Wilentz's words, "a usable past in order to create a healthier future" (2000: 28).

The theme of more personal well-being, or mental health more specifically, forms the main theme of the subsequent paper by Rula Quawas. Engaging in an analysis of Fadia Faqir's, an Anglo-Arab author, novel *Pillars of salt*, Quawas uses the subject of "madness-ism" to investigate the consequences of "inappropriate" femininity. In "Hysterically speaking and resisting: A reading of Fadia Faqir's sane madness-ism in *Pillars of salt*" Quawas pays attention to "the space where the realities of a 'bad' Bedouin woman are interrogated, negotiated, and rewritten", and sees madness as something more positive than a debilitating disorder. She then investigates its potential as a catalyst to a rebellion and, paradoxically, a kind of freedom. Quawas additionally reads the novel's female protagonist as both "the Other of the man, and the Other of the colonialist" and thus responds to the idea of a double stigmatization of the colonial madwoman. Recognizing Maha as the victim of her brother's machinations, or ultimately the victim of the hegemonic, patriarchal system of her culture, Quawas comments not only on the various conceptualisations of female madness in the Western world, but also in Arab literature and culture. This survey of definitions and examples facilitates the subsequent analysis of Faqir's heroine's imprisonment in the asylum and her – to use Faqir's term – "living speech" with which she manages to transgress the walls of her enforced enclosure.[9]

Such dreams of freedom from personal and more public constraints is the goal of the protagonist of Rania Reda's final essay of this collection, one on Manette Ansay's novel *Vinegar Hill*. Reda leads the reader through the history of religious sexism, showing "the idea of female oppression in the name of God as revealed throughout the inherited religious assumptions". Utilizing feminist theories of Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether, in "Female oppression in the name of god: A reading of Manette Ansay's *Vinegar Hill* in relation to New Feminist Thought", the author introduces Ansay's Ellen both as a rebel against the patriarchal social set-up

[9] Becoming one of the curators of memory of this book's title, Maha's story continues, as Quawas herself writes in the present volume, to preserve "her life and memories alive so that she will not perish from the earth and be buried in the sand".

she is forced to live in but also against the ideology which makes her so subjugated and silent – enforced by religion and the Church. Analysing the protagonist's family members, Reda is able to show the never-ending cycle of oppression which Ellen has to break free from to independently decide about her life. The author even suggests that "Ellen's decision to leave [her family, KB] marks hope for the future of feminism", and so we see her undergoing a spiritual revolution that Mary Daly was writing about. Despite showing the contrary in her analysis of the novel, with Ellen breaking away the ties with the Church, Reda still insists that "[t]he answer to the 'woman question' is thus not losing faith completely. Religion *does* have the power to serve women as a greater source of liberation than as being the origin of suppression and subjugation."

Michèle Roberts and her feminist friends would probably be more critical of such optimism, especially since feminist theology exposed the fixed, even foundational and yet very subtle ways in which various religions (and their ideological discourse) still police women and control their performance of adrocentrically-defined femininity. Roberts dealt with such themes in her fiction, for instance in *The wild girl*, but also in her memoir where she commented on her religious upbringing and the time spent in convent schools. She writes:

> All through childhood and adolescence I was intensely religious. I believed I had a vocation to join the Carmelites. It seemed sensible to taste the pleasures of the world first … , At St Michael's (my second convent school) my adored mentor, Sister Aquinas, said much the same. I returned … to find that she had left the convent. … Mother Clare Dominic, the headmistress, patiently listened to my blurted-out upset. Soon afterwards she left the convent too. Turbulent times were beginning. *Women were thinking of new possible ways to live their lives* (Roberts 2008: 5; our emphasis).

Some of such scenarios have indeed been presented in the present volume. And just like Margaret Cavendish, whose semi-medical self-diagnosis was presented earlier, the editors and authors of this collection have "a double desire, the one that [they] may write well, the other, that [they] may be read well" (Preface to *The worlds olio,* 11).[10] While the book does not exhaust all possible interpretations and analyses, we sin-

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[10] For more, see: Folger collective on early women critics (eds.). 1995. *Women critics 1660-1820: An anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

cerely hope that it will incite an even deeper and ongoing exploration of female voices in literature.

Women give birth to children "some to be godmother, aunt, teacher, teller of tall tales" as the current Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy tells us in her poem "The Long Queen" (2002: 2).[11] Whatever we/they are whatever we/they do, we repeatedly pay tribute to Virginia Woolf who was the first one to tell modern women that a woman writer always needs a room of her own, both in its literal as well as metaphorical dimensions. Such "room" for work and research has been provided by the authorities of the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, and we are grateful for the financial support for the conferences and meetings with writers. As always, we are very grateful to Mr Dwight Holbrook and Mr Simon Bacon for proofreading the manuscript. My (LS) special thanks go to the participants of two seminars devoted to the work of Michele Roberts and Sharon Maas.[12] These were: Katarzyna Bronk, Natalia Brzozowska, Katarzyna Burzyńska, Marta Frątczak, Joanna Jarząb, Urszula Kizelbach, Joanna Ludwikowska-Leniec, Jacek Olesiejko, Kornelia Taborska and Anna Wołosz-Sosnowska. Almost all of them are now PhD holders. I would also like to thank the students who prepared the "*New Ordo Virtutum*" during our 2013 Literature in English Symposium:

- Hildegard of Bingen ..... Natalia Schmidt
- Margaret of Cortona ..... Karolina Gluza
- Angela of Foligno ..... Edyta Zborowska
- Marguerite Porete ..... Justyna Dolecka
- Sain Catherine of Sienna ..... Edyta Matusiak
- Julian of Norwich ..... Daria Weryńska
- Dorothea of Montau ..... Aleksandra Pytko
- Margery Kempe ..... Katarzyna Szymczyk
- Anna Maria Marchocka ..... Joanna Banaszak

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[11] Duffy is the first woman, the first lesbian to hold that position at the British court.

[12] Both writers have been guests of honour during Literature in English Symposiums, organised by the Department of English Literature and Literary Linguistics at the Faculty of English. Michèle Roberts visited Poznań during 2013 conference entitled *'I am an exile from heaven beating on its closed doors': Saints and sinners: Postmodernism, feminism and medievalism in Literature in English*, and Sharon Maas during 2014 conference entitled*: On imagination, borders and friendship* – where she discussed her works at our anniversary, 10th LIES.

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I

ET DIEU ... CRÈA LA FEMME ... AND GOD ... CREATED THE WOMAN…

ENCORE DES MOTS TOUJOUR DES MOTS[1]: MICHÈLE ROBERTS' ART OF STORYTELLING

LILIANA SIKORSKA

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Frequently described as a feminist novelist, Michèle Roberts (b. May 20, 1949) is one of the most interesting contemporary women writers whose artistic evolution can be compared to the intensification of gender awareness. Reading her novels, poetry and essays one can trace not only the progress of a growing feminist consciousness, to use a well known phrase coined by Gerda Lerner (1993), but first and foremost its advancement from the early stages of defiance towards the socially imposed norms to later more mature ways in which women writers have challenged the ideologies of sex and gender, thereby altering the places historically and culturally assigned to them. Such ideologies as that of a "double standard" applied toward girls and boys differently preoccupied the author in her early works. Back in the 70s Roberts was part of "…a very productive Feminist Writers group with Sara Maitland, Michèlene Wandor, and Michèle Roberts" (Childs 2005: 11). Active in socialist and feminist politics (the Women's Liberation Movement) since the early 1970s, she was the Poetry Editor (1975-77) at *Spare rib*, the feminist magazine, and later at *City limits* (1981-83). One of the results of working in what was "the writer's collective" was the volume *Tales I tell my mother. A collection of feminist short stories* (1978). Apart from Roberts, the contributors included: Zoe Fairbanks, Sara Maitland, Valerie Mainer and Michèle Roberts.

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[1] This and the other French phrase concerning words and language come from the song "Parole, parole" (1972), written by Gianni Ferrio, Leo Chiosso, Giancarlo Del Re and sung by Dalida and Alain Delon.

Despite being repeatedly linked with the engaged feminism, Michèle Roberts has nonetheless been quoted as expressing the hope that eventually there will be "male writers and female writers, rather than as at present feminist writers and writers" (Rennison 2005: 137). As Rennison observes, "[h]er early novels, as well as much of the best of the poetry she was writing at the time, grapple with conflicting images of femininity, both within women's own construction of self and within the wider culture" (Rennison 2005: 137).

Roberts revealed much of her youth in her memoir *Paper houses* (2007), which was based on her diaries from that period. The work discloses her struggles to write while doing odd jobs, and as she herself writes, "I... had become a feminist and a socialist, refused to get a proper job, had lived in 'squalor', was determined to write, whatever the cost" (2007: 81). Besides being about her involvement with socialism and feminism, the memoir also ruminates about her friends and other feminist writers, including Sara Maitland, Micheline Wandor and Alison Fell. *Paper houses* as well narrates her real and imagined peregrinations: "My diary was my room of my own in which I could speak and act as I like. Reading created my temporary house, spun a cocoon around me ... You carry the tent, your paper house, with you, scrunched up in your pocket, and then put it up when you need it and it magically inflates" (2007: 250). The book shows the reader the areas and houses that she lived in and how all of these places were auxiliary in her development as a writer who carried inside her own story as well as the stories of those she met in her life's journey. Roberts has also worked for the BBC in Bangkok, Thailand (1973-1974). The incidents connected with her stay in Bangkok are described in *Paper houses* (2007: 87-105) and in the short story "Just lie back and think of the Empire" published in the collection *Tales I tell my mother* (1980: 32-47). In the memoir she gives an explication of the events in her life that stimulated her writing.

It is perhaps her manifold life experience that gave Roberts such an insight into women's lives and their life choices, women of different social classes and ethnic backgrounds. Roberts herself came from a very interesting cultural background. She was born in Bushey, Hertfordshire, one of the twins in an English-French family. Her mother was a French Catholic and her father was an English Protestant. Both the relationship between twin sisters, as well as the question of bilingualism, are her main sources of inspiration. She frequently mentions how when she is writing

in English, she inserts French words and sentence structures. Yet another area of influence is the Catholic Church. She received a convent education and at some point was thought to become a nun. She attended Somerville College, Oxford; where she claims she lost her faith and later studied at University College London, where she trained to be a librarian. Roberts openly admits that she left the Catholic Church and does not believe in God (2007: 80), and yet the Catholic Church and her convent education have become part of her repository for fiction. She constantly analyzes the effects of her mixed parentage and the family's Catholicism on her mother's side. It comes as no surprise that Roberts' literary interests include the lives of female saints, the figure of Mary Magdalene but also various literary characters such as William Wordsworth, Charlotte Brontë, Gustave Flaubert, Stéphane Mallarmé and Colette among others. She is as fond of intertextual games as she is fond of food, sex and God, all of which, as she herself admits – in a private conversation (Poznań 20. 04. 2013) are also her main literary themes. In her lecture "The place of imagination", found in her collection of essays auspiciously entitled *On food, sex and God. On inspiration and writing* (1988) Roberts claims that "[w]riting contains talking-to-oneself-about writing" (1998: 3). The collection contains Roberts' thoughts on the creative process as well as her texts on the work of other writers, among others: A.S. Byatt, Marina Warner, Doris Lessing, Jeanette Winterson, Anita Brookner and T.S. Eliot. What is more, discusses the tensions between her own religious background and her early novels and discloses some of her inspirations, for example St. Therese of Lisieux (1998: 195). Unlike other writers, Roberts is not afraid to confess the constant inner tensions between autobiography and fiction. "If I am seen to write autobiographically then I'm automatically seen to possess inferior capacities as a writer" (1988: 5). Her talk in Poznań at the 9th Literature in English Symposium – the talk entitled "Telling lies and story telling – on fiction and autobiography" – analyzed the writer's angst which she expressed in her former essays.

Des mots facile, des mots fragile

In her early novels she espoused the feminist theories of the seventies expressing everyday concerns of women of those days framing them within ideas on art and literature. Her early books are *A piece of the night* (1978), *The visitation* (1983), and, *The wild girl* (1984), in which Mary Magda-

lene gives her version of the story of Christ. *A piece of the night* gives two stories of women, Sister Veronica and Julie Fanchot, neither of whom fit the roles prescribed by what society calls a perfect nun, perfect wife and mother. Sister Veronica bears her sin committed with a girl friend in a convent school, and Julie leaves her husband, when she finds out about his affair with one of his students. Julie's aspiration to read literature is thwarted by her becoming involved with Ben. She has problems "discovering herself" and as a result lands in a mental hospital. Roberts' representation of women and madness is also one of the most characteristic ways in which the women are shown oppressed by the past. Being a woman is always a struggle for identity and self-definition. Julie is taught by her mother that a woman's life is one of duty and obedience: "The child is joined to the mother, the woman is joined to the man. That that is what being a woman means" (*A piece of the night* 2002: 47). Still, Julie's first sexual experience is marked by social, rather than physical awkwardness (*A piece of the night* 2002: 66). This is how Roberts comments on the issue of women's bodies, which is one of her frequently recurring motifs, and has Julie toy with the idea of choosing a completely new name. "Julie Lovelorn, Julie Wanting, Julie Badmother, Julie Warrior, Julie Witch, Julie Earth, Julie Priestess" (2002: 15). Julie is frightened that she does not live up to her family's expectations of becoming a perfect wife and mother. Roberts has the heroine think ironically: "Thou shalt not, if though art a mother, have time to thyself" (2002: 132). If she is to be "good", she has to be obedient to her father, and then to her husband. Her mental prison is social conventions. She is, so to speak, framed in the male vision of her. "If she does not trust and live his fantasy, she can no longer reach out even to distorted splinters and does not know where to begin to look for herself. She locks herself into libraries, into cupboards of books, of food" (2002: 67). The novel tackles also the unspoken conflict between mother and daughter, with the daughter unwittingly becoming the looking glass for the mother. Julie's lesbianism, albeit not intended as the venue of the "coming out novel", is the symbol of her rejection of a more traditional model of life. Her inadequacy is finally realized through, on the one hand accepting the role of mother, but rejecting the role of wife.

Roberts' next novel, *The visitation* (1983) features twins, a boy and a girl, Felix and Helen, whose troubled relationships with each other and with their parents overshadows Helen's future life and her relationships with men. Although she is the smarter one, the parents are always proud

and doting on Felix. Helen grows up, in a way being ashamed of her creativity and independence and then again consciously and unconsciously flouting the conventional gender behaviour instilled by her parents. As Dominic Head notes: "Michèle Roberts conveys this economically in *The visitation* (1983) when the protagonist Helen Home is made to feel she has 'failed by passing her 'eleven-plus' exam while her twin brother Felix does not" (Head 2002: 95). Head also quotes Rosalind Coward who in *Sacred cows. Is feminism relevant for the new millenium* (1999) claims that "…it was women who found themselves 'in the driving seat of these profound social changes'" (Head 2002: 95). The feminism in the novel is brought out in the relationship between mothers and daughters, gender recognition (like the threat the man poses to the adolescent Helen and the telling glances exchanged by her mother and grandmother), the maturation of women into her biological and social roles, which in the end Helen rejects, opting for a lesbian union. She does not refuse herself the prospect of a child. She conjures

> images of a daughter named Lilith, Lily for short, with tufts of black hair and a greedy mouth open for milk, tiny red fists curled up and the red mouth bawling, tiny red feet with exquisite toes and nails. Her own arms are empty. That's why she stuffs her hands into her coat pockets, to let them contact something beyond air and nothingness. She aches with wanting (2002: 110).

The visitation is a novel also about the special bond between twins, a brother and sister in this case, as well as the question of masculinity and the social roles of fathers, brothers and husbands. In the world of the 80s, still marked by blatant patriarchy, female relationships are always marred by the spectre of propriety, and it is only in private that the women can admit: "Heaven is us together now" (2002: 111).

A different form of "paradise" is depicted in *The wild girl. A secret gospel of Mary Magdalene* (1984). It concerns the figure of Mary Magdalene and links various versions of her life story. In the novel, Mary Magdalene tells her own story of escape from the house, of life with Sybilla, an Alexandrian woman of pleasure, and finally of her return home to her sister, Martha, and of her meeting the feminized and feminine Jesus. Mary follows Jesus and falls in love with him, but the other apostles are jealous of his love for her, and it is that jealousy that drives her out of Judea and Palestine after the crucifixion. Due to the revenge of one of her former

acquaintances, the pregnant Mary Magdalene, Mary, Jesus' mother and Mary his sister, land in France. The book is full of Mary Magdalene's dreams and visions and ends with her foreseeing the future of Christianity with its persecutions and burnings. After one such vision, Jesus appears and wants to find his bride, and Mary Magdalene goes to the desert and disappears. Her escaping into the desert brings to mind yet another Mary-figure, the sinner-saint, Mary of Egypt. It was the Middle Ages during which the character of Mary Magdalene became fused with that of Mary of Magdala, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, the first named Mary being the Sinful Woman (Prostitute), who anointed Christ and was his follower, and the character of the Desert Mother from the medieval play of Mary Magdalene. In the novel, among the milieu of these characters, the latter writes down her own gospel of how she did defied becoming like her sister Martha and their mother, the servant of men. The story is firmly anchored in medieval hagiographic tradition but supplemented with an emphasis on Mary's sexual relationship with Jesus. In the "Author's note", Roberts admits that she was inspired by The *Nag Hammadi* scrolls[2] which made her "imagine what an alternative version of Christianity might have been like" (1999: 9). Consequently, she wrote the novel as the fifth gospel, that of Mary Magdalene[3], so as to embrace that "other" Christianity. Roberts masterfully weaves her favourite topics of mothers, daughters, femininity and masculinity. Like the Biblical model, her Mary Magdalene is a prostitute and a saint, but unlike the Biblical Mary Magdalene she is conscious of the consequence of her life choices. An adolescent Mary Magdalene runs away from home so as not to be married against her will. She is raped by the merchants who promised her protection: "I was brutalized but I was freed: none of the honourable men at home would ever take me to wife now" (1999: 15). She is the follower of Christ, the first witness of resurrection and a priestess, denied ecclesiastical power by the church. In Robert's novel Christ's disciples dispute over Mary's teachings. There are different versions of the legend of Mary Magdalene, yet all of them unanimously argue that she retired to the south of France, where Roberts envisioned her giving birth to a daughter. She has Mary Magdalene pondering what to tell her daughter: "I shall tell her that through her woman's body she knows the Spirit and the Word, that

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2 For more, see Pagels (1979).

3 For more, see Jansen (2000).

through her body she experiences God, and I shall pray that Wisdom may come to her and enable her to open herself, when the time is ripe, to that mystery of love which brings the Resurrection and the Life. This is my prayer for her, and my farewell. May she forgive me for leaving her Amen" (1999: 180-181). The greatest medieval storybook, Jacobus de Voraigne's (Italian: *Giacomo da Varazze, Jacopo da Varazze* (c. 1230 – July 13 or July 16, 1298) *Legenda Aurea* (*The golden legend*, 13th c) translated the figure of Mary into an Everyman, representing as she did to medieval man the victory of grace, contrition, and penance over human frailty.

Similar topics reappraised through feminist philosophy find their way into *The book of Mrs Noah* (1987), which uses the biblical character of Mrs Noah, her famous garrulousness conceived by medieval dramatists and frequently depicted in the Biblical Cycle Plays. In them she was always a comic figure failing to understand the commands of God and unalterably refusing to obey her husband's wishes. At the beginning of the above mentioned novel, Mrs Noah is standing on the river bank, a figure beyond history, carrying a Biblical name, and afraid to enter the ship. She is at the same time a contemporary character telling her story. In Roberts' novel, Mrs. Noah is a doctor's wife who enters the ark with various female friends. It is Mrs Noah who dreams of the Ark as the refuge for women writers. Their journey and storytelling provides the frame of the story. She invites the Sybils as her companions and they establish a discussion club for writers. Mrs Noah allows one male inclusion and that is The Gaffer, a man who apparently is the author of the Bible. She lets him join the discussion club for writers. Together they spend their evening telling each other stories, with Mrs Noah Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury tales* (1400), Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1350-1352), Margaret de Navarre's *The Heptameron* (printed posthumously in 1558). Remodelled in Roberts' novel, the Ark is both real and unreal. Each of the stories told compose the hitherto silenced history of women. One of the stories is set in the Middle Ages and concerns a young woman who, wanting to pursue her studies, enters a convent. In the convent, her once estranged sister brings her the work of Margaret Porète, *Mirror of the simple souls* (c. 1290). That book once again unites her family in their search for true but not institutionalized religion. But the book is deemed heretical and forbidden by the church authorities, and the nun realizes that once it is discovered she will be executed. Before that happened, she wants her testi-

mony to reach her sister so that her story will not die, and so she writes throughout the night asking the forgiveness of her loved but and not the church which has already damned her. She finishes her narrative with: "I am a stranger in this world. I am an exile from heaven, beating on its closed doors" (1999: 125).

The idea of love betrayed over religious dispute is also the subject matter of the ensuing story set in the Renaissance, in the time of religious persecutions, and involving a case of recusant Catholics. It presents a woman who has an affair with her husband's steward, who in the end betrays her. As all the signs of the old religion are forbidden, including the statues of the Virgin Mary, the keeping of such figures incurs accusations of heresy. "Now to remain a Catholic is to become a traitor. The Queen has decreed it so" (1999: 161). The treacherous Steward takes the statuette of the Virgin as a keepsake, and later denounces the family of his lover as heretics. Another story in the novel tell of a girl raped by her master. Unable to support herself and her child, she strangles her child and is hanged for infanticide. "I'll write her life. In my hands her poor body will live again" (1999: 204). There is also a narrative set in the future, in which men have to go through the rite of passage, their first sexual experience, after which they get an alcohol allowance and a video recorder, while the women are subdivided into breeders, feeders and tarts. In the end, the Ark comes ashore again, and Mrs. Noah goes back to her everyday reality of family life. In summary, the novel is full of Biblical and classical references, for example, the Sybils, famous for divination and oracles, belong to ancient Greek and Roman theology, and are here rewritten to fit Roberts' views of female genealogies in the history of literature.

The author's interests in female lineage is likewise visible in a ghost story entitled *In the red kitchen* (1990). The novel concerns four principal characters: a female Egyptian pharaoh, Hat, a Victorian medium communicating with ghosts, Flora Milk, a wife of Flora's patron, Minny. Minny writes letters to her mother about family life, her pregnancies and children, while her husband, conducts experiments with spiritism and eventually has an affair with Flora. Finally there is Hattie, a twentieth century character and a writer of cook books. The narrative alternates between different personalities and epochs, with Flora's spiritualism providing a link between all these stories. Each of the characters has a trauma of their own. Hat dreams of power, of becoming the pharaoh herself but is

scarred by her incestuous relationship with her father. Flora suffering from the supposed abuse which she might have experienced at the hands of her father and then her patron. Minny is a victim of depression. She uses Flora's powers to communicate with her dead child, which results in a serious suspicion of Minny's involvement in her child's death. Flora herself experiences the crudeness of betrayal when her own sister, Rosina, accuses her of being a false medium and of using tricks to deceive people seeking Flora's help. Such a state of affairs is probably caused by Flora's secret relationship with Rosina's beloved, which then results in Flora's being married to George. On the other hand, Rosina cannot be considered without dubious motives because she had envied Flora her special abilities and had always had a strong desire to become a medium herself. Hattie, in turn, tries to deal with the fact that she was sexually abused by her uncle and thinks that her connection to Flora may help her to find consolation. In other words, by reaching into the past, all of these women try to deal with their present traumas, the sources of which patriarchy and difficult father-daughter, mother-daughter relationships. Yet another link in this woven tapestry is the house and the old cemetery, which add to the magic of the narrative:

> The walls of this house are built of grey brick. When I look more closely, I see they are not grey at all but blue, dark yellow, burnt, brown, plum. The window frames and ledges, painted cream a long time ago, are peeling and flaking now. The front porch, with its twin columns of chipped stucco, frames a door in faded olive green that grips two tall oblongs of stained glass (1993: 8).

It is in this house an orphaned Hattie realizes her dreams of a place, "a home I couldn't be thrown out of" (1993: 13), and it is in this house that she plans to write her book when now she is strangely drawn into the past: "The past, my own past, has not mattered to me. Now, in this house, the past surrounds me and holds me, and my own past leaps back at me in flashes ... I want to tell you my stories" (1993: 17). Hat also considers writing a great testament, the testament that will be immortal. She only feels obliterated when the hieroglyphs spelling out her name have been destroyed: "I have been unwritten. Written out. Written off. Therefore I am not even dead. I never was. I am non-existent. There is no I" (1993: 134). The colour red is both positive image evoking energy, courage, survival, the colour of transfusion – and negative connoting contaminated

blood and death. Likewise, the red kitchen of a Victorian house becomes a womb, a place where not only children but also stories are hatched. The book creates an atmosphere of mesmerism and spirits, a typical fascination of the late nineteenth century but also hysteria or a diagnosis of disease. When Flora hears Dr. Charcot say the name of the disease, she cannot quite the meaning of his words: "*Isterry*. History? And then famm. History and women?" (1993: 124). Juxtaposing the ordinary life of a Victorian wife with the life of a medium, whose gifts place her at the centre of attention and make a connection between the women from the past and the present.

The same motif of a house as a space of family mysteries hidden and revealed can be found in Roberts' Booker Prize nominated *Daughters of the house* (1992). Set in France, through a number of everyday objects the novel describes the lives of two cousins, Thérèse and Léonie. They meet each year in a house in Normandy and while playing in the house and its surroundings try to find out about the well preserved secrets of the adults. In the chapter entitled "The carpets" the servant, Victorine, says that "The war was a sort of bookmark which divided the pages of history...Victorine stooped and lifted a corner of the carpet. Look. See? The marks of German's boots. All over the ground floor is used to be beautiful red tiles, spotless. Now, it's all ruined, every inch" (2001: 44). The character of Thérèse derives in part from the figure of Thérèse Martin, known as Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus or The Little Flower, who during the span of the novel begins to develop her religiosity. This inclination is nurtured by various priests and others visiting the house. As if an afterthought, Roberts shows the commercial side of religion, the modern "predatory" Catholicism as the Bishop muses: "For certainly, once the chapel is built and consecrated, there will be pilgrims coming from all over Normandy. The shrine may become famous throughout France. Who knows, perhaps we'll even see a miracle or two" (2001: 146). The fascination with sacred places, natural shrines, is more akin to paganism than Catholicism and the new priest wants to root it out: "He said we had to pray in church, not in the woods. People used to come here at night at harvest festival time and pray and dance. He stopped all that" (2002: 2). In Roberts' novel, the adult Thérèse realizes that her decision to enter the nunnery was the result of her early loss of her mother and an attempt to fill that loss with the surrogate mother, in her case the Virgin Mary, an embodiment of the unattainable ideal – as Marina Warner says of de-sexualized motherhood in

Alone of all her sex (1976)[4]. Roberts follows Warner's argument: "She was the Virgin Mother of God. She was flat as a boy. She was the perfect mother who'd never had sex. To whom all earthly mothers had to aspire" (2001: 164). In *Daughters of the house* Leonie experiences, what Roberts herself, must have experienced as an ethnically mixed child, an English half-breed in France, provoking the question of who is "native" and who is "foreigner". For her, like for Leonie, France is both a homeland and a foreign country. Eventually, the girls learn about the undisclosed past, the story of the Jews and Henry Taillé, who died in one of the rooms of the house. They unearth the most well preserved secret which is that of their birth. They were not cousins, but twin sisters, born out of rape of their mother by a German soldier. The book shows the way children create stories out of pieces of information they get from adults, and how their imagination works. They misread reality the adults so carefully want to hide, and in the end unearth the past the adults want to forget about. Yet the past cannot simply be pushed away and shut in an unused room of the house for disgraceful secrets haunt their bearers throughout their lives. In the space of the novel history is frequently tainted with memory; half-truths and half-lies are never far apart. The theme of twin girls, their maturing into adolescence is once again brought out through the images of the sexualized body as well as the virgin/mother dichotomy. The house as a space both real and metaphorical brings to light ideas of assimilation and exclusion.

Such ideas are also potent in *Flesh and blood* (1994), the novel composed of short stories, is set in contemporary times as well as in the past, it is broken and unfinished, as each of them ends with double dots as if in anticipation of a continuation. Roberts experiments with narrative form, presenting a number of female characters. In the stories we meet a Victorian couple, Félicité and Albert, that encounter begins like a traditional nineteenth century story of betrothal but ends with Félicité being raped by Albert. Alone and alienated she only has words inside her "words which relentlessly told her a story about evil" (1995: 56). A different story presents Eugénie, set in France at the time of the French Revolution. Eugénie is married to a sadistic Marquis de Sade-like person and eventually finds

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[4] The new edition of the book with the new preface appeared in 2013. I received the book with Marina Warner's dedication soon after its publishing. It has been an unexpected present for which I am very grateful.

her vocation in becoming a martyr. At the end of the narrative Eugenie's husband asks her to take the whip and 'punish' him herself. The roles thereby become reversed. Eugenie starts to read a story which "might turn to be a tale of God's help in time of trial" (1995: 79). Other included stories are about a young girl Marie-Jeanne, a lower class girl living in a seaside town and a fictional Victorian painter Georgina Mannot, who is the subject matter of a documentary. *Flesh and blood* begins with the account of the life of Fred who supposedly murdered his mother, in a Colette like voice, it turns out Fred is in fact female. The typical motifs investigated here by Roberts are those of femininity, the exploration the biological and the social aspects of sex and gender, absent or unloving mothers are juxtaposed with the presence of food and the sensual pleasures connected with eating. Clothes and cross-dressing, the obsession with materials, linens, fabrics are present in Félicité's cupboard fantasies and surface through images of Georgina's father growing up among shirts. In most of the narratives, the theme of female isolation in heterosexual unions, the idea of marriage as oppression, unalterably give one the feeling of entrapment amplified by religious ideologies which strengthens the idea of the deemed insignificance of women's problems.

Similar themes appear in *Impossible saints* (1997), which however is also about the search for women writers' heritage. Here Roberts depicts a mother Beatrice and a daughter Josephine. For both:

> Books were their drugs, the magic carpets onto which they flung themselves in order to be borne away somewhere else, books lifted them up like powerful caressing hands and cradled them like mothers do, as though they were babies to be held and fed, they fell asleep, sated with reading, then woke again, into pages of words, unknown, beckoning, a new world, and started another book (1998: 43).

The novel is a postmodern revision of the lives of the saints, which has a frame story of two women, two nuns Isabel and her aunt Josephine. Isabel, who turns out to be the narrator of the story, cannot understand how Josephine could become a saint. She remembers not only her aunt's lascivious behaviour but also feels hurt by Josephine's lack of warmth and loving towards her. The novel begins with the description of the Golden House, where the bones of a Saint were kept. After her death, Josephine is pronounced a saint, and various pilgrims come to take a part of her (holy) body. This primal metaphor of dismemberment and consumption links

medieval hagiography with contemporary feminist thought, as the body of the woman becomes literally re-membered through writing. Isabel, then, recreates Josephine's life, seemingly as it happened, without unnecessary (hagiographic) idealizations. Josephine's character is based on St. Theresa of Avila, who despite her intense religiosity also went through intense periods of depression and doubt[5]. Roberts has Josephine say: "I became a nun for the wrong reasons. I wanted to be a saint, but not because I loved God. I was frightened of dying and going to hell. I didn't love God, I feared him" (1998: 137). Interspersed with Isabel's account are the tales of various saints, known from medieval hagiographies, but rewritten not as "possible saints" but as the "impossible" ones, not in order to dispute their sanctity but to bring to light the elements in their stories which, according to Roberts, were hitherto concealed. Paula, Petronilla, Theckla, Christine, Agnes, Thais, Dympna, Uncumber, Marin, Barbara and Mary of Egypt are given new lives in the novel, which uncovers alternate motivations and life choices commonly ascribed to them. As much as the novel speculates about their lives, Roberts seems to be constantly asking who these women were. By the re-writing of the genre, the novel points to connections between hagiography and fable, fairytale highlighting the macabre and the grotesque. By rewriting the lives of saints deglamourising their self-sacrifice and giving new feminist versions of their legends, Roberts raises the question as to who in fact was a Saint. The novel reverses the notions of saints and sinners through yet another metaphor – that of the house which the saintly Josephine shares with the prostitute Magdalena. The house of Magdalena has two separate entrances, which signify two separate quarters – the one devoted to prayer and the one to entertainment with men. Without revelling in the current medievalist debates about the historicity of saints[6], or the composite portraits of saints such as Mary Magdalene or Catherine of Alexandria, to mention the most obvious examples, Roberts playfully tackles the most important feminist issues concerning hagiography.

Literary inspirations appear in her next novel. In the "Author's note" preceding the text of *Fair exchange* (1999), Roberts reveals that her inspiration for this story was the affair of William Wordsworth and a French woman Annette Vallon. However in this case, Roberts did not want to

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5 For more, see Theresa of Avila (1957) and Weber (1990).

6 For more, see Lowerre (2006), Burrus (2008)

write a historical novel, but instead wrote a historical romance about William Saygood, the fictional compatriot of Wordsworth (2002). In the novel Annette Vallon falls in love with an English poet, William Saygood, a liaison interrupted by his sister, Polly, based on William Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy. Historically, as in Robert's novel, the period prior to the French Revolution was the time of the emergence of radical social and political thought on both sides of the Channel[7]. Writers and political thinkers wrote about the hope for changes brought about by the revolutionary movements until the revolution turned into the time of Terror. This period of radical social and political upheaval in French and European history led to a major transformation of the French society, and many people from various social classes were swayed by its ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality. As Louise, the maid in *Fair exchange* says: "Louise was full of ardour and hope. The revolution promised change, that everyone could share in. The lure of liberty was like the dance, snatching you up and whirling you around, your skirts flaring and your tricolour ribbons flying. You spun into newness. You let yourself fall in love and believe in the future. It was 1791, France was poised on the edge of tumultuous adventure and Louise was part of it" (2002: 61). Together with the emergence of new political activism, there appears proto-feminist movements of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and her circle. Wollstonecraft's *A vindication of the rights of women* (1792) was one of Roberts' inspirations, and she brings this author into the novel in the character of Jemima Boote.

Likewise, Roberts changed the historical character of Annette Vallon who, in reality, had an affair with Wordsworth in Orlean (fr. *Orléans*), where she was staying with her brother. She came from a middle class family with royalist sympathies. In 1792 she gave birth to their daughter, Caroline. Annette was 25 at the time and after she got pregnant she moved to her family house in Blois. Wordsworth followed her, but neither of them had enough money to support them both. Wordsworth wanted to collect some money from his family and decided to leave Annette and return to London, where he was supposed to take holy orders. He never married Annette. In 1902, together with his sister Dorothy he went to Calais where he met up with Annette and Caroline, but by then they have already parted their ways. Even though this story was the major inspiration

[7] For more, see Clemit (2011).

for Roberts, she alters the story considerably. *Fair exchange* begins with Louise, the Vallons' maid, on her deathbed confessing to a crime she committed many years ago. "In her youth Louise Daudry, née Geuze, had committed a wicked and unusual crime. At that time, autumn 1792, she wanted money very badly, so she put aside her knowledge that what she was doing was wrong and would hurt others. She told herself that virtue was a luxury the poor could not afford. She let herself be persuaded that no one would ever find out" (2002: 3). Louise was the person who helped pregnant Annette by bringing her to live in her mother's country house. While Anette, now in disgrace because of her pregnancy, finds refuge away from home, while Jemima Boote hopes for privacy to write her novel. Jemima rents a former convent in Blois and takes on Louise as a maid and Anette as a companion. The former female convent becomes a space imbued with femininity as the two pregnant women bind their time while waiting for their children to be born. Jemima Boote, is like her model, Mary Wollstonecraft, a strong character and a free spirit equally affected by the Revolution and by motherhood and the uncertainties of her personal life. The author shows how domestic spaces, such as the convent or Louise's house, may be both a place of power and powerlessness. Once again, the physical space of the house-convent is an important symbol of femininity, of the life-giving womb. One can see it as the epitome of femininity where stories are hatched. The two companions share their problems and domestic tasks, presenting a seemingly ideal situation in which their domestic bliss is only temporarily disturbed by the presence of men. Although this is a novel is about women's rights and their place in society as envisaged by Mary Wollstonecraft, nevertheless Roberts has William Saygood argue passionately:

> Women are given to us as our helpmeets, our deer companions. We should allow them all the education they want It can only improve them. An educated women has something to talk about. Imagine spending your evenings being forced to converse with a boor who can chatter of nothing but knitting. No wonder so many husbands are driven from the hearth, from all hope of expectation of domestic happiness, when their wives are so incapable of sharing their thoughts or ideas in any way. You might as well have done with it and marry a cow and live in a stable (2002: 124-125).

The novel returns to the issues recurrent in Roberts' novels, the relationship between mothers and children, the question of nurture versus nature in bringing up children, the influence of the family in which the child grows up as opposed to its own innate nature. In the end William Saygood, who thinks that his daughter Caroline is in York state asylum, learns that she is not his daughter. Caroline is Jemima's daughter, who was thought to have died. William's friend, Paul Gilbert, the father of Jemima's daughter, paid Louise to exchange the children. He wanted to find out whether upbringing would have any influence on the development of the character of a human being. He was a revolutionist and wanted to see whether his child raised by Anette, a royalist and traditionalist, would grow up following her or his way of life. The novel's point of suspense is Louise's confession, its revelation keeping the readers on edge as they want to find out what exactly was the crime that Louise had committed.

Roberts' ensuing novel *The looking glass* (2000) also has a lower class character in its focus as it tells the story of the orphaned Geneviève and her life as a maid in the house of an artist, Geard Colbert, who is surrounded by women all of whom fight for his attention and affection. This character is a composite portrait of Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898). Like all other of Roberts' novels, *The looking glass* centres on women and the power of narrative. One of the narrators, the orphaned Geneviève is a natural storyteller. Geneviève says: "The nuns always warned us against storytelling and daydreaming, which they said meant lying, and escape from truth. To me it was the opposite. Those bright pictures were the most real thing" (2001: 10) and elsewhere she states "[i]t was only at night, in the dark, that I had been able to let go of myself and disappear into stories" (2001: 11). Although the nuns try to dissuade her storytelling, spinning tales it seems is the only thing that makes her life bearable. Yet, she soon learns that other people's narratives can be disconcerting: "My stories had had murder and violence in them, certainly, but because I was their author I had been in charge of who did what to whom" (2001: 26). Geneviève admits that the only stories she heard about women were about the lives of saints told by the nuns (2001: 26), and for her the saints were "outside morality" (2001: 26). She realizes that "[a]s a lonely child I had needed stories but now, I decided, I had done with them; childhood was past..." (2001: 27). Yet, throughout her narrative she frames herself in the myth of a mermaid. "I left behind me, in the swim my depths of the mirror, that mermaid-girl intrigued by the

possibility of dancing and flirting. I stepped out of the buoyant water, onto dry land" (2001: 36). All the women in the novel tell each other stories and relate their experiences to literature. Millicent, the English governess of Colbert's niece governess who also falls for the writer notes in her journal: "I suppose he must have a lot of mistresses. It stands to reason that he would. I'm glad that I understand all that. Coming from such a sheltered background, I wouldn't be expected to. But French Literature is a great help, I find Stendhal and Flaubert and so on" (2001: 125). She is the one that finds a book of poems by Charles Baudelaire, *Les fleur du mal,* dedicated to Gerard from Isabelle (2001: 125). Isabelle, a seamstress, has been Gerard's lover for quite some time, being the unhappy wife of Armand. Chronically afraid of attachments, Colbert changed his attitude towards her when she became a widow, and therefore an eligible candidate for a wife. All the women in the story function as his muses. Characteristically for Roberts the women are guardians of stories. In the end, Colbert's niece Marie-Louise, who was also under Colbert's spell, comments: "All that I cannot utter an entire memoir about her uncle. I haven't read it. She never published it because she was not satisfied with it. She could not decide what to put in and what to leave out, torn between feeling she should tell the truth and wanting to present her uncle as solely heroic" (2001: 261). In a dramatic denouement all Gerard's lovers meet in Isabelle's shop and part their ways as the ominous year of 1914 is approaching.

The mistressclass (2003) is yet another novel partially set in the nineteenth century. This time the main frame of reference is the true story of Charlotte Brontë's stay in Brussels and her infatuation with Constantin Georges Romain Heger (1809-1896). Whereas Roberts' main influence was Charlotte Brontë's life, Charlotte Charlotte Brontë's *Vilette* (1853), in turn, was inspired by her stay in Brussels. Lucy, the main character, teaches at the boarding school and falls in love with Paul Emanuel. This situation reenacts the love affair between Charlotte and Constantine. When it was published, the novel was criticized as too crude and unhindered in its description of female desires, and it is that aspect of Charlotte Brontë's novel that Roberts uses as the basis for *The mistressclass*. The novel's structure, however, are the fictional letters between Monsieur Heger and Charlotte who, although promising to stop writing to him, is unable to do so and continues to write in private. Charlotte calls Heger her dear master (2007: 3). She quite openly tells him: "*Vous me manquez*.

You are lacking to me. I lack you. My real self is not here in Haworth but at your side. Living abroad; with you. My real self is not this vicar's wife, this good daughter, but that young pupil-teacher, that disciple, ardently in love with you. Writing essays and stories. Planning her novel. My real life stopped when you rejected me and got rid of me" (2007: 77). The contemporary story is based on a love triangle between two sisters, Catherine and Vinny, (Delphina) and Adam. What complicates the liaisons are the relationships between these younger generation characters and Robert, Adam's father, a painter. Catherine is a professor secretly writing women's erotica - soft porn. To support her weakness for comfort and finery she has been married to Adam, a novelist currently working as a carpenter while doing research for his new novel. Their children are grown up, and so Catherine and Adam decide to move into a small house, which Adam's father, the painter, bequeathed to them. To their housewarming party came their friend Charlie, whose gallery Adam is building, and Vinny, Catherine's bohemian sister, whose favorite novel is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. There are sexual undercurrents which run between Adam and Vinny, as well as between Catherine and Adam and Charlie. What adds to the mystery is the nude painting of young Catherine, but what also surfaces is the fact that Adam and Vinny were a couple when they were in their twenties. It is Charlie who recognizes Catherine as the model for the mysterious nude painting, which hung in Robert's bedroom. "Robert had repeatedly painted a figure with Catherine's face, in imaginary landscapes of jungles and forests; in imaginary roles, as a goddess, a madonna, a bride" (2007: 287). It was not Catherine but Vinny who was with Robert when he died; and it turns out that Vinny still loves Adam, the latter finds out about Catherine's secret occupation, which only adds to his own problem of writer's block. In the end Catherine decides that she and Adam need some time off and is planning to go to India, possibly accompanied by her hitherto estranged sister, Vinny. The novel is divided into seventeen parts, interweaving the story of Catherine, Vinny, Adam and Robert with the fictional love letters written by Charlotte Brontë. The Brontë's story is concluded with Charlotte's confession that she has found a place to write in, in which she feels safe and guarded from the world, possibly her own fiction.

Like *The mistressclass*, *Reader, I married him* (2005) is an intertextual game, a crime story, a love story, a contemporary *commedia dell' arte*, with a grotesque satirical touch. The novel is a carefully weaved plot and despite a tendency to use stock-figures rather than round characters, Rob-

erts tries to individualize human types in a tale in which nothing is as it seems. Set mostly in Italy, the novel reminds one of E.M. Forster's fascination with Italy and the obvious play with contrasts between the British and the Italians. True to the model, Roberts has Dawn meet an old friend Frederico and enjoy the sensual pleasures of Italian food and the ferocity of Italian love. Unlike Forster, Roberts does not repeat Forsterian cultural disparities and instead of an innocent young woman sent to Italy, has the main character Dawn, three times widow, go to Italy to recuperate after her recent loss. Dawn has a troubled relationship with her stepmother, Maud, and the Catholic Church, here represented by Father Michael, whose figure is oddly reminiscent of Church Militant, controlling the masses through fear rather than being a benevolent shepherd. In the end he also turns out to be somebody other than we think. A friend of her stepmother, Father Kenneth tells Dawn that her stepmother is a saint, to which she replies that "[s]aints can be hard to live with" (2007: 33), which is Roberts' ironic commentary on real and pretended sainthood. Maud, in truth, tells her: "Every woman owes it to herself to get married once, Dawn, but you don't have to make a habit of it" (2006: 7). The above and other "motherly wisdoms" are Maud's inventions as she is using quotations from books she cannot identify. The nunnery where Dawn visits her friend Lenora is more like the nun/whore house in *The impossible saints*. Here Dawn comments that "[h]oly poverty might mean simplicity for the nuns but translated into luxury, even opulence, offered to visitors" (2006: 59).

Such statements express Roberts' views on the place of the Catholic Church in the contemporary world. While commenting on the Catholic separation of body and soul she sees how spirituality is replaced with worldliness. Instead of moralizing, she offers the reader a rather playful narrative deriding the convent life and the kind of Catholicism which is all about show and surface of which Dawn is quite aware. Lenora "had been a feminist in the seventies. She still had very short hair when I met her in Italy in the early eighties. In those days she worked for a feminist theatre company and wrote plays" (2006: 19). One cannot forget the intertextual game which is already present in the title of the novel, a well known quotation from *Jane Eyre* which is also reversed, as the novel is not really about marrying somebody but rather about Dawn murdering her three husbands. Dawn remains an avid reader of works such as *Mansfield Park*, *North and South*, *Jane Eyre*, *Middlemarch*, C. G. Jung, Penelope

Fitzgerald's *Innocence,* the book of *I Ching* and David Bowie. Like Julia Roberts' character in *Runaway bride* (1999, directed by Garry Marshall), Dawn thinks that "[w]ith Tom I'd been a hippy who smoked dope, listened to David Bowie, threw the I Ching. With Cecil I'd been an elegant and gracious hostess giving art historical dinner parties. With Hugh I'd been a walker, camper, devotee of folk songs and real ale. But now? Alone, I could do anything" (2006: 35).The truly postmodern mixture of high and popular, together with Dawn or Aurora as she is called by Maud, or Doris, Daphne, Doreen, Dixie, Dorothy used to address her by Father Kenneth performing her identity of a distraught widow, an innocent young woman, a woman with no personality who takes on whatever features her partners find attractive, which might be seen in the context of Ervin Goffman's notion of identity performance and social life as a game (1997). The game of allusions evokes issues of identity, memory and the past, and raises question whether it is feasible to re-invent the past through art, food and religion.

Roberts' last novel to date *Ignorance* (2013), traces the fates of two girls as young women, Jeanne Nerin and Marie-Angèle Baundry, who are in the convent school together. Roberts gives voice to different characters in the story, so the novel repeatedly switches points of view. Marie-Angèle comes from a respectable family, Catholic and middle-class, while Jeanne's mother is a widow who takes in washing. She is also Jewish, a fact widely known even though she has converted to Catholicism. Young Jeanne recalls:

> In church, every Sunday we prayed for the conversion of the Jews to One True Faith and celebrated the heroic martyrs who died defending it. The martyrs refused to marry pagans like Bluebeard. The lives of Saints listed the tortured: slashed with swords, breasts torn off, eyes gauged out, racked on the wheel, made to walk naked into brothels where soldiers waited for them. I wouldn't be brave enough to stand up for what I knew was right. I'd turn pagan and marry Bluebeard rather hurt so much. Then after death I'd be punished and burn in hell for ever more. You could shut all this away inside the slammed covers of your book but at night the book jumped open and red fire swept out and consumed everything (2013: 12).

When the Second World War begins, neither of the women has time for fiction as the war transforms the village life of Ste Madeleine with its cobbled streets, a château and a school run by nuns into a place of danger

and constant battle for survival. The life of Marie-Angèle is changed by the war. Even though she witnesses the destruction of her village, she manages to find a husband, Maurice Blanchard, the black marketeer, who aids her family in their strife. Their union is a conscious decision, which Marie-Angèle achieved through pregnancy. Maurice also has a sexual relationship with Jeanne. Moving to a chateau, whose Jewish owner is in hiding elevates the Baudry family to the seeming apex of the social ladder. In the novel, as elsewhere Roberts uses the sociological and metaphorical properties of space; the higher the social class of the family, the closer to the chateau they were placed. Always at the bottom of the social ladder, Jeanne and her mother are victims of the Nazi antisemitism. Jeanne ends up a prostitute and she later has an illegitimate child. In order to atone for her sins, not only the bearing of an illegitimate child but also possible collaboration with the Germans, she is sent to a convent in England and has to leave her child behind. On the ferry she meets a stranger, an Englishman Bernie Mathers, who speaks fluent French. He takes her to his cabin and when they arrive in England he brings her home so that she stays with him and his mother. Bernie's mother accepts Jeanne as her future daughter-in-law. She does not speak English and the only way to communicate is through food and the exchange of recipes. Jeanne ruminates: "Find a language. Not their English foreign language. The language of food. The art of composing a menu. Menus exist in the future tense: they want to sit with them at the kitchen table, tell them this really matters, ask Bernie to translate, wait, dare to look at their faces" (2013: 229). While Jeanne is preparing to teach a few recipes from her mother's cook book, she discovers that the book was her mother's Bible; its copyright date is 1920, when her mother converted from Judaism to Catholicism. Whereas it is ostensibly a wartime narrative about fear and survival, as well as about the choices that affect us but also affect those near us, the novel touches on the hitherto unrevealed antisemitism of 1940s France through the prism of ordinary characters.

Roberts has also published four collections of short stories, *Your shoes* (1991), *During mother's absence* (1993), *Playing sardines* (2001) and *Mud: Stories of sex and love* (2010). In *During mother's absence* (1993) Roberts reiterates themes found in her novels, such as storytelling, myth, saints and autobiographical elements. In "Anger" she rewrites the story of Melusine, a woman with a mystery, in the medieval rendition of the tale, half-woman half-snake. In this story a young girl is rejected by her moth-

er. She is hirsute and looks like a changeling; in her adult life, she empowers herself when she accepts herself and the way she looks. One story in this collection "Charity" is also about a difficult relationship between a mother and daughter. Traditionally Charity is one of the Virtues frequently portrayed as a woman with children. In Roberts' words: "Charity is a lady with no clothes on her top under the black bit of paper, feeding four babies at once" (1993: 42). In another of the stories, "Laundry" reimagines the life of Saint Austerberthe (630-704). In hagiography this is Saint Eusterberta of Pavilly, who became a nun when she rejected an arranged marriage. In Roberts' story, she is the laundress who has an affair with a young monk. At the end of the collection in which this appears there is a short story which is in the form of a glossary of French words explained in English. This autobiographic piece aims to present Roberts' life in France and England and shows that she has deep roots in both of these countries. Throughout the collection the figure of a mother is always in the background; paradoxically, in fact all the tales are not about absence but about a mother's presence.

Playing sardines (2001) opens with the story under the same title and refers to a childish game played in the dark, a game about desire, about wanting. Roberts reminds the reader about the erotic allure of recipes. In "Monsieur Mallarme changes names", she once again conjures an image of the poet who cross-dresses in order to conquer writer's block. "No hands" has a plaster figure of Madonna which makes the narrator think of a story tale of a millers daughter with no hands who in the end gets a pair of silver ones and about the Lady of Lourdes who appeared to Bernadette. "Fluency" presents a sixty-year-old woman, a flâneuse, who wonders through Paris and thinks about her life and her loves, the lovers she took to Paris. She also thinks about London where she lives and moved a lot, finally realizing that the city is a palimpsest. "The City heaves and contorts and gives birth to its past" (2002: 66). In "A feast of St. Catherine", a woman – a professional translator – who has a lover who takes her to Rome, feasts in a restaurant thinking about Catherine of Sienna who economized on food and was known to have "holy anorexia". The stories, in general, talk about food and women's lives, their hetero and homosexual fascinations.

Mud stories of sex and love is a collection concerned with Essex and includes allusions to Colette, George Sand, Madame Bovary, Tristan and Isolde and Jane Eyre. The title image of mud refers to John Constable's

painting “Fishing with a net” and provides a wide-ranging ekphrasis. In “Flâneuse” an Englishwoman wanders through contemporary London only to be transported into the eighteenth century reality and hears her lover say: “What’s real? William says: we make it up, reality. You dreamed it, that’s all” (2010: 60). “Sleepers” offers a very interesting retelling of *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of a minor character in the original novel, the French maid Sophie. She travels to France and recalls her time spent caring for Adele, Rochester’s daughter. Sophie states that Jane was Rochester’s mistress, and her ‘escape’ from Thornfield Hall was caused by the fact that she was pregnant and had to deliver the baby discreetly. The story also mentions Adele’s third “mother”, the Creole madwoman, whom Adele sometimes sneaks out to visit. Sophie comments on that during their meetings. “The Creole” nourished and cuddled Adele as if they were both animals. However, Adele had to get punished for the transgression. The punishment is her being send off to a boarding school. Sophie’s ruminations end with the image of a fire destroying Thornfield Hall, and Adele and Sophie are then free to ‘escape’ to their home, France. „Annunciation” is set in the 1960s, at that time, a young girl Marie, is depicted as struggling with her Catholic-school education and the morality the institution has instilled in her. “On the beach at Trouville” is once again an extended ekphrasis as the context of the story is the painting by Monet, “The beach at Trouville” on which not only Monet’s wife but also a black clad girl is painted. “The lay of Bee Wolf” is a retelling of *Beowulf* in which Bee Wolf is the lord of a hall and the story accounts for the tragic death of Gren Dell, who lost his way and did not know how to communicate with men. Bee Wolf’s warriors were frightened by the monster Gren Dell’s strange sounds and appearance. They attack him but are beaten. In the end, as in the original, Gren Dell is defeated and Bee wolf has a cloak made of his skin. Later Bee Wolf’s entourage go to the den of Mrs Dell and there she eats Bee Wolf’s wife and two daughters (he has three), but the third girl escapes into the forest and consoles herself by composing a lay about her father’s adventures. She eventually gathers up strength to get up and set off to complete her literary quest. The richness of the intertextual allusions, the mixture of places, London and Paris and times from the eighteenth century to the twenty first, is here augmented by autobiographical references, people and places important in Michèle Roberts’ life.

Des mots magiques des mots tactiques

Her volumes of poetry include: *The mirror of the mother* (1986), *Psyche and the hurricane. Poems 1986-1990* (1991) and *All the selves I was: New and selected poems* (1995). Another volume *Touch papers. Three women poets* (1982), was co-authored by Michèlene Wandor and Judith Kaznatzis. In *The mirror of the mother,* the poems celebrate women both mythical, such as Judith and Delilah, as well as women from her own family circle, such as her grandmother, noted in "my grandmother is dying" (*The mirror*, 53), "after my grandmother's death" and "lament for my grandmother on the day of the winter solstice" (*The mirror*, 76-77). Additionally there is a friend referred to, a Lin Layram, who died of cancer: "Lin's death" and "her funeral" (*The mirror,* 28-29). In "the women of the harem" (small letters, original, LS) "the women of the harem/over breakfast/compare dreams" (1986: 16), and the speaker relates how she became "his casket he my/drowned key" (*The mirror,* 16). Troubled femininity appears in "the amazon's song" (small letters original, LS) where the speaker claims: "I have become wind, tempestuous/tossing, a home-brewed hurricane" (*The mirror*, 46). We see the evidence of this in "the Vicar's wife's song" that mentions "only Christ is my lover/whom I forgive/much: my misery, his silence; my beauty is all for him" (*The mirror*, 47). A religious context dominates in the which poem: "masochism two/man of iron" (small letters original, LS) where she writes: "you call this act love/I embrace a pillar of dread" (*The mirror*, 62). The ostensibly Christian context of the two poems mentioned above can be contrasted with the mythical context of the series of poems about Persephone: "persephone descends to the underworld" (small letters original, LS). There Persephone admits that "my lover is a dark man" (*The mirror,* 90), and describes the relationship based on fear and fascination which in the end is also accepted by her mother, who lets her go, suggesting the inevitable severance of the metaphorical umbilical cord. Persephone's mythical dark lover becomes someone real in Roberts' life as depicted in the poem "I am abroad in a strange land". "I am abroad/in a strange land/loving a man again" (*The mirror,* 40) which evokes difficult relationship between a man and a woman.

Sarah Falcus claims that the poems, such as "Magnificat", present lesbian affection as "a love that can heal the hurt caused by heterosexual relationships" (2007: 46). Roberts admits in "Magnificat" that "...this man/what a meal he made of me/how he chewed and gobbled and

sucked/in the end he spat me all out" (*The mirror*, 70). Two poems: "Coniston's New Year's Eve" and "I have been wanting to mourn", placed side by side in the collection, celebrate body and femininity. In the former Roberts recollects the painful process of growing up: "[h]ere I am whooping into darkness, back beyond, way beyond puberty, blood out of the unnamed stone/plunging towards the woods/and the frozen lake they fringe/its hidden cavern, body-shaped" (*The mirror*, 30), while in the latter, she mourns "for a long time", "for a past time", in which the natural processes of birth and death are expressed in this way: "I have found women/to witness my loss/of blood,/of mother/of childhood/called puberty (that is all the -/word word should be larger than that)/I call myself woman, I try to/no one can ever love me like that/nevermore/no never again" (*The mirror*, 33). The final stanza is strangely reminiscent of Edgar Alan Poe's "The Raven". Her "Daphne to Apollo" has the speaker announcing "…our confusion, to make men sound like gods" (*The mirror*, 36). In the poem "Daphne", a forest nymph is conflated with Ariadne, and her "labyrinthine memories" become "memories of trees/who never yelled, or wept/or went away" (*The mirror*, 37). In "judith and delilah and me" (small letters original, LS) Roberts writes: "when holofernes slept/then it was/that judith slew him with his own sword/by her hand" and continues "when samson slept/then it was/that his strength left him/his own hair/by delilah's hand" (small letters original, LS *The mirror*, 19). The poem then becomes openly (hetero)sexual: "I shall take your sword into my mouth" (*The mirror*, 19), yet stressing women's power over men. The same motif one finds in "*The wanderer*" and "*The seafarer* revisited" which are also about female power in re-creating stories: "pirates learn/to use the pilgrim's coracle/mothers wear cutlasses/as well as earrings/we are teaching our children to swim" (*The mirror*, 17). Roberts also looks at the notion of motherhood through the prism of politics in "Prisoners of Irish War". In the poem she recalls hunger strikers of the 1980's: "this is the last battleground/their skin is a thin barricade...wild men, naked on the blanket/wild women, starving for what/new mothering" (*The mirror*, 75), their mothers suffering alongside their sons. She immortalizes her own mother in the poem dedicated to her: "Demeter keeps going". The title phrase "The mirror of the mother" giving unity to the whole collection is likewise a complex idea. The mirror is, after all, both an object reflecting a person but also a literary genre of a manual, in this case, a mother's guide given to her child.

The real and mythical mother/daughter relations are rewritten through the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Roberts' love stories are repeatedly re-imagined through the story of Psyche. In the title poem of the volume entitled *Psyche and the hurricane*, Psyche is once again a lover. She describes the destruction of nature by a hurricane. Even though the damage is physical, the ruined landscape is converted into the desolation of the mind, and Psyche laments: "I have lost Eros. My love/has been ripped/out, leaving me" (*Psyche*, 54). In the poem "Restoration work in Palazzo Te", Psyche is imprisoned in paint, and she becomes free to represent all-enveloping femininity: "she swings free/in the vault of darkness, the/silence between sentences" (*Psyche*, 42). Psyche, like Roberts herself, is knocking at the plaster of the myth's crust" (*Psyche*, 42). According to Falcus, "[t]his suggestion of female access to the hidden and the silent becomes an act of exposure…" (2007: 20). The figure of a woman guarding and then exposing secrets re-appears in the poem "for Paula, mourning" (small letters original, LS), in which Roberts calls the title character "curator of memory" (*Psyche*, 19). The notion of layers of meaning compared to layers of paint returns in the poem entitled "the broken house" (small letters original, LS), in which the broken house is transformed into the representation of a dying union: "Dirt/is a part of me. Pall/of plaster grains. Dust /to dust: I am already dying" (*Psyche*, 25) "No more floor: feet lost/in broken bricks I am walled in air/bleak/as a marriage/I can't make/or mend" (*Psyche*, 26). The speaker is acutely aware that only unreal women have infinite patience, like the medieval Patient Griselda from Chaucer's *Canterbury tales*. The speaker sees her life as "a house of tricks/flimsy as playing cards" *(Psyche*, 24) and therefore easily wrecked. The motif of destruction can, however, bring out positive images. In the poem "The day the wall came down" the shattered relationship between twin sisters, suggested in the line "we began as one/pram with two hoods/a secret language/a single dent in the bed" (*Psyche*, 74), is rebuilt through good food and shared space. The title suggests the momentous historical event of the destruction of the Berlin wall. Roberts' poem concerns walls that people built around themselves which sever their family ties. The alienated sisters "...taste garlic, spaghetti/anchovies, broccoli/hot with red chilies/and what has divided us/comes down" (*Psyche*, 75). Family ties are also the subject matter of „The return" as when the speaker tells her father: "I'm back, Dad! Your prodigal daughter/in a shiny black mac/with my battered heart,/my suitcase of poems" (*Psyche*, 48).

The father's house, the parsonage of Haworth, is the site of the reminiscences of Charlotte who remembers "the dying Emily turning her eyes/reluctantly/from the pleasant sun" (*Psyche*, 91). Charlotte's voice is mixed with that of the poet addressing her own sister. The autobiographical references in the poems add, in Falcus's words, "a further facet to the politics and ethics of histories and herstories" (2007: 100).

Yet another important component is Roberts' intertexts ever present in her writing. In "bangkok breakfast" (small letters original, LS), like in T.S. Eliot's "The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "women come women go..." (*All the selves*, 1). The poem reflects the apparent poverty of Bangkok street life. In "winter sacrament" (small letters original, LS) she has a dream about meeting her mother whom she sees "at the altar steps, in the cathedral vault" (*All the selves*, 16). The poem entitled "rite of passage. *for Joan of Arc*" (small letters original, LS) is dedicated to Joan of Arc, who "after victories after the failed leap from the tower" is trapped in "ecclesiastical grammar" (*All the selves*, 19). The fascination with Joan of Arc and various female heroines Roberts shares with her friend, Marina Warner, whose work she praises in her collected essays, *On food, sex and God. On inspiration and writing* (1998)[8]. In "Penelope awaits the return of Ulysses", Penelope is a contemporary character. Opening the door of her and her companion's flat, she mourns his absence and feels "[s]now is falling in me" (*All the selves*, 36). The longing to fill the emptiness is not that of separation but of rift, large and deep and not too easily mended. "Your absence undoes me./I want to make, and make./These days I want to remain unfinished./I need you to hear me out. To unravel me" (*All the selves*, 37). In another essay "re-discovering Pompeii" (based on an exhibition at the Academia Italiana, London)" (small letters original, LS), Roberts conjures up the image of creation and mud, the latter so potent in her short stories under the same title. Looking at the lives buried in volcano dust and mud rather than created from clay, she sees the common heritage of mankind: "you are buried in me", "you rise up/ you restore yourself to me/out of the pit of winter" (*All the selves*, 106). In the series of eleven poems entitled "The aunt's progress", the notion of heritage and belonging is seen in the context of family life: "your life/still goes/on slid-

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[8] Warner wrote a biography of Joan of Arc (1981), edited the papers of the trial of Joan of Arc (1996) and devoted herself to the study of women in art in *Monuments and maidens. The allegory of the female form* (1985).

ing/in and out/of mine" (*All the selves*, 114). The poem entitled innocently "house-hunting in the Mayenne" can be read as an erotic piece addressed to a lover: "I mouth new wants/and lap at you/milk-white/sour-sweet" (*All the selves*, 120). Metamorphized, the lover is referred to as follows: "you're my house/as I am yours/foundered on rock/the hillside at our back" (*All the selves*, 120). The poem ends with the invocation of "secret words/pungent scarlet hot" (*All the selves*, 120).

In 2012 Roberts published privately a volume of poems under the title *The heretic's feast*, which contained poems in which for example her mother is addressed, "you were my saint ascending" (the title poem of *The heretic's feast*, 3) and pieces in which the poet exposed her religious doubts: "the cathedral's white dome/stone milk/illusion of heaven" (*The heretic's*, 10). As is the case in other of Robert's poems, the above mentioned collection is also about personal negotiations between her mother's Catholicism and her father's Protestantism. Similar to her earlier work, *The heretic's feast* weaves the themes from her immediate reality as well as offering a feast of imagination. Roberts also authored a play, *The journeyman*, which was performed in 1988.

As Bradford noted, "Roberts has since the 1970s been one of the most prolific and widely celebrated of the writers who allied themselves with the first wave of feminist writing. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s most of her novels involved a historical perspective, part drawn from her own experiences from the 1950s onwards and part focusing upon more distant scenarios and mythologies" (Bradford 2007: 125). Michèle Roberts has continuously expressed her socialist, feminist and republican views. She has remained a feminist even when the word lost its political, and therefore popular resonance. She turned down an OBE but accepted the order of a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres given by the French government in 1993. Her novel *Daughters of the house* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for fiction and received WH Smith Literary Award. She is an Emeritus Professor of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia and was Visiting Professor in Writing at Nottingham Trent University for several years. As she herself says: "All writing is of course a struggle out of silence to find the right words" (1998: 211), writing that is the product of imagination but also writing that is powered by one's own experiences. Quite appropriately her essay in the present volume is entitled "Oh you storyteller: On fiction and memoir".

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OH YOU STORYTELLER: ON FICTION AND MEMOIR

MICHÈLE ROBERTS

To begin with an image:

A half-hoop of light separates my darkness from hers. Twin hoods, pulled up towards each other, shelter us from the rain, almost meet where light scythes in, slicing our blackness apart. The pram is a deep-bellied metal body. I lie in one half and Margi lies tucked in at the opposite end, facing me.

Is that a piece of autobiography or of fiction? The use of the first person can suggest either. Perhaps the employment of metaphor – light as a scythe, the pram as a body – points towards fiction. And people can't remember being babies, anyway, can they? I must have made that up. It's the start of a story.

When I say that actually I do have a twin sister, called Margi, and that we were taken out in a big double pram, people can say, oh yes, I see, so it's a fancy beginning to an autobiography.

When I insist that I can remember lying in the pram, people look skeptical. That's a memory created by a photograph, they say. Perhaps it is. I've no way of knowing. But that half-hoop of light, seen from underneath, from inside the dark pram, seems real. Very different from the external view created by a photograph.

In the piece of unpublished memoir, *A is for apple*, from which I'm quoting, I continue:

> Did Mum know her baby twins apart? Was I still myself if she didn't know who I was? She was God, giving names to all the creatures in her universe, but what if she blinked, dozed, and the creatures rolled to and fro and changed places while she dreamed?

Aged ten, I tackled that problem by thinking about buses. If the red double-decker that took us up to the West End from our suburb was called the 113, surely it would still be the same bus even if at the bus depot they changed its name to the 142 and sent it off along a different route? I knew that twins had different names in different languages. My French grandparents called us les jumelles.

Mum added once: and you were supposed to be boys! You were supposed to be Jonathan and Jeremy!

What would it have been like to be a Jonathan or a Jeremy? I had to write fiction to work that one out, fiction embodying the imagination as a form of knowing.

Growing up a twin, growing up half-English and half-French, with a Catholic mother and a Protestant father, one parent from an English working class background and one from the French bourgeoisie, I didn't know where I belonged. Ideas of doubleness, replication, chopped parts still return to haunt me. Does being a twin mean being just half of one whole person? Twins are an aberration: as the second-born, am I the mistake? Speaking English and French, do I have a forked tongue? Are twins a kind of solo monster with two heads and two big mouths? Does two, as a number, mean one plus one or does it mean one fused with one? My conscious, rational mind may not pose these questions, but my unconscious certainly does, as I discover from dreams and from letting out the unconscious in writing. (There's another twin pair: conscious/unconscious).

If I get into a muddle thinking about twins, then I need to sort it out. If I get into a similar muddle thinking about fiction and memoir then I need to sort that out too. Writing – writing fiction and writing memoir – is all about posing and solving problems at the level of language and form. Since the relationship between biological twins puzzles me, perhaps it can help me think about that between memoir and fiction. What will happen if I map one onto the other?

So– to start with a difficulty: the difficulty of 'I'.

To say 'I' involves a certain amount of confidence; owning one's power. For me, as a child, 'I' meant not-my-mother, not-a-boy, not-my-twin. I was all negatives. In silence I read and daydreamed and that was where a self got born, began to grow. Recently I was in conversation with the novelist and playwright Nell Dunn, who told me that she linked her becoming a writer to her sense of having had a very squished ego when young. Writing was the only way she could find to let her self expand.

Perhaps writing a fictional 'I' may have the effect of strengthening the lived one. In this sense fiction becomes performative; a rehearsal of life.

A commonsensical view holds that the self is stable; firmly at our centre; in charge. This view can be criticized (as it is for example by Carolyn Heilbrun in Writing a Woman's Life, published in 1988, following, I think, a line of argument first proposed by Virginia Woolf) as simply the comforting perception of people with plenty of political power and social status, used to their stories, their point of view, being taken as normal. Less privileged 'different' groups have to struggle to articulate themselves in public and be heard. They may have more complicated views on what 'I' means. Certainly, for many writers (who are not usually people with plenty of power and status) the self can seem slippery, even precarious. This can sometimes feel frightening; on other occasions exhilarating. For example, when I'm too lonely or unhappy my sense of 'I' starts to fragment. 'Who am I?' becomes a scary question- there's no-one to answer it because I've temporarily fallen apart. This is different to – twinned with - the good loneliness of the writing self, the good aloneness, the longed-for solitude in which writing can happen. Losing myself in writing, losing all sense of time, three hours passing in a few seconds – is blissful. There's no I; just writing and bliss. (And retrospectively a new meaning of power: not power over other people but power meaning being fully alive). At other times the ego resurrects itself, the self shouts loudly: I want, I am angry, I am sad. And at others again the self recognizes its existence vis a vis the state: signs its name, has a passport and bank account, pays taxes.

Using 'I' in fiction, writing fiction in the first person, you can play with possible and alternative selves, you can hold up a mask and speak through it, you can time travel, you can become possessed, you can abandon yourself, you can run away from home, you can play-act and ventriloquize, become somebody else. You can also pretend that your novel is a memoir, as David Lodge has pointed out Charlotte Brontë did in *Jane Eyre*, when inventing and shoring up her own version of realism. Jane Eyre's narrative voice is so compelling, her 'I' so seemingly truthful, that I believe her every word. The illusion spun by realism is complete.

Brontë's language creates this beautifully convincing illusion of reality, language that is sometimes self-effacingly transparent, like a clear window onto the world, and sometimes as obviously material as stained glass. Brontë gives us an entire outer world via Jane's narrating voice, and a vast inner one. Reality, in this version, includes literature from the Bible

onwards, dreams, folklore, superstition, fantasy, poetry and song. So 'I' is a circle, the novel as a containing mind, and 'I' is a straight line, Jane Eyre, a particular character, with her particular history, striving forwards into her own future, and 'I' is an acute angle, a fictional perspective onto the world. Not at all a narrow, limited one: deployed by the cunning artist Charlotte Brontë, 'I' opens up and swivels around the broadest of canvases.

An 'I' composed in fiction – the finished and perfected work of art out in the world- can feel more solid than 'I' trying to narrate an autobiography. 'I' in fiction has colour and edges; the messy 'I' in autobiography may waver, hesitate, doubt. Sometimes art seems more real to me than life, and sometimes life only makes sense in terms of art. This perception shifts and changes all the time. When I first came to writing memoir (an essay in a collection called *Fathers – Reflections by daughters*, published in 1983; and a piece called Une glossaire/A glossary, in *More tales I tell my mother*, published in 1988) I was, at the same time, experimenting with the first person in fiction, for example letting Mary Magdalene narrate a fifth gospel (*The wild girl*, published in 1984) and letting Mrs Noah fill in some of the gaps in the Old Testament (*The book of Mrs Noah*, 1987). These two passionate female prophets, buried alive in the Bible, wanted to become reborn inside me, wanted to sit up inside me and speak. Since they were not-me I could let them be questing, revolutionary, courageous. They could articulate the truth through fiction. They could articulate questions that bothered me, for example why (in the culture I'd grown up in) was holiness so split off from sexiness? Why was the creativity of having children so split off from the creativity of making art? Mary Magdalene and Mrs Noah contrasted with what I often felt I was: wimpish, cowardly, too all over the place. Writing a fictional 'I' showed me how much I loved making things up, let me recognize the imagination both as a kind of mind-muscle and also as a place, sometimes inner and sometimes outer- a kind of translucent bubble – often the only place where I felt I truly existed.

Writing a later autobiography, *Paper houses* (sub-title: a memoir of the 1970s and beyond; published in 2007) entailed discovering that I did have an existence out in the world, and that I did have a self coherent in time, a self that went on through the 1970s into the 1990s. Through writing that story of my political and personal past, composing the jumble of memory-images and diary scraps into a written linear form, I saw for the first time that sequences of memory did indeed compose a self, that I was

indeed joined up inside, just as my pages joined up into chapters, into a complete book; and that this story of my 'I' was in fact the story of being fired with desire and ambition, ruthlessly determined to keep writing whatever else was going on. Perhaps there were other versions I could have told. Could have made up. Could have found.

I'll come back later on to these synonyms for creating. For the moment I want to leave the 1970s, 80s and 90s, and return to childhood, to those twins.

When I was young, I thought constantly in terms of simple categories of difference: either or. Either I'm good OR I'm bad. Similarly, I thought: either it's fiction OR it's memoir. Clarity, rigid separation of a and b, felt safe. Anything in between, a third term, felt dangerous. Similarly, I thought: either a piece of fiction is autobiographical (bad) OR it's invented (good). Now, writing this lecture, I discover I am wanting to think in terms of and. Fiction and memoir may have something in common. The image of the twins may be able to help me think about narrative shapes, about truth and lies.

Two small stories about these two small words truth and lies.

First story. Aged three, my younger brother Andy (that longed-for boy who had duly arrived) fell down the cellar steps in my grandparents' home in France, landed in some broken glass and cut his hand and arm badly. Only I knew that, consumed with jealous rage, I had done it. Aged five, I'd tried to kill him. I'd pushed him down those steps. Every year afterwards, on those special evenings when we huddled together in the darkened tiny salon for a session of home cinema and Grandpere showed us his flickery, soundless cine films of our previous summer holidays, Andy would come up on screen, wrapped in a thick crepe bandage, looking brave and cheery, and all the grownups would coo: oh, do you remember, oh the poor little thing. And I'd shiver with guilt and shame and horror. Andy never denounced me. Aged twenty-eight, I finally got up the courage to speak to him about this terrible event. He laughed at me and said: you were nowhere near me at the time. I fell over all by myself. And in any case there were no steps down to the cellar – it was a shed at the end of the garden. So I was left with the knowledge of the jealousy and rage I'd felt, and how powerfully they'd fired my imagination.

Second story. Our north London suburb, on the edge of a wasteland that ran into the countryside, contained plenty of flashers. We children became expert at dodging them as, open raincoats flapping, they darted out of bush-

es and tried to bar our passage home from school. We didn't mention them to anyone; just coped; they became part of the landscape, inner and outer. One day, aged seven or so, I arrived home from school to find the front and back doors locked and nobody there. A few moments of terror, and then I remembered. We were supposed to be having tea with my grandmother (the English one, Nana) a mile away. By the time I got to Nana's house, panting and red in the face, I was half an hour late. The grownups cried: but where have you been? I could not bear the humiliation of admitting my forgetfulness and being laughed at and so I lied. Oh, I said: a man made me get into his car and drive about with him. My mother immediately put me into the family car and drove us around the suburb, looking for the man. After a while I cracked, and admitted I'd made the whole thing up. We returned to Nana's house. Nana looked at me and shook her head: oh you fibber, you storyteller. My mother didn't say a word about what had happened. Nana's words consoled me: I felt recognized. Story in those days was often used as a synonym for lying. I'd made up a story in order to get out of trouble. I'd told a lie powerful enough to convince my powerful mother to chase a villain who didn't exist.

I wonder now: did I want, with one part of myself (in conflict with her twinned part the goody-goody), to be kidnapped, swept away, enraptured? Colette, writing in the early twentieth century about her idyllic Burgundian childhood, described that dizzying pleasure, how, if a thunderstorm blew up and rattled the shutters, her mother Sido, always fearing robbers and predators of all kinds, and her anxiety newly stirred up by the storm, would rush into her daughter's bedroom, scoop her up in her arms and carry her off upstairs to her own bed, the child still half asleep but passionately enjoying being whirled away in the darkness, the hurry of it, the mystery.

What did Colette desire for her readers? We're not supposed to ask that question any more – if the Author is dead, then so are her intentions – but nonetheless I'll speculate that perhaps Colette, that great sensualist, may sometimes have wanted her audience to feel carried away as she used to be. Perhaps I wanted mine to be as convinced by my tales as my mother had been on that one occasion.

Writing fiction as an attempt at seduction? Barthes once said that writing was playing with the body of the mother. It might be for you, chum, I thought. For me it was more like calling to my mother from far away: listen to me, please listen to me. When I discussed Barthes's statement with the Italian novelist Dacia Maraini she explained patiently: well, it's a fan-

tasy, isn't it, a wish. I realized that Barthes was reminding me of the privileged icon of my Catholic childhood: Baby Jesus in his mother's arms fondling her breast, her fingers pointing towards his wee cock. No place there for daughters.

I envied Barthes his capacity to imagine and lay claim to such a strong intimacy, which, even imagined as a metaphor, for me felt impossible, taboo. That difficulty became my initial subject. My first two novels, *A piece of the night* (1978) and *The visitation* (1983) explored mother-daughter relationships through contemporary stories interwoven with history and myth- all carefully composed in the third person to avoid seeming autobiographical or confessional (that's to say Bad). I was offering my mother my novels as gifts. Alas: they hit her like rocks. She loathed them, saw them as too angry, too passionate, too sexual. I saw them as radical, iconoclastic, poetic. Now, looking back, I'm not surprised she didn't like them: they questioned her religion, her way of being a woman. Telling me clearly how much she disliked them, she initiated a conversation that stuttered on for many years, for which I remain grateful.

She was my first muse. She inspired me to get me writing. If I wrote on one level out of a sense of loss, on another (twinned) level I wrote out of fullness: my mother gave me the gift of languages, the clashes and play between them, she gave me bits of stories and anecdotes, snatches of nursery rhyme and song, she gave me a thirst for dictionaries.

So, deep down, I was starting to see fiction writing as embodying, on one level, an I-Thou relationship (though of course it was doing many other things too- not least exploring the making of a new form with each novel). After my mother, other beloved muses, always connected to books, came into play: for example my father (an amateur writer who never managed to get anything published) for *Impossible saints* (1997), which also investigated biography and hagiography through re-telling the life of St Teresa of Avila and re-writing that medieval compendium of saints' lives *The golden legend*, and so tracked a history of fathers, from Bad, or weak (St Peter, St Jerome) to Good (the male saint who loved St Mary of Egypt). The lives of Wordsworth and Mary Wollstonecraft inspired *Fair exchange* (1999), Flaubert and Mallarme inspired *The looking-glass* (2000), and I added to my canon George Sand and Charlotte Brontë for *The mistressclass* (2003). Experimenting with biographical fact and story, I launched off from the biographical known into the fictional unknown: for example offering an alternative version of how and why

Mallarme wrote his poems or how Flaubert conducted his love affairs. So in a sense fiction, invention, became the unconscious of biography. And perhaps vice versa too.

Invent comes from *invenio*, to come upon, and this image of creativity spoke compellingly to me: the writer-archaeologist advancing into the rock tunnel, opening the rock door, uncovering the golden treasures hidden there. You shine a light on something hidden in the dark. What was lost and forgotten is actually present and alive. When, in the mid 1980s, before travelling to Egypt, I read a book about the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb, I could not understand why I felt so profoundly moved. Later, I realized that the description of finding the hidden golden treasures mirrored my unconscious understanding of how the imagination worked. Also, on the level of fact and on the level of metaphor the transition from death to life (afterlife) was being invoked. This experience – creativity as discovery – feels numinous; brings joy. Once, in a moment of reverie, waking from dreams, I saw that the precious treasure gleaming at the back of the dark cave was a golden sculpture of a mother and daughter joined at the base; a two that was simultaneously a one. This impossible and mysterious image seemed beautiful and holy and true. Beautiful and holy because true. I'd found something I'd lost, that I'd once had, that I thought was gone forever.

I lived by this symbol for several years. Gradually, the image faded back into the darkness, ceased to exert such a powerful effect. With my conscious, rational mind I could now interpret it, if I wanted to, I could see it as an image of the oceanic feeling a baby has at the maternal breast, lost in a flow of bliss. La jouissance. I don't object to those kinds of interpretations at all, I enjoy seeing possible links between our passionate bodily experience and our making of images, but I value the way the golden image was shimmeringly pre-linguistic; simply present; simply itself. Later, another image, again pictured in a dark place, a basement room this time, succeeded it: a dead body on its bier sat up and began to speak. Later, when it too had faded and I was thinking about it, I realised that my novels tracked the movement from psychic death to psychic life; from silence into speech. For example, *A piece of the night* opens with a dead nun in a glass coffin in church, and closes with women sitting together and talking. For example, my latest novel *Men in love* (not yet published) opens with a murdered baby and ends with a man reading a woman's memoir.

The image of creating that recurs regularly in my dreams is that of discovering an extra, secret, hidden room in my flat – the dream prods me to walk through the wall and start exploring this new space; to jump into the unknown and begin writing another novel. This connects to, blurs into, a second – twinned – understanding of invenio/invent, which concerns what I call heroic creation: making something out of nothing. Making something that wasn't there before. In this version, the writer doesn't rely on a previously existing story that she can twist around or smash to pieces – that's to say re-tell. Instead, the entire form has to be invented for the new novel, the structure built word by word, nothing to grip on, dismantle, rebuild. This can feel difficult, chaotic, painful, demands a different kind of courage, brings a different sort of reward. One of my images for this process is of a child going upstairs in the dark, not knowing what lurks there at the top: murderers or monsters or Colette's mother.

(As Jenny Newman has pointed out, these two versions of creating exist in Christian theology too: did God make the universe out of nothing, or out of a pre-existing chaos? I think these questions led on to the muddles Christian patriarchs could get into about biology: if God made the world all by himself, fathers, in the image of God, made babies all by themselves, women being mere vessels.)

I'm sure that most novelists will have experience of both these sorts of creativity. Indeed, we may well swivel from one to another in the course of writing one single novel. What combines the two sorts of creation is the novelist's sense of mystery. She voyages into 'I don't know.' I don't know what will happen if I stand this story on its head and shake it. I don't know what to do with this blank page. She writes the novel in order to find out. Clare Boylan, introducing her collection of novelists' essays *The agony and the ego* (1993) comments on how many writers invoke mystery as a synonym for beginning to create, how much they trust that dark enquiring.

For me, the inspiring galvanizing moment is always a visual image. For example, a dream image of an unconventional, big-nosed Virgin Mary, dressed in red, made me realize how much I'd always longed, as an ardent and priggish little girl, to have a vision of the Madonna (only she never travelled to the end of the Northern Line tube in London, preferring hot places like Italy or the south of France). I recognized that another small French Catholic child, Therese Martin, back in the nineteenth century, had had similar longings. She later became Ste Therese of Lisieux. Here was the grit in the oyster for writing *Daughters of the house* (1993).

Ste Therese, an enclosed nun, was not, of course, a professional writer, though she did produce poetry (sentimental devotional doggerel). She wrote an autobiography, The Story of a Soul, a text that her contemporary, Freud, might have appreciated as an appendix to his case histories concerning hysteria- that's to say women's forbidden anger reasserting itself in disconcerting ways. Therese, aged twenty-four, dying of TB and writing under obedience, can't mention taboo subjects such as rage. Her modern biographers point out the traumas of her childhood: the early loss of her mother to cancer, the loss of her foster-mother and wet-nurse, left behind in the country, the loss of her mother-substitutes, her elder sisters, who vanished into an enclosed order of contemplatives – the Carmelites. Therese's desire for heroic adventure (forbidden to a young woman of her social class), took her in the only direction available: following her sisters into the same convent. Motherhood, the huge adventure of giving birth, also embodied female heroism, but Therese knew the risks: you might die.

Some biographers suggest that the story of Therese's soul had already been formulated for her by her parents, both of whom had wanted to enter religion, as priest and nun: she had little choice, given the constraints of her life, but to act out their narrative. Before she died she told a correspondent that in fact she had wished to become a missionary priest, which of course was impossible. We witness her acting out her dream of heroism firstly by writing to missionary priests across the French Empire and secondly by cheerfully suffering all the irritations of communal life among unchosen and often uncongenial companions. In *The story of a soul* she spins a miracle-filled, sometimes irritating and sometimes touching tale with herself at its centre, God's favourite and most charming child, all 'unfeminine' ambition, competitiveness and self-assertion magically transformed into loving her heavenly Father and humbly doing his will.

I read her autobiography in layers: what's said, what's never mentioned, what's exaggerated, what's revealed through poetic image. I chose to portray her, in *Daughters of the house*, through the splits I perceived in her: the need for control versus the desire for rapture. The form I invented dramatized an inventory: a list of objects, which you may want to keep or choose to abandon. The Therese figure I invented thinks she has had a vision of the Virgin, and the novel explores what she may actually (or not) have seen; hauntings from wartime; collective memories of collaboration and betrayal. I returned to *Therese in mud* (2010), this time putting her in-

to a painting by Monet, this time seeing her as part of a composition of light and darkness.

St Teresa of Avila's autobiography – written in the sixteenth century- fascinates me for different reasons. In it she's trying to tell the truth but having to tell it slant. She's been instructed to write it by the authorities, the priests and Inquisitors, to prove that she's a true daughter of the Church. Potentially she's a heretic. Not only is she having mystical visions, communing one to one with Christ, sidestepping all need for priests as powerful intermediaries between her and God, but also she's from a Jewish background, which is very dangerous – the Jews have been thrown out of Spain as infidels. So Teresa has to set to and create a narrative that describes her pilgrimage towards Church-defined truth and gets her out of trouble. She tells of entering the convent simply out of fear, to avoid going to hell after her death. Subsequently, meditating on a sculpture of Christ wounded and tormented, she realises his loving sacrifice on behalf of mankind, and so becomes a true penitent, truly seeking God. Teresa writes with the humility she's obliged to assume, both as a woman and as a sinner, tracking an arc of penitence, telling little teaching stories en route, but at the same time creating her story with well-judged rhetoric, intelligence, power and charm. She knows exactly what she's doing. She and her Life win through: the authorities let her off and she can return to her work: reading, writing, travelling all over Spain to reform the Carmelite order. Hidden behind her black veil, the closed black curtains of her primitive carriage, paradoxically she is a powerful woman. Within the constraints of her time. As long as she remembers to perform her ritual gestures of humility, male prelates will listen to her and take her advice. So she became for me one of my beloved impossible saints, in my novel of that name, and within the context of a novel I wrote her secret autobiography, its words literally hidden, tiny pages rolled up to form the paper beads of a rosary.

Each of these saints, the Spanish Teresa and the French Therese, represents a twin sister-writer for me. The other one; the one I'm not. Clinging on to their Catholic faith, entering the convent, they took the road I didn't. Both of them, writing such complicated and contradictory stories about themselves, seemed perfect subjects for a novelist. I could certainly identify with their struggles to define and assert themselves while they simultaneously deprecated and even hid themselves. I could certainly feel appalled by so much 'voluntary' self-submission even as I understood the reasons for it.

Where are my twins now? What do I think now? Are memoir and fiction still as much at odds as I grew up believing? To you I may have sounded naïve in even posing these questions. Amateurs of what gets called biofiction or autobiografiction will perhaps just write them off, invoking a particular philosophical view: reality cannot be known, so autobiography is really the same as fiction. But I've needed to work things out for myself. Reading autobiographies I discover they employ and devise narrative shapes recognisable to readers of fiction in order to express their truths. And I've discovered too that these truths are not simply factual truths but also poetic truths, psychic truths, imaginative truths. Part of the mind's activity, they don't sit quietly waiting to be pigeonholed into the literary slots of either fiction or memoir, they don't sit quietly waiting to be remembered, tidy as sheets and pillow-cases on a shelf. They jump up when they want to, perhaps at particular moments of crisis, they erupt from the unconscious and shake themselves out. Make a lovely mess. They have to be put into order; re-composed. A sheet may make a tent, a magic carpet, a shroud. A pillow-case may make a swag-bag; a bandage; a gag.

Memory means re-creating. We may believe not that the past dwells inside us, deep down, but that it is lost, that, in particular, childhood is lost. Certainly the lived past is. In this sense, any autobiography is a making-up of what's gone, therefore tips towards fiction. Colette hints at this in Belles Saisons (quoted and translated by her biographer Judith Thurman):

> If a child could tell about his childhood while he is passing through it, his true childhood, his account would perhaps be nothing more than one of intimate dramas and disappointments. But he only writes having attained adulthood. However, he believes that he has preserved the memories of his childhood intact. I mistrust even my own.

So Colette sets to and invents the child she may have been, perhaps the child she wants to believe she was. Thurman warns us that when Colette seems at her most disingenuous she's at her most opaque. Colette, who had a day-job for a while as a music-hall performer, knew all about striptease. A dance of veils: now you see me now you don't. (One literary precedent for this kind of autobiography-theatre comes in George Sand's *Lettres d'un voyageur*, an account of her travels in northern Italy, where she writes as a young man. We could also note Gertude Stein, author of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Stein disguised herself as Alice

Toklas in order to write about her own genius). Colette, mimic, actor, storyteller, took up/made up images of her childhood, her mother, in her masterpiece: *La naissance du jour* (*Break of day*). She invents a new form, one that combines autobiography, fiction, letters and elegy. It's classified as a novel by most critics, yet contains a narrator-character called Colette, who seems very like the author herself. But the author warns her readers early on: "Am I portraying myself? Have patience. This is only my model".

Colette's mixtures of fiction and autobiography allow her to rehearse and re-invent her dance to and fro and around her mother Sido in the Burgundian house, village and woods; she returns over and over to that maternal goddess from whom she must also, over and over, escape. Embroidering her theme of mother-daughter complications, twisted threads, dropped stitches, she reminds me of other stories, of Rapunzel and her witch-mother sealed away in their tower, of Psyche and Demeter composing a myth of earth and underworld, of winter and spring. Colette's a good pagan. She avoids the nostalgia involved in overly mourning paradise lost. Carolyn Heilbrun, writing about women autobiographers, considers that nostalgia veils anger. Perhaps it does for men too? Is John McGahern angry then, when he rhapsodically remembers walking the flowery Irish lanes with his beloved mother, who abandons him by dying? Is Robert Graves angry then, when he writes of walking the paradisial Welsh hills, well known from his childhood holidays, in intervals of the First World War?

But then paradise regained may be the making of art? Colette writes of the earthly paradise, the eternal now. Being born of woman is not a cause of despair, because it leads to death, as those stern old early Christians thought, but a cause for joy, because it means we can live now, as fully and as joyfully as possible.

To halt the zigzag between the twins, bumping against each other, turning back to play with each other, caress each other: now the moment has arrived when they jump out of the pram, the playpen, the shared bedroom, when they start to learn to utter not only the secret language of twinspeak but all the languages they will need for survival in this world.

They can live in separate houses now and they can run in and out of each other's houses all day long; the house of fiction, the house of memoir; detached and semi-detached.

PLAYING WITH MUD: LITERARY GHOSTS IN MICHÈLE ROBERTS' PROSE WRITING

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Michèle Roberts revisits literary characters, motifs and stories, tearing them from the patriarchal context and endowing them with a feminist perspective, resisting binary and hierarchical thinking, rejecting the stereotypical images of femininity. Her texts are highly allusive, frequently reworking familiar motifs, yet placing them in an unfamiliar setting and style. Intertextuality, a marked feature of Roberts' writing, is present in the form of references to other texts and authors. In her collection *Mud. Stories of sex and love* (2010), Colette, George Sand, Camille and Claude Monet appear, together with Emma Bovary, and Tristram and Isolde. Roberts offers playful re-imagining of the lives of prose writers, poets, artists and fictional characters, applying the strategy of feminist appropriation. Similarly to Marina Warner (1985: 334), who in her book *Monuments & maidens* invites the readers to listen to women's voices "hoarse from long disuse",[1] Roberts raises the issue of the position of women in society and celebrates their individuality. Through the acts of empathetic imagination she re-imagines a

[1] In the epilogue to *Monuments and maidens: The allegory of the female form*, Marina Warner writes about female figures who have been used as allegories throughout many centuries: "They have begun to speak from within, so many fantasy figures, Pandora and Eve and Tuccia and Liberty and Athena and the other virgins, Justice and Temperance, and Lady Wisdom and Naked Truth. Their voices are hoarse from long disuse, but they are gaining in volume and pitch and tone, they come to us from a long distance (their journey has been going on for more than two thousand years), and their limbs take time to move to the rhythm rising within, they have been subjected for so long. And they are saying, Listen" (Warner 1985: 334).

wide range of fictional characters and historical figures, which demonstrates her need to rework narratives giving voice to the disempowered and the disenfranchised. She insists on disrupting and destabilizing dominant norms, questioning the concepts of femininity and masculinity and negotiating power transactions.

One of the concepts associated with all-male vision of the world is a *flâneur* undergoes a creative reworking in Roberts' writing. A *flâneuse* wandering around literary ghosts, she straddles cultures – she writes in English, but there are strong French elements (setting, characters, history, literary motifs) in her writing. Roberts' writing aims at debunking preconceptions and illuminating alternative methods for the interpretation of culture as she demystifies the ideological links and demythifies fixed concepts. Her feminist reading strategies thus involve gender-blending and genre-bending: breaking conventions and recasting historical and literary figures in contemporary world offers a subversive effect. She explores the possibilities of language, employing it as a powerful and sophisticated instrument, her aim to explore difference. The analysis aims at demonstrating how the intertextual elements, literary references and allusions as well as genre syncretism are all employed by the author in order to reflect the polymorphous nature of storytelling, thus developing the short story form. Julia Kristeva's concepts of abject and semiotic, genre and intertextuality theories, as well as Nancy K. Miller's concept of arachnologies will be employed in the discussion. I would like to propose an overview of the motifs in the selected works of fiction, employing comparative practice to this end, and looking at the 2010 collection *Mud: Stories of love and sex* in the context of Roberts' other works, comparing their generic features, and finally attempting some general conclusions.

When the collection was published in 2010, it received considerable critical acclaim. In her review of the volume Stevie Davies (2010) writes that

> Roberts brings art and artifice, the artefact of gender, the style of couture and cuisine up against the raw matter from which culture is forged. Feminist themes prevail: through invoking and subverting classic Victorian texts – Madame Bovary, George Sand's novels, Jane Eyre – the collection examines women's freedom from provocative angles... 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.

The above quotation highlights some of Roberts' main concerns, such as gender constructs, subversiveness, women writers and characters. Roberts advocates the gynocritical[2] approach to the history of literature, foregrounding the forgotten, the neglected, the disenfranchised, and the misunderstood. Allowing them to speak, she imaginatively continues the tradition of Jean Rhys and Angela Carter. Susanne Gruss (2009: 248) writes about Roberts and Carter that "both produce re-visions of women who have lost their voice, write their biographies, and expound the impossibility of recovering what has been lost". Indeed, Roberts acknowledges the presence of Carter's ghost lingering in her writing as Elaine Showalter (2009: 270) confirms, quoting Roberts: "She's become a liberating example to those of us who've come just after her". Gruss (2009: 7) makes a rather bold claim that Roberts is less radical than Carter, arguing that she makes "a use of tradition to nourish and generate new writing". Roberts' stories demonstrate the liberation in various ways: the ingenuity of literary devices, the deployment of intertextual elements and the inventiveness of the form. The influence of the feminist movement is something that Roberts herself elaborates on in her memoir, *Paper houses*, where she relates her early activism in the 1970s. Clare Hanson (2000: 229) recognises: "Roberts is one of a generation of British women writers profoundly affected by the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s", adding, "Feminism provided the terms through which identity could be tested, questioned, and challenged, but was itself questioning and fluid – hence the diversity of the fiction it inspired". Similarly to other female authors, such as Angela Carter mentioned above, but also Jeanette Winterson, and Marina Warner, Roberts employs feminist reading strategies to revise tales and retell them from a new perspective, offering renewed versions of many stories, which is at the centre of such texts as *The looking glass*, *During mother's absence*, *Flesh and blood*.

Subversive, feminist storytelling is also a principle preoccupation of the short story collection, *Mud: Stories of love and sex* (2010), where the eponymous mud offers various meanings: its texture, fragility, suggesting plasticity, short-lasting impressions and ephemerality, but also dirt stick-

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[2] Gynocritics is a term coined by Elaine Showalter in her essay "Towards a feminist poetics" (1979). It is a field of study concerned with women as writers aimed at establishing a distinctly female literary tradition.

ing to shoes, covering them, seeping from (and into) permeable borders, oozing out. It leaves a trace that is impermanent and delible; it is shapeless, but may be formed. As Roberts demonstrates, mud as a theme is also a substance of literature and identity, offering infinite possibilities of creating and malleating, incessant intertextuality, whose immense potential is demonstrated by the texts. Subversively, it also stresses another important aspect of Roberts' writing, namely sensuality: mud made word, stressing a down-to-earth existence, represented by mud-caked skirts and shoes. Mud may take different forms, its initial formlessness turning into a shape. At times it resembles bodily fluids, the other, incorporated, yet rejected bringing to mind the abject described by Julia Kristeva (1984: 2), who sees it as "the jettisoned object... radically excluded", somewhere at the borders of the self. What causes abjection is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules, the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1984: 4).

For instance, in "Honeymoon blues", mud metamorphoses into vomit, but at the same time it resembles the protagonist's name – Maud – that is a near-homonym. Mud is also undeniably present in Venice, which features in "Remembering George Sand" and "Honeymoon blues", with its overwhelming smell of silt and its ceaseless sedimentation process, like literary traces or palimpsests. In "Sleepers" there is Jane Eyre, the ghosts of Thornfield, and the author imagines Adèle. Also, there is the ghost of Emile Zola in "Easy as ABC" opening with a sentence: "Nana, let me tell you a story" (Roberts 2010: 129). It may also refer to *nostalgie de la boue*, that is "longing for an uncivilized, savage and indulgent life", "means ascribing higher spiritual values to people and cultures considered "lower" than oneself, the romanticization of the faraway primitive which is also the equivalent of the lower class close to home" (Pasztory); "a desire for or attraction to crudity, vulgarity, depravity, etc., yearning to wallow in something that is seen as low and filthy"; longing for the mud. Combining high and low thus means defying hierarchical thinking, a subversion of established categories, the opposite of binary oppositions. It is not an abstract term, and as Roberts writes, "Abstract words separated things" (Roberts 2007: 278). It is physical, and may represent what Kristeva terms the semiotic, i.e. closer to the originary language of communication, "the instinctual semiotic, preceding meaning and signification,

mobile, amorphous" (Kristeva 1984: 49). This aspect of Roberts' writing will be addressed to in more detail later in this paper.

Gruss (2009: 131) confirms the presence of the French philosopher in Roberts' writing, arguing "Kristeva's concepts of maternal pain and the semiotic prove fruitful as background reading for Roberts' most experimental novel to date, *Flesh and blood*, which prompts the reader to participate actively in the construction of the text". Roberts often stresses the importance of maternal connection. In the collection of essays *On food, sex and God* she writes about absence:

> My myth of speaking and writing (a myth, an explanation on the level of poetry, a psychic 'truth') is that we learn to use language as a kind of birth into absence. The mother, the all-giving breast, is not there: out of terrible feelings of physical pain, rage felt in the body, we learn to say "I want", to try and summon back the life-giving presence which nourishes us and without which we die.... Into this emptiness comes the desire to make something: the words of desire themselves, images of desire, images of the beloved body we fear may have destroyed with our biting, wanting, greedy neediness. Out of this chaos of feeling, out of this overwhelming sadness at absence, we learn to create something beautiful: our words, later on our gifts, later still our works of art. We re-create the mother inside ourselves, over and over again (Roberts 1998: 20-21).

The above passage demonstrate Roberts' creative approach to language, which replaces the primary sensual understanding, fills the gap, creating a bridge between the pre-verbal experience and the intellectual, rational faculties. The effort of creating something from absence described in the passage above, which involves re-creating the lost reality and playing with language has a mythopoetic function.

Not all is lost, however. Faced with these narratives, the readers are encouraged to employ their children's imagination, in which "bit of refuse form treasures. Children's minds work magic, transforming mud-coated rubbish into gems" ("Remembering George Sand", 112). The immense creative power to imagine, to create something out of nothing is both the writer's and the reader's task. The theme of imagination returns in Roberts' essays where she highlights its role:

> I'm suggesting that the place of imagination is at the heart of each of us, at the heart of culture, of society. It's the place inside us where we hold and contain a kind of thinking which re-members how we were children and still can be: non-rational, wanting to make and give gifts, playful, aggressive, destructive, sad, repartive, joyful. It's a safe place, in which to let go of old certainties, let boundaries dissolve, experience the kind of chaos necessary for new life, new ideas. It's a space we need inside our culture, a space we need to hold our children in, contain them safely in while they fight and learn. If we stay in touch with our own imagination, our own unconscious, our own autobiography, our own childhood, we are more tender towards our own children (Roberts 1998: 22).

The readers are invited to wonder, to immerse themselves in "the receptive state of marvelling", as Marina Warner (1994: xvi) puts it. Reading becomes an originary experience, genuine and intuitive, not contaminated by imposed references and readings.

The employment of the afore-mentioned reading strategies helps Roberts develop and rework the short story genre in an innovative manner, offering a highly inventive structure. The composition of the book invites the reader to stroll, following the verb *flâner*, to walk without a purpose, taking one's time, with no hurry, to wander around. As V.S. Pritchett (1976: 424), a British short story writer and critic states, short stories enable "a glancing view", and it is best done wandering around. It is a *flâneur* narrative, going in circles, meandering (Roberts 2007: 6), bringing ghosts of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin to mind. In stories from the collection *Mud: Stories of sex and love*, there are *flâneuses* in flip-flops, which play against the conventional idea that there were only *flâneurs*, not *flâneuses* – as Roberts writes "only men were *flâneurs*" (Roberts 2007: 185), as women were street walkers. It also brings to mind "Fluency", a short story from the collection *Playing sardines*, in which the narrator, a *flâneuse* in her sixties, wanders around London streets only to find herself in Paris, wondering if she would ever meet Simone de Beauvoir's ghost.

Yet, another meaning of the verb *flâner* is employed, namely, literary *flâneurie*, here combined with *bricolage.* In this respect, Roberts employs the possibilities of the short story, an elusive form, which "charmingly resists definitions" (Brosch 2007: 9). The inventive generic heterogeneity of all Roberts' texts is a marked feature and has already been pointed out by Gruss and Falcus. It is certainly a marked feature of the collection, *Mud:*

Stories of sex and love, and it offers a continuation of the generic mixture present in the previous novels and short story collections. As Falcus (2007: 231) writes, "Roberts' texts have always blurred the boundaries of genre from the mixing of short stories and novels, to the use of auto-biographical material and the movement between different genres in the same text, as in *The book of Mrs Noah*"; and further "Both *Reader, I married him* and *Playing sardines* continue this stylistic experimentation" (Falcus 2007: 231-223). Falcus (2007: 233) claims that *Reader, I married him* is a mosaic of generic elements taken from "crime story, romance, travelogue, erotic novel and farce", and Gruss (2009: 241) adds that even the title is recharged with a double meaning: "it aligns Roberts's text with Brontë's famous romance, but provides the story of what happens after the marriage". As the critics notice, genre is fluid and unstable in these texts

> boundaries are uncertainly defined, as a text such as *Flesh and blood* could just as easily be named a collection of short stories as a novel, and *Impossible saints* embodies both of these forms as it weaves short stories of the saints among the longer narrative of its own saint. This instability is further exploited by the nature of Roberts's language, which verges on the poetic even in her prose texts (Falcus 2007: 12).

Roberts also writes about abolishing boundaries, these "rigid separations between sorts of writing" (Roberts 1998: 14), in order to find better connections between self and the world. This is demonstrated in the instability of genre, a marked feature of her other texts, for instance the novel *In the red kitchen* which offers a generic mixture (mystery novel, psychological thriller, pastiche of Victorian novel), interweaving female experience, and demonstrating striking convergence which goes beyond time and place.

This generic playfulness present in Roberts' writing is characteristic of feminist writing, as Lidia Curti (1998) suggests in her essay "'D' for difference: Gender, genre, writing", in which she approaches genre theory from a feminist angle. Since "d" is the only difference between genre and gender and it is always there "in presence/absence" (Curti 1998: 31), it indicates "the imperfect closure between genre and gender, and within each of the two: the boundaries between genres constantly redefined through the endless play of repetition and difference, the boundary masculine/feminine forever open and constantly deferred" (Curti 1998: 31).

Thus Curti (1998: 30) stresses the fact that fluidity governs genre theory, claiming that the relation between genre and gender has become "an important aspect of experimental contemporary fiction". Further, she writes that "In recent narrative, the blurring and transgression of boundaries, the conscious play with these and other formal constraints has found a focus in the break-up of a fixed notion of genre, in connection with the changes in the notions of gender difference" (Curti 1998: 30). She argues that women's novels in particular have proved efficient in introducing "interrogations or travesties of genres" (Curti 1998: 30). This is confirmed by the inventive transformations present in Roberts' texts mentioned above.

Another marked feature of Roberts' prose writing is a well-established concept of intertextuality coined by Julia Kristeva in her essay "Word, dialogue, novel", who incorporates Saussure's theory of language and draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism to develop her own theory. She writes that "an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*" (Kristeva 1986: 37). According to Gruss (2009: 7), much of feminist authors "offer pleasure in their highly intertextual revisions and reversions of culture and tradition and their discussions of feminist discourse" and it is also a feature of Roberts' writing. For instance, *Reader, I married him* studded with references to *Middlemarch*, D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster's *A room with a view*, and Jung's texts. In her memoir she alludes to *éducation sentimentale* by Gustave Flaubert, referring to the French context once more (Roberts 2007: 22). And as Falcus (2007: 229) notes, "Hauntings – textual and physical – dominate *The mistressclass* and symbolise the project of historiography. Women and men are haunted by memory, myth and history in all of Roberts' novels, but these hauntings are subjective and unstable, as is the past itself". As fiction and literary characters, so are history and historical characters equally important in Roberts' writing. Roberts' novels and short stories require a good knowledge of history and culture. Aurora, the first-person narrator of *Reader, I married him* is well-read, she is "an unconventional chick lit heroine – and the novel is too self-conscious in its use of the generic conventions to be 'real' formulaic fiction" (Gruss 2009: 240-241): there are numerous references to *Mansfield Park, Pride and prejudice, A room with*

a view, and *Middlemarch*, including to *Jane Eyre* in the title. Active readers will easily recognise the palimpsest of texts that comes into making Roberts' prose writing, after the undergoing numerous playful metamorphoses.

Transformation and transgression are a recurrent theme of Roberts' texts. The introduction of the motif of metamorphosis prove the allusion to the fairy-tale genre as "shape-shifting is one of fairy-tale's dominant and characteristic wonders" (Warner 1994: xv). For instance, in the story "God's house" bodily boundaries are being abolished as the narrator describes how her body fuses with the garden and grass on the ground, becoming one: "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" ("God's house", 329). When her mother dies, the narrator's grief engenders a bodily transformation:

> 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 language of the body, incorporated and flowing, unstable, volatile, is one of Roberts' major preoccupations. She writes in her memoir: "Alongside my novel I continued to write poetry and through poems I discovered a sort of language that let me live, the language of the body, expressed in metaphor. Metaphors connected the inner world to the outer world, opened them up to each other, connected conscious to unconscious. City could flow into self and self into city. That was how I experienced life, walking around" (Roberts 2007: 141). The above quotation aptly reflects Roberts' method of fusing inner and outer reality, inviting the outside inside, transgressing boundaries. Here again echoes of Kristeva's semiotic are present, suggesting the unrepresentable *parler femme*, an originary pre-verbal experience, and foregrounding an image of sensuality in writing.

Sensuality and sensory perception in Roberts' writing are foregrounded by Elaine Feinstein, in her review of the collection, as she pays special attention to the way gustation is present in Roberts' stories:

> This is a delicious book, to be savoured mouthful by mouthful like caviar – or perhaps as a child comes to know the world, by stuffing every object we encounter into our mouths. For that is how these stories work. Black suede shoes "look good enough to eat"; a handful of moist earth or the rich, squidgy mud itself demands to be relished intensely by all senses (Feinstein 2010).

Undeniably, the sense of taste plays an important role in Roberts' writing, which Ralf Hertel (2005: 132) explains as "an attempt to appropriate France literarily and come to terms with her continental origins", calling it "her obsession with the gustatory". Senses and sensuality as opposed to reason and intellect play a vital part in Roberts' writing, returning to originary language and semiotic, as has been mentioned above.

Furthermore, the insistence on perceptions foreground corporeality as in Roberts' writing the text frequently stands for the body, *un corps morcelé*, a body in pieces, which overcomes the mirror stage, resulting in the construction and subversion of various textual "wholes", which includes the body as text. For instance, Roberts writes about parts of her book as "'sections' because I saw the text as a body that had been cut up and damaged" (Roberts 2007: 159). This evokes *écriture féminine* with the ghosts of (still alive) of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva,[3] as a project of the second-wave feminists, who tried to find stylistic markers typical of woman's writing. The concept was coined by Hélène Cixous, who in her manifestoes "The laugh of the Medusa" and "Sorties" opposes Lacan's suggestion that if "the symbolic (social order) is conceived through language, then it follows that language is masculine, articulating a male ideology and a male view of the world" (Tolan 2006: 335). In *Entre l'écriture*, Cixous (1986: 69) writes about "la féminité d'un texte" conferring gender on it. Tolan (2006: 335) clarifies that:

> *Ēcriture féminine* was described as a uniquely feminine style of writing, characterized by disruptions in the text: gaps, silences, puns, rhythms,

[3] Hélène Cixous, "The laugh of the Medusa" (1975); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the other woman* (1974); Julia Kristeva, *Stabat Mater* (1986).

> and new images all signal *écriture féminine*. It is eccentric, incomprehensible, and inconsistent, and if such writing is difficult or frustrating to read, it is because the feminine voice has been repressed for so long, and can only speak in a borrowed language, that it is unfamiliar when it is heard.

As Showalter notices, the French adjective *féminine* may signify writing related to the female body as well as "a 'feminine' avant-garde stylistics available to both sexes, and employing such techniques as gaps, breaks, questions, metaphors of excess, double or multiple voices, broken syntax, repetitive or cumulative rather than linear structure; and open endings" (Showalter 1990: 187-188). Similarly to French feminists mentioned above, a famous American feminist critic Nancy K. Miller criticizes poststructuralist theories of language, including the concepts of textuality and intertextuality (Allen 2000: 155). In a much-discussed gynocritical approach Miller argues that the concept of intertextuality does not include gender difference since in poststructural theories of the text the sex both of the author and the reader is not important (Miller 1986: 104). Miller opposes Barthes's theory of the vanishing author of the text which is connected with a web and weaving, named hyphology (Miller 1986: 271). She coins her own theory and names it "arachnology" after the brilliant weaver from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Arachne, transformed by Athena into a spider. Arachne stands in opposition to the effacement of the female author and the privileged position the male author has always possessed. Miller points out the "gendered nature of the concept of intertextuality" (Allen 2000: 159). She claims that the author does not disappear as she creates the text and weaves its fabric, pointing to "the interpretation and reappropriation of a story" (Miller 1986: 272). What is interesting in the context of the present discussion, Miller (1986: 273) points that Arachne's story "evokes a bodily substance".

Susan Stanford Friedman (1991: 158) argues that Miller "reintroduces the spider as author, as subject, as agent, as gendered body, as producer of the text" and "refuses to accept the concept of anonymity that Barthes, Foucault, and Kristeva promote in their version of intertextuality". The motif of text as a web is present in Roberts' writing who writes in her memoir *Paper houses*: "I dreamed my way through webs of images and re-wove them into story-nets" (Roberts 2007: 333). The focus on texture and textuality, alluding to arachnologies, highlights plurality: this is the

type of intertextuality present in *Mud: Stories of sex and love*, in which the text becomes a weaving of other texts, a textile suggesting a web, without engulfing its strong voices, powerful first-person narratives. The plurality of beings involves ghosts, which people Roberts' books, offering textual and literary hauntings, which are made present in these narratives.

Though an unlikely combination, ghosts and mud have something in common: both may represent characters, who are unwelcome, rejected, forgotten. Roberts' texts include female voices which have been excised, erased, or silenced or ignored. The interlacing of female lives highlights the aspect of self-creation, which is aided by invention and imagination and opposed the incorporation of women's stories into the stories of men. The stories are powerful evocations of the feminist philosophy in their recalling of absent women and eventually giving them the opportunity to speak for themselves, simultaneously offering a deconstruction of the traditional attitudes towards the female issue. Roberts deploys the power of storytelling, and she challenges the standard viewpoint, undermining former versions of stories and offering new ones from their own perspective. In these texts, power is relegated almost entirely to the female voice. Many voices invite themselves in as is described in the passage from *Ignorance*: "The story stirred in me, wanted to jump out and fill the room. Fragments of the past, like dying cinders in a mound of grey ash, made a faint glow. Ghosts shuffled in, formed a crowd of shapes standing round me" (Roberts 2012: 231). Yet, these are "robust ghosts" (Roberts 1995: 5), rather than ghouls, which haunt the stories, offering their individual versions, speaking against erasure. As John Berger (2005: 141) writes, ghosts from the past always keep a rendez-vous, there is "An absence – after the departure of the dead – but not abandonment".

Conjuring literary ghosts, Roberts stresses the indomitable power of storytelling, but also the very sources of fiction. As she reminds us in *On food, sex and God*: "Language is founded upon absence", and fiction creates a presence "crucially connected with absence, an absence that can be felt as insistently material" (Roberts 1998: 12-13). Roberts makes presences out of absences, filling gaps: "The multiplicity of meanings, truths, convinces me far more deeply than any single one. Just as words appear to tell the truth and yet make it up, so words tell not one truth but many. Truths: complex, slippery, changeable, fluid" (Roberts 1998: 13). In the above quotation Roberts foregrounds her postructuralist and post-

modern influences, stressing the plurality of truths, and foregrounding the polyphonic nature of history and present reality.

Roberts employs the all-embracing potential that stories represent to metamorphose from the earthy and the sensual, demonstrating that meaning is not fixed, but flows freely, resembling mud flow. Stressing the unstable meaning, as well as the need to re-shape and re-present, Roberts highlights the plasticity of stories, this changeable identity represented by the eponymous mud. Their status enables the author to introduce the exercises in subverting practices as the stories are represented as morphing into myriad possibilities. Frequently playful, embedding myths, stories and folk tales in her writing, Roberts proves that they constantly undergo the process of reformulation, due to their malleability: they can be shaped and formed, constantly rewritten and reinterpreted. Thus, her texts uncover more and more information in the form of mud deposits. She employs this immense creative potential and the innumerable literary ghosts to suggest continuation and innovation, rewriting, and reworking. Her work is tied in with summoning the forgotten, the neglected, the omitted.

To conclude, *Mud: Stories of sex and love* engages in two activities: *flâneurie* and *bricolage*, inviting the reader to do the same, i.e. *flâner et bricoler, flâner en bricolant, bricoler en flânant*. Roberts has gathered collectibles, literary memorabilia, sought by many readers, and by applying various textual strategies, such as ambiguity, intertextual elements, literary references and allusions, genre syncretism, she destabilizes and debunks obsolete views. Mud, this suspension, a mixture of water, containing particles of soil, silt, and clay, suspends meaning, preventing it from becoming definite and fixed. Plurality stressed in these stories concerns literary forms, as Roberts combines both tradition and innovation, her work to re-imagine and re-invent. The polyphony and polyvalence foreground the polymorphous nature of storytelling, thus expanding the short story form. As Roberts (2007: 6) writes, what initially may seem like muddle and mess, turns into stories. She is not afraid to get her hands and feet muddy, offering us mud made word in the end.

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II

RE-MEMBERED THROUGH TEXTS: WOMEN AND WRITING IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

GENDER AND REPRESENTATIONAL VIOLENCE IN OLD ENGLISH *JUDITH*

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Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry concentrates on men and their performance of their identities as warriors. The Old English *Judith* (composed around the end of the tenth century and preserved in London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv or the so-called *Beowulf*-manuscript from the early eleventh century) is unique, as it features a female figure, who is directly involved in a political and military conflict. Judith as the heroine of the poem differs from her earlier representations whether in the Biblical Book of Judith or its subsequent retellings and patristic commentaries on its Biblical source. Her identity as a chaste widow is not the focus of the Old English poet, although her chastity may have been mentioned in the poem's lost beginning. On the contrary, Judith in the poem acts as a warrior and her maid, a mere ancillary in the source, accompanies Judith in their joint heroic endeavour. Although Holofernes is characterised by lust, Judith's virtue is not essential to her identity in the Old English poem. Instead, she is unwomanised in the poem. In contrast to her heroic behaviour, the Assyrians and their chief Holofernes, who invaded Bethulia, Judith's native city, are demasculinised and represented as weaklings.

The foregoing analysis of the Old English poetic adaptation of *Liber Iudith* has two objectives. Its first aim is to explore the ways in which the contrasting characterisation of Judith and Holofernes is used to define and produce the notions of gender as performance within the bounds of heroic culture. It will turn to Judith's Butler performativity theory and Thomas Laqueur one-sex model of sexuality to explore the notion of femininity in *Judith.* The article offers a feminist reading of *Judith* and discusses it as

an inherently deconstructive text whose representational violence reveals and deconstructs the conventional notions on gender in the Christianised patriarchal and heroic society of the late Anglo-Saxon England. The scene of Holofernes's decapitation in the poem reflects and inverts, arguably, the textual symbolic violence that refuses Judith her own construction of her gender as a woman. Also, the article will revisit Roman Jakobson's concepts of metaphor and metonymy to study the poem as a textual allegory. It will also use Derrida's idea of free play to show how the tension between metaphoric and metonymic modes of representation reflect another tension inherent in the poem: the tension between the metaphoric centre that controls the reader's response to the poem and metonymic rupture that deconstructs the textual strategies on which the poem's compositional integrity and ideological conformity rely. Finally, Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance will be referred to in order to explore the constructed nature of gender in the poem as essential to its ideological Christian message that controls the reader's reception. The overall aim of this article is to explore the trace of femininity behind the masculinised representation of Judith: what does the placing of Judith in the centre of the poem's heroic action reveal about the literary representations of women in Old English literature?

The notion of gender as social, cultural and political relations between men and women that informs the cultural and ideological context of the poem may be used to deconstruct the differences between men and women held to be natural in the early medieval culture. The representation of gender in Old English *Judith* is, however, very complex. The patristic interpretation of Judith as either tropologically representing chastity or typologically standing for *Ecclesia* had been valid for centuries and well known in Anglo-Saxon England by the time of the poem composition. As will be shown below, church fathers interpreted Judith as a tropological representation of chastity. The immediate cultural context of the poem, however, is the Germanic heroic code. As a matter of fact, the poem does not seem to follow any of the allegorical or tropological interpretation of the Biblical Book of Judith. Judith's identity as a chaste widow is not central to the poem's themes and some essential narrative and thematic elements of the source that according to exegetes required non-literal interpretation are simply cut from the Old English poetic adaptation. The cultural context to which the representation of gender fit is, instead, the Anglo-Saxon heroic culture. In contrast to Aldhelm's *De Virginitate,* Ael-

fric's of Eynsham's Letter to Sigeward and his own homily on the Book of Judith, the context of the poem's composition is heroic rather than strictly religious.

When it comes the way Judith is represented, the poet removes almost all the descriptive details from his source, which characterise Judith as wise and pious Jewess and then as a seductress, whose deceptive wiles are justified as tactics to destroy the national enemy[1]. The scant descriptive epithets that exist in the poem are part of Old English alliterative inventory of poetic formulas. In the Old English versified version, Judith emerges as a heroine who sets an example to the Bethulian warriors, by whom she is subsequently bettered. The poem transposes the masculine gender role from the Assyrians onto Judith, who is later emulated by her compatriots. The masculine gender in the poem is shifted from the Assyrians to Judith and from Judith to Bethulian warriors.

The argument of the present paper rests on the one-sex model of gender described by Thomas Laqueur in *Making sex: Body and gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1990). Laqueur demonstrates that the ancient and early medieval medical writings understand sex difference in terms of degree. Before the Enlightenment, he argues, men and women were "arrayed according to their degree of their metaphysical perfection, their vital heat, along the axis whose telos was male" (Laqueur 1990: 6).[2] As for Germanic culture and literature, Laqueur's model of sexuality was already applied by Carol Clover (2006) to Old Norse sagas, the earliest of which postdate the Old English period by some three hundred years[3]. The aim of this article is to show that the concept of one sex speaks to the Old English heroic poetry as well. The model of sexuality that Thomas Laqueur proposes informs much of the Christian writings, especially those that concern female saints. It was a patristic commonplace to claim that wom-

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1 Jerome provides an additional verse in his Vulgate translation of the Hebrew Book of Judith, in which he supplies a justification for Judith's actions and which mitigates any implication of lust on her part 10:4.

2 As Thomas Laqueur (1990: 26) observes, Galen claimed that men and women have essentially the same bodies with the same genitals. The difference is that women have their genital organs inside, men outside. Every genital organ within the female body has a counterpart in male genitals; "Women, in other words, are inverted, hence less perfect, men".

3 Carol Clover (2006: 397) gives examples from Norse Sagas to show that "Norse society operated according to one-sex model – that there was one sex and it was male. More to the point, there was finally just one "gender," one standard by which persons were judged adequate or inadequate, and it was something like masculine".

en can achieve moral perfection and sanctity only through the ultimate rejection of femininity. In his prose version of the treatise *De Verginitate* composed at the beginning of the eighth century in Anglo-Saxon England, Aldhelm addresses the community of nuns at Barking, to whom the entire work is dedicated, in the following terms:

> Virgins of Christ and raw recruits of the Church must therefore fight with muscular energy against the horrendous monsters of Pride and at the same time against those seven wild beasts of the virulent vices, who with rabid molars and venomous bicuspids strive to mangle violently whoever is unarmed and despoiled of the breastplace of virginity and stripped of the shield of modesty (*De Verginiate*, 68).

The warfare against the seven deadly sins is depicted by Aldhelm as a heroic endeavour that requires masculine strength; the virgin who qualifies to undertake it changes into a *Miles Christi,* who is capable of acting manly. The early medieval adaptations of Old Testament narratives follow this patristic ideal of femininity and masculinity. The Christian commentators who read the Book of Judith through the lenses of exegetic methodology emphasised in the story what was most essential to their contemporary ideas on gender relations and conformed their adaptations of *Liber Iudith* to the ideals of moral perfection they sought to promote.

It is evident that the Old English versified adaptation's textual strategies refuses to represent Judith as woman, because the poem's authorial voice refuses to acknowledge the individual's power to construct his or her own gender. First, gender is presented in terms of degree, as in Thomas Laquerer model. Second, the femininity of its female agents is absent, or hidden, from the narrative. The textual strategies that inform the poem's composition reflect the textual misrepresentation of gender. *Judith* programmatically misrepresents femininity, as the text resists the representation of an attempt to construct one's own gender. Judith's transgressive act of decapitation of Holofernes, who is a figure of male authority, is the act of constructing one's gender identity and Judith's violence is an inversion of the textual misrepresentation that suppresses and contains her femininity. Judith's act may be construed as deferral of the closure that the text is imposing on the reader, as it constitutes a rupture threatening the stability of the patriarchal centre in Derridean terms. This argument reflects Jacques Derrida's idea of play of discourse that he voiced in "Structure, sign and play in discourse of the human science" (1967). Ac-

cording to him, the structure of discourse is made coherent by the centre that lies both within and outside it. The role of the centre is

> ... not only to orient, balance, and organise the structure – one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganised structure – but above all to make sure that the organising principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure. By orienting and organising the coherence of the system, the centre of the structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form (Derrida [1967] 2005: 352).

Judith's transgressive act is represented in terms of Derridean play of discourse. Although it is the source of rupture that threatens the patriarchal order that the poem endorses, it is, in turn, contained and redirected by the patriarchal centre that controls the terms in which she is represented as woman. Derrida's observation that "the centre also closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible" is at work in the poem.

Judith is a poem in which there exists a play of distinct modes of making meaning and controlling the reader's reception of the text. Roman Jakobson differentiates between the metonymic and metaphoric poles of meaning. In the metonymic structure, separate and often incongruous elements co-exist, while in a structure dominated by the metaphoric bent all the elements are dependent on one another on the principle of similarity and mutual correspondence (Jakobson 1971: 255-256). Jakobson recognises epic and realistic fiction as metonymically oriented. In novel, for example, "the realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synechdichic detail" (Jakobson 1971: 255). In *Language, sign, and gender in* Beowulf (1990), Gillian R. Overing adapts Roman Jakobson's distinction between metonymy and metaphor to differentiate between metaphoric and a metonymic models of reading Old English poetry. In the metaphoric mode of signification, the tension resulting from the dyad of meaning is resolved into a third encompassing element in Hegelian terms (Overing 1990: 8). When it comes to the metonymic mode of signification, "meaning is a joint function of the infinite play of differences and the potential of its infinite deferral" (Overing 1990: 7). According to Overing (1990: 6), "an essential characterstic of the metonymic mode, which differentiates it from metaphor, is its resistance to closure, resolution – in fact, to interpretation in the sense of defining and deciding

meaning".[4] In Jakobsionian terms, there is a seemingly contradictory relationship between the metonymic, i.e. contiguity-based, relationship between its subversive gender representation and patriarchal ideology and the metaphor closure that resolves binary oppositions present in the poem. In Deridean terms, metonymy dissolves the centre of a structure and makes a play of contingent elements possible, while metaphor fixes meaning around a stable centre. Gillian Overing claims that Old English poetry is of metonymic bent, while Christian vision is largely metaphoric.[5] In *Judith*, while the heroic nature of Old English poetry, which pertains to the heroic content of poem, is rich in metonymic and synechdochic detail, Christian ideology imposes an exegetical methodology of reading texts that is to a large extent bent on the metaphorical pole; exegesis favours the fixity of meaning over the freedom of interpretation.

It is proposed here that in *Judith* there is a tension between the metaphoric and metonymic levels of signification and that this tension results in a double perspective on gender in the poem. The poem's authorial voice, of course, struggles to contain and suppress the notion of a free agent by controlling the reader's response. However, although the text appears to direct the reader's response to follow the metaphoric terms of interpretation as it eventually compromises Judith's achievement and substitutes her with (male) heroes, there is a latent metonymic level that deconstructs the metaphoric centre and refutes its presence. The possibility of the metonymic dynamic that lies behind Judith and her maid performance questions the oppositions which structure the poem's narrative.

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[4] According to Overing (1990: 7), metonymy rests on the imagery of weaving in that it allows a multiplicity of "connections and open-ended ongoing movement". Overing (1990: 6) identifies Old English poetry "in post-modernist terms as a discourse mode without a centre, one that functions without a fixed, privileged reference point, or 'transcendental signifier' – Derrida's term for that which encompasses and defines all elements of signification within a discourse".

[5] Gillian Overing (1990: 9) suggests that "the pagan heroic worldview metonymically emphasizes the individual's present achievement, values the moment salvaged from a transitory life and the inevitable flux of fortune. This immediate world is all there is; it is the ongoing and sole context for interpretation. The Christian vision is essentially metaphoric in that all present meaning is gauged in terms of the hereafter, the promise of punishment and reward, the future effect or meaning of actions; one thing is always seen in terms of another, the physical present is always interpreted in relation to an all-encompassing spiritual reality that dictates and postpones its validation (Overing 1990: 9).

Turning to Judith Butler's ideas on gender performativity, the very fact that Judith may take on the appearance of masculine gender is itself deconstructive, as it reveals the constructed nature of gender in the heroic world. Their performance points to the artifice of the structural oppositions. The way Judith and her maid construct their (male) gender matches Judith's Butler notion of gender performativity. In *Gender trouble*, Butler defines gender as "the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler [2008] 1990: 45). In the third chapter of *Gender trouble*, she argues that the very existence of parodic identities like drag queens in the contemporary culture points to the constructed nature of gender that easily lends itself to parody and pastiche. She claims that gender identity is a fiction that arises as "a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct an illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody mechanisms of such constructions" (Butler [2008] 1990: 189). Judith's gender performance may be understood in terms of the parodic imitation of the available gender constructions. Her violent act against Holofernes is the inversion of the representational/textual violence that misrepresents femininity in the Christian Anglo-Saxon textual culture and allows her to leave a trace of femininity that is otherwise absent from the heroic world of the poem.

Judith in the Old English poem is in no way idealised as a chaste woman. In *Liber Iudith*, Joachim praises her for her courage: "quia fecisti viriliter, et confortatum est cor tuum, eo quod castitatem amaveris, et post virum tuum, alterum nescieris" 'you acted manfully and your heart was strengthened, because you loved chastity and after the death of your husband you did not take another' (*Liber Iudith* 15: 11).[6] The Old English author places even greater emphasis on her courage, as Judith's actions are qualified as manly and heroic throughout the entire poem. When she is idealised, she is praised for her courage and faith[7]. The qualities she rep-

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[6] Henceforth indicated as Book of Judith and followed by verse number. All quotations taken from *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* [1969] 2007. (Edited by Robert Weber and Roger Gryson.) (The fifth edition.) Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

[7] David Chamberlain (1975) provides explores both Judith and Holofernes' characterisation in detail. He demonstrates that Judith's chastity and widowhood are deemphasised in the poem, because these qualities are not essential to the depiction of the situation of Anglo-Saxon noble households "responsible for defending the kingdom, in

resents combine physical prowess and wisdom. She is "ferhðgleawe" 'wise' (*Judith* ll. 41), "gleaw on geðonce" 'discerning in thought' (*Judith* ll. 13) and a "snoteran idese [accusative form]" 'wise lady' (*Judith* ll. 55). More than this, Judith's characterisation draws upon poetic representation of ideal warriors. The decorations and adornments that Judith is wearing are depicted as armour[8].

The kind of behaviour that Judith exemplifies and for which she is praised is the behaviour suitable to warriors. Judith's intelligence as well as the virility that she assumes is the very opposite of what her enemies represent. While Judith does not appear to encapsulate chastity, Holofernes, her adversary, represents lust. His characterisation, therefore, may appear to have been influenced by tropological and typological exegesis.[9] In patristic commentaries on the book of Judith, Holofernes is depicted as either typologically as *diabolus* (opposed to Judith representing *Ecclesia*) or tropologically as lust (Judith representing chastity). Jerome, the author

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which the most influential women would have been wives, not virgins or widows". "The poem clearly stresses faith, wisdom, courage, holiness, and beauty of Judith but not her chastity" (Chamberlain 1975: 155).

[8] In Hennesey Olsen's (1982: 289) view, Judith's "jewellery is described in terms of reminiscent of formulaic descriptions of armour". Damico (1984: 28) argues that Judith's characterisation in the poem is informed by the valkirie tradition; as in the Old Norse descriptions of valkyries, the Anglo-Saxon heroines like Juliana, Elene, Wealhtheow and Judith are portrayed as radiant women, whose descriptions foreground their apparel's metallic brightness. Like Wealhtheow, Judith is described as *goldhroden* 'gold-adorne'd. Damico (1984: 76) claims that "etymologically, the second element of the compound, *-hroden,* is apparently associated with military armaments and decorations".

[9] There have been many critics who argue for either tropological or allegorical interpretation of *Judith* or both. Jackson Campbell (1971: 172) thinks that "For minds thoroughly accustomed to figural interpretation, perception of action, emotion and allegorical meaning would probably have been simultaneous". Hennesey Olsen (1982) emphasises the political significance of the poem, claiming that it depicts the Vikings' violence against Anglo-Saxon women. Ann Aestel takes the battle between Assyrian and Bethulia to be a historical realisation of the eternal warfare between God and the devil. She turns to the seven rules of the Roman historian Tychonius, which are reported by St Augustine in *Civitas Dei.* According to Tychonius's conception of history, "historical figures must be seen ... as the timely exponents of the divine or demonic head to whom they have allied themselves" (Aestel 1889: 119). John Hermann (1989: 173) supports the reading of the conflict as allegorical, arguing the battle episode, which is the narrative invention of the Old English poem, is designed to facilitate the non-literal reading of the whole poem and says that the poem is explicitly tropological and implicitly allegorical.

of Vulgate, identifies Judith as chastity and Holofernes as lust: "Vincit viros femina, et castitas truncat libidinem" 'the woman conquers men and chastity beheads desire' (*Patrologia Latina* 22. 559). Jerome also develops an allegorical reading of the book, saying Judith typifies Church, as she "diabolum capite truncavit" 'beheaded the devil' (*Patrologia Latina* 22. 732). According to the author of a Latin homily once attributed to St Augustine of Hippo, "decepit sincera corruptum, fefellit casta pollutum, pudica peremit adulterum, sobria jugalat ebriosum" 'the clean deceived the perverted one, the chaste cheated the impure one, the virtuous the adulterous one, the sober one destroyed the drunk one' (*Patrologia Latina* 39: 1839-1840).

In the Old English *Judith,* Holofernes is lust impersonated. His promiscuity is emphasised in *Judith* and is far more essential to his characterisation here than in the Biblical source. When Holofernes had had Judith brought to his tent, "þohte ða beorhtan idese mid widle ond mid womme besmitan" 'he desired to destroy the bright lady with sin and filth' (*Judith* ll. 58-59). The stress on his libidinal desire stems partly from the impact of the tropological exegesis on the poem. It seems, however, that the Germanic concept of *dryht* and the ideal relationship between the chieftain and his retainers holds a stronger influence on the poem and informs the negative and ironic characterisation of Holofernes.

In the poem, Holofernes's lust is one of the symptoms of his failure to represent proper commandership. In Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition men's gender is qualified by their homosocial bonds with other men. In contrast to what an ideal commander should display, Holofernes prefers to go to sleep with Judith rather than stay with his army. Holofernes, dominated by sexual libido, represents a particular inversion of the ideal chieftain and warrior that is central to the Germanic heroic code.

> Gewat ða se deofulcunda,
> galferhð gumena ðreate
> bealofull his beddes neosan, þær he sceolde his blæd forleosan
> ædre binnan anre nihte;
>
> [The lascivious devil's follower went with the troop of companions to seek his bed, where he was to lose glory on the same night] (*Judith* ll. 61-64).

In the ideal *comitatus*, bonds between men, the homosocial relations, take precedence over heterosexual relationships. The identification that brings Holofernes close to a devilish fiend is conflated with the poet's insistence that he fails to embody the values of heroic code; he seeks Judith as his bed-companion not only out of his lust, but also because he is not mindful of the bonds that tie him to his retainers. The place where he is to lose his "blæd" 'glory' is specified as bed. It is also ironic that he is attended by his retainers on his way to the tent. His attendants are grouped as "gumena ðreate" 'a troop of men'. Holofernes is set apart from his warriors the way a hero never is. The male-female relationships are absent from the concerns of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry and were not central to the immediate didactic concern of minstrels, which was to set a proper heroic example to aristocratic warrior audiences. Holofernes is a bad warrior, because he is not concerned with the members of his *dryht*, who do not enjoy the feast with him and of whom they are afraid[10]. He tells them to drink for the entire day until they fall unconscious "swylce hie wæron deaðe geslegene" 'as if they were killed' (*Judith* l. 31); their sleep anticipates their death that is bound to result from swords and spears of Bethulians. What is more, it is expected that the ruler will be depicted as a generous ring-giver, but Holofernes is never described in this way; it is mention in the context of the feast that his companions are "agotene goda gehwylces" 'deprived of all good' (*Judith* l. 32).

It seems that in *Judith*, the depiction of Holofernes as a lustful sinner substitutes the conventional topos of male friendship and homosocial bonds of *comitatus*. Judith is idealised as wise and courageous, because she acts as man would. Contrastingly, Holofernes and his troop of soldiers are demasculinised. In general, Old English poetry portrays male bonds as intensely emotional. When Beowulf departs from Heorot, Hrothgar, crying, embraces the hero. Dockray-Miller (2006: 452) suggests that Hrothgar's behaviour transgresses the boundaries of what constitutes the normative model for male-male relations in Germanic society and that "his lack of emotional control" is indicative of his waning masculinity. David Clark (2009: 135), however, claims his emotional outbreak does not indicate homosexual desire. Clark argues that the portrayal of Hrothgar is positive and

[10] Hugh Magennis (1983: 336) points out that the feast scene that begins the poem's action is an ironic inversion of the Germanic feast: "the irony which lies in the discrepancy between the ideal Germanic feast scene and the unruly feast" in *Judith*.

"should be put in the same context as the intimate vertical bonds between Beowulf and Hygelac, and later Beowulf and Wiglaf". Clark (2009: 135) disagrees with Dockray-Miller's (2006: 448) opinion Hrothgar appears effeminate, because he leaves the male quarters and Heorot to share bed with Wealtheow. Although her opinion may not hold true as regards *Beowulf*, in the context of *Judith*, Holofernes suffers a degrading death in his bed rather than heroically dying killed by Bethulians.

In the poem, it is not Holofernes but Judith who acts as the warrior should.

> Wiggend stopon
> ut of ðam inne ofstum miclum,
> weras winsade, þe ðone wærlogan,
> laðne leodhatan, læddon to bedde
> nehstan siðe. Þa wæs nergendes
> þeowen þrymful, þearle gemyndig
> hu heo þone atolan eaðost mihte
> ealdre benæman ær se unsyfra,
> womfull, onwoce.
>
> [The soldiers stepped outside with great speed. They were leading the truce-breaker, the loathful leader [Holofernes] to bed. The maiden of the Lord was full of glory and mindful of how to find out the easiest way to deprive the enemy of life before the impure and sinful one is woken up] (*Judith* ll. 69-77).

The poet vividly contrasts the drunken Assyrians with Judith, who is always presented as wise and discerning in her actions. What is more, Holofernes is describes as "wærloga" 'a truce-breaker'. Although the passage was taken to indicate that the poet followed the typological reading of the Book of Judith, Holofernes standing for *diabolus* and Judith, "nergendes þeowen þrymful" 'the glorious handmaid of the Savior' as the figure of *Ecclesia Militans,* it rather complements earlier characterization of Holofernes as an inadequate commander. When he is finally placed in his tent, Holofernes lies on his bed so drunk "swa he nyste ræda nanne on gewitlocan", 'that he has no council in his mind' (*Judith* ll. 68-69). In contrast, Judith is characterised in accordance with the heroic tradition as a protagonist, who is in constant control of his mind and is praised for the integrity of intention and performance.

Holofernes's decapitation completes the poet's plan of characterization. The poem's first half records his progressive loss of authority. As a passive victim that falls prey to his own vices, he is contrasted to Judith throughout the first part of the poem. As for the second part of the poem, a similar process of diminution affects the character of Judith. While Holofernes is being emasculated throughout the poem, Judith is being depicted in masculine guise. In the part of the poem that follows the decapitation, Judith's heroism is subsumed under the ethics of heroic code under which terms she is shown to be less and less able to construct her identity as a woman. While Holforness's decapitation is the last stage of his loss of identity as a man, the rest of the poem records Judith's loss of her power to determine her femininity on her own terms.

First, the lord-retainer bond is applied to Judith and God to highlight the theme of faith understood in terms of heroic obligations. Judith is, anachronistically, "nergendes þeowen þrymful" 'the glorious maiden of the Savior/Christ' and prays to the Trinity, not to the God of monotheistic Judaism. Like Tacitus in *Germania* (AD 98), the author of *Judith* seems to differentiate between two separate heroic codes for lords and retainers[11]. Judith fights for the glory of God, not for her own. Before she strikes Holofernes, she prays to Triune God for physical prowess. As a result, "Þa wearð hyre rume on mode, haligre hyht geniwod" 'her mind was enlarged and hope renewed' (*Judith* ll. 96-97). On her arrival to Bethulia, she attributes the victory entirely to God (*Judith* ll. 185-186). God appears to be more directly involved in the events that take place in the poem than in the Biblical source and, accordingly Judith's agency is more limited in the Old English poem.

Secondly, Both Judith and her maid-servant, who is her accomplice in the overthrowing of the heathen leader, are termed "collenferhð" 'courageous' (*Judith* l. 134). Elsewhere in Old English poetry, this word describes male warriors.[12] The poet increases the significance of Judith's

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[11] "To defend and protect him [the lord] and give him the credit for one's own deeds of valour are the most solemn obligations of their [retinue] oaths of allegiance. The chief fights for victory, their followers for their chief" (Tacitus 1999: 44-45).

[12] The word applies to Beowulf on his way from Heorot to his ship back to Geatland ("wolde feor þanon cuma collenferhð, ceoles neosan" 'the courageous visitor wanted to go far way and sought his ship' *Beowulf* ll. 1805-1806) and when he is dying after killing the dragon (hyne fyrwet bræc, hwæðer collenferhð cwicne gemette in ðam

servant. The actions of both are described as heroic almost on equal terms. The emphasis on their co-operation serves to sharpen the contrast between the disintegration of the Assyrians' *comitatus* and Judith and her maid-servant's joint heroic achievement.

> Eodon ða gegnum þanonne
> þa idesa ba ellenþriste,
> oðþæt hie becomon, collenferhðe,
> eadhreðige mægð, ut of ðam herige,
> þæt hie sweotollice geseon mihten
> þære wlitegan byrig weallas blican,
> Bethuliam.
>
> [Both ladies went away full of courage and eventually departed from the host, courageous and blessed maidens. They could clearly see the shining walls of Bethulia gleam] (*Judith* ll. 132-138).

Mary Dockray-Miller reads the poem through Luce Irigay's *Sexes and Genealogies* and argues that the Old English author amplifies the role played by Judith's maid, who assists Judith's gender performance. "The maid and Judith," Dockray-Miller (1998: 165) claims, "create a co-operative community of women, wherein Judith is a maternal figure; the female community constructs a heroism for Judith that is based on protection and generation rather than aggression and domination".[13]

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wongstede Wedra þeoden ellensiocne' 'he was pressed by anxiety whether he would see the courageous King of Geats alive on the battlefield' (*Beowulf* ll. 2784-2787).

[13] In the poem, there is a "metaphorical daughter-mother bond" between the maid and Judith (Dockray-Miller 1998: 167). Dockray-Miller (1998: 171) also argues that Judith in the Old English poem is not described as a chaste widow, because "her sexuality is not limited to a heterosexuality defined by her relationship with a man. Judith demonstrates a sexuality and satisfaction of desire that goes beyond the paradigm of two lovers, heterosexual or homosexual, to encompass different generations and mulitplicty of bonds, with men, with women, with mothers, with children, whether or not related by blood". She points out, however, that the Irigarayan community ceases to exist once Judith and her maid arrive in Bethulia (Dockray-Miller 1998: 171). The present article, however, proposes a different view on Judith and her maid. Dockray-Miller's reading of these two figures suggests that they construct their gender role on their own terms. Judith and her maid are never recognised as women. When the gender distinctions of the heroic world are viewed through the lenses of Laqueur's one-sex model, masculinity encapsulates the highest virtues and ideals of society and both women are shown to act as warriors in the poem and form a metaphorical *comitatus*.

Thirdly, their return to Bethulia is described in terms of the formulaic hero-on-the-beach topos. Donald Fry (1967: 169-170) identifies the theme in *Judith* and anatomises it as "a stereotyped way of describing (1) a hero on the beach (2) with his retainers (3) in the presence of a flashing light (4) as a journey is completed (or begun)". Formulaic conventions allow the poet to vary the theme and replace details such as beach with gates to the city, which pertains to the variation of the theme found in Judith (Fry 1967: 170).

The remaining part of the biblical source is also rewritten according to the ideals of heroic code. As John P. Hermann (1989: 174) says in *Allegory of war,* the battle of Bethulians against the Assyrians is the invention of the author of *Judith*, since in *Liber Iudith* there is no actual battle at all. In the source, the Assyrians discover that their commander is dead and the disintegrated army escapes from the camp at the sight of the approaching Bethulian army, as they have no other leader, who would be ready to substitute Holofernes and lead them to battle. Not so in the Old English poem. The Bethulians first attack the Assyrian camp, then the Assyrians discover Holofernes's decapitation. John P. Hermann (1989: 181) suggests that the structural and narrative change results from the influence of patristic commentaries and indicates that the poet follows the allegorical interpretation, wherein the Assyrians signify the devil and the Bethulian defend *Ecclesia* signified by Judith. It has been noticed that such a reading produces further narrative and structural contradictions instead.[14] Rather, it seems that the poet is faithful to the conventions of the heroic code, to the expectations of the audience, and to his didactic aim, which consists in the Christinisation of Germanic heroic values. The speech that Judith delivers to the Bethulian men entices them into action by making them mindful of their duties resulting from their sworn obligations.

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[14] Chamberlain claims that the omissions of such characters as Joachim, whose speeches in the source were explored by exegetes for typological meanings and the exclusion of Achior and the episode of his conversion into Judaic monotheism testify to the poet's interest in the primary, literal narrative, rather than in its possible allegorical significance. As he points out, "more probably the omission of Anchior, like the omission of Joachim, is again another instance of deliberate refusal by the poet to construct or exploit the more obvious allegorical possibilities suggested by his scriptural source. An early medieval poet celebrating the faith and strength of Holy Church in its victory against the Devil would not be inclined to omit, I think, the dramatic conversion of a pagan" (Chamberlain 1975: 144).

While Judith and her maid are absent from the stage, the Bethulian men become themselves the embodiment of heroic ideal. To emphasise their heroic status, the poet maintains the oppositions that structured the earlier part of the narrative. In contrast to the Bethulians, the Assyrians are disintegrated and depicted in a derogatory and comic way. Not only are they afraid of the impending slaughter but also of their lord. Too timid to enter the tent where they think he is asleep with Judith, "ongunnon cohhetan, cirman hlude ond gristbitian, gode orfeorme" 'they started to clear their throats and make loud noises and gnash their teeth, faithless men' (*Judith* ll 270-272).[15] Eventually, they leave their lord and escape alive: "flugon ða ðe lyfdon, laðra lindwig" 'those who survived fled, the hateful army' (*Judith* ll. 296-297). It is formulaic commonplace in Old English poetry that warriors never leave the battlefield alive without having their dead companions avenged[16]. In another Old English adaptation of an Old Testament narrative, *Genesis A,* Aner Mamre and Eschol promise to Abraham that "hie his torn mid him gewraecon on wrathum, oððe on wæl feollan" 'they either avenge his injury on his enemies or fall dead' (*Genesis A* ll. 2037-2038). The Assyrians are depicted to fail to satisfy this basic obligation.

Judith is invariably depicted in masculine terms. More than this, the poem dramatises the tension between Judith's proper heroic performance and the Assyrians' failure to live up to the ideals of the heroic code. The poem is more preoccupied with the ideal of masculinity than with the ideal of chastity. *Judith* follows the one-gender ideal, as it portrays people as either adequate or inadequate regardless of their biological sexual identification. Both Judith and her maid work to extend the confines of the masculine heroic code. The Old English author praises both women for heroic achievement and values it in terms of the heroic and masculine epithets. Eventually, however, the second half of the poem restores gender

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[15] According to Fredrik J. Heinemann (1970: 90), the poet ironically rewrites the assembly type scene that is common in Old English heroic poetry, as "what began as a battle assembly, which presumably would have resemble as phalanx, becomes a crowd of nervous warriors waiting in vain for their sodden commander to emerge from the tent". I disagree with Heinemann's opinion that the poet aims to make the Assyrian soldiers appear effeminate (Heinemann 1970: 90). In terms of Laqueur one-sex model, they appear to be de-masculinised in the same way as Holofernes was before in that they fail to emulate the heroic code.

[16] This heroic ideal is also mentioned in Tacitus's *Germania* (AD 98): "it means a lifelong infamy and shame to leave a battle alive when one's chief has fallen" (Tacitus 1999: 44).

relations to the normative model informing the idealised representation of men as warriors; the Bethulian army takes the lead and defeats the enemy.[17]

Returning to *Judith,* the one-gender model that informs the narrative insists on the metaphorical signification, as it requires the resolution between the inadequate and adequate masculine performance. The resolution is achieved when the representation of masculine gender is shifted from Judith, who is not a man, to Bethulian men. The application of the metonymic mode of meaning to the poem, however, reveals another dimension of gender (de)construction in the poem. Judith's violence against Holofernes may be understood as the inversion of the textual violence inscribed in the patriarchal representation of gender. Judith is framed by the representation of Assyrians, who are inadequate as men, and by the army of Bethulians, who represent the ideal *comitatus.* However, the decapitation of Holofernes challenges the system of binary oppositions between the masculine and non-masculine in one important way. Dockray-Miller (1998: 166) observes that "in the female and feminine community that the text creates between Judith and her maid, Judith's gender performance actually overthrows the masculine patriarchal paradigm of sex and violence". Judith and her maid co-operation challenge the textual misrepresentation of women common to Germanic poetry, according to which they perform the passive functions of peace-weavers and cup-bearers enclosed within the hall.

Although femininity remains hidden and the text is informed by the ideology that values one's status according to one-sex standard, Judith succeeds in deconstructing the oppressive terms of how she is valued in

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[17] Some critics claim that Judith was chosen as the subject of a heroic poem written in the times of Viking invasion in late Anglo-Saxon England, because the heroine is to shame men into action. Alexandra Hennesey Olsen (1982: 293) says that "the poem is intended to galvinize the men into action by shaming those noblemen in the audience who have watched the abuse of their wives, daughters or kinswomen because they are, in Wulfstan's words, 'racne ond ricne and genoh godne' to prevent". Christopher Fee (1997: 401) notices the change in Judith's characterization from the source and argues that the poet presents her victory as insufficient: "In contrast to the Vulgate heroine, the Old English Judith acts more in the capacity of a noble figurehead whose audacious behaviour shames and inspires her warriors into similar feats of courage, than in the capacity of a war-chief whose daring plan offers a slim chance of survival". Such interpretations are rejected here, as they naturalise the patriarchal misrepresentation of femininity that heroic literature may seem to maintain.

the heroic world. The head of Holofernes that Judith displays to Bethulian soldiers is the sign that may be conceived either according to the metaphoric or metonymic mode of signifying. In the metaphorical mode, it indicates that Holofernes no longer signifies anything within the masculine system of signification and a symbol that earns Judith recognition she would not otherwise have being not a man. The ending of the poem completes the enclosure of femininity on which the poem insists. After the army's victory over the Assyrians, Judith accepts the spoils that accrued to Holofernes (which does not happen in the Biblical source).

If Holofernes's head is read in the metonymic terms of interpretation, it becomes an icon that stands for the poem's centre and its textual strategies. It is possible to read *Judith* in Derridean terms as a textual allegory, wherein the physical violence is an inversion of the medieval textual strategies that are coextensive with that culture's patriarchal ideology. The fact that femininity in *Judith* is hidden from view is symptomatic of the textual strategies and processes given to representing and misrepresenting gender.[18] The free play motioned by Judith's decapitation takes place within the finite system of possibilities. Jacqes Derrida (2005 [1967]: 352), in "Structure, sign and play in discourse", claims that in discourse, the infinite "substitution of contents, elements or terms is no longer possible" and that "at the centre, the permutation or the transformation of elements ... is forbidden. At least this permutation has always been *interdicted*". This interdiction serves the Christian ideology of the poem, as the heroic code that the poem endorses is Christianised in terms of gender re-

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[18] Some of the poem's interpretations actually assists the poem's perpetuation of these strategies. Hennesey Olsen (1982: 291) claims that "the decapitation of Holofernes is presented as a symbolic rape of man by a woman" and claims that the poem was composed in the times of Viking invasion and is a historical record that enlivens the memory of Anglo-Saxon women raped and killed in the Viking attacks. Both critics participate in the poem's textual strategies that misrepresent femininity; Olsen's reading naturalises the patriarchal notion on gender, as she claims that the poem shows women to be in need of protection by men. In her historicist view, it is required that the ending of the poem has the patriarchal gender hierarchy restored at the end. Bethulians behave in a way that is expected from the lords of households; they defend their mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters against the danger of rape. The restoration of the balance, however, is contingent on misrepresentation of femininity. Such arguments suggest that individuals represented as feminine only in negative terms; they imply that Judith rejects her femininity to bring victory over Holofernes and the enemy is essentially effeminised to be looked at contemptuously by the audience.

lations. In the battle scene, the Bethulian army reclaims the patriarchal centre of the poem. The Christianisation of the heroic code happens at the expense of the free agent formation, as the largely anonymous party of warriors symbolically substitutes Judith, who acted as an individual.

Although Judith cannot construct her gender outside the relations of power that are naturalised in her world, she manages to reveal the very constructedness of gender in heroic world. The way Judith is described in the poem illustrates the commonplace ideas on femininity in the early medieval culture. The structure of the poem is based on the binary oppositions such as *Ecclesia* and the devil, courage and cowardice, virtue and vice, the masculine and the non-masculine. As all these oppositions consist of a privileged and an unprivileged element, it appears that in the medieval culture to be not a man earns one the badge of inferiority. Nonetheless, what appears to be a neat structure of oppositions subverts itself, since gendered identity emerges only as performance of familiar cultural patterns. The binary oppositions and gender distinctions that the medieval culture the poem perpetuated are constructed, not natural. As gender in reality, so is the poem's structure informed and shaped by these patterns and ideals. The analysis of *Judith* as a crafted composition uncovers the late Anglo-Saxon culture's textual strategies to construct fictional identities and inculcate in its audience the ideals of femininity and masculinity.

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THE BIRTH OF A FEMINIST: GENDER, RELIGION AND SILENCE IN ANNE ASKEW'S *TRIALS*

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Amongst the religious martyrs, Anne Askew is undoubtedly one of the most representative examples of women who challenged the power of the Catholic Church in the final days of Henry VIII's reign. In her first-person narrative, she records her questionings, tortures and, eventually and her imprisonment for heresy and beliefs on Eucharist that contradicted the traditional doctrine asserted in the Six Articles of 1539. Her vivid narrative represents a spiritual autobiography, human legacy and historical document that provides new insight into women's status and conditions in the English society during the Reformation. This paper demonstrates how Anne Askew's standpoint on Christianity has paved the way for the post-modern reinterpretation of religious matters, on the basis of the works by John Bale and John Foxe, since no manuscript copies of her narratives have been passed down to us. More specifically, the analysis focuses on the relationship between gender roles and religious controversy in the two prose narratives known as *The examinations of Anne Askew* by John Bale and Askew's work "A ballad of Anne Askew", showing them as two intertwined aspects at the time of the Reformation.

Anne Askew[1] was born in 1521 in Stallingborough, Lincolnshire. At the age of fifteen, forced by her family, she married Thomas Kyme, but she soon rebelled against her husband, already showing her unconven-

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[1] Biographical information is taken from *Oxford Dictionary of national biography* (http://www.oxforddnb. com/view/article/798) (date of access: 25 March 2013).

tional spirit, by refusing to use his surname. She did not want to be patronized by him and be considered inferior to his man.[2] Askew and her husband had opposite religious beliefs, in that she supported Martin Luther's reformed Church and her husband was a Catholic. Subsequently, Askew's revolutionary behaviour led her to leave her husband and go to London, where she preached, siding with the circle of Protestant women around Catherine Parr. As a consequence of these banned activities, she was arrested and her husband was ordered to take her back home. Askew escaped again and went back preaching in London. She was arrested and, this time, condemned to death.[3] Her letters, written at the time of the questionings and tortures (1546), witness and mirror her spiritual strength that the Reformed Church of England would not have accepted because of Askew's determination not to repent.

The revolutionary value of these efforts highlights Askew's unconventional role as a protestant martyr and heroine, as shown in the lines of the first stanzas of the ballad, titled "A ballad of Anne Askew, intituled: I am a woman poore and blind"[4], in which she apparently conforms to the common belief that portrays women as passive and vulnerable beings:

> I am a Woman poore and blinde
> And little knowledge remains in me,
> Long have I sought and faine would I find,
> what hearbes in my garden were best to be.

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2 She became Thomas Kyme's wife as a substitute for her sister Martha who had recently died.

3 Anne Askew was questioned, and eventually accused of heresy because of her association with Catherine Parr and the Reform movement. During the interrogations, she refused to believe in the theological dogma of the transubstantiation. According to this doctrine, the substance of the bread and wine of the Eucharist, during the Mass, is transformed into the substance of the body and blood of Christ, thus challenging the King's Act of the Six Articles. The theological controversies over the Eucharist divided Protestant and Catholic believers in that the Catholic doctrine affirmed that sacraments were independent of the spiritual condition either of the priest or of the believer, whilst Protestants argued that some of the main sacraments such as Eucharist depended on the spiritual state of the minister and the congregant. See more at: (http://faculty.history.wisc.edu/ sommerville/361/361-08.htm).

4 The only reference existing before that date is the one of Thomas Nashe in 1596. Even though it is uncertain whether Anne Askew wrote the ballad due to the fact that there are no manuscripts survived, the only copies preserved are the ones of John Foxe and John Bale.

> A garden I have which is unknown,
> that God of his goodness gave unto me:
> I meane my owne body wherein I would have sowne
> the seede of Christs true veritie ("Ballad", 195).

The ballad was not recorded in the Stationers' Register until 1624. Commonly attributed to Anne Askew, the text survives in a number of versions; this fact demonstrates that it was widely known throughout the sixteenth century. "I am a Woman poore and blinde" contains two important elements: the metaphor referring to *sowing the seeds*, and Askew's description of herself as *poor and blind*. On the one hand, the metaphor invokes women's passivity, a concept also expressed by Aristotle's philosophy,[5] according to which the female represents the passive partner in the procreative process, whilst the active man sows the seed inside her body. This conception finds its roots in the Bible, where the word of God is seen as the seed[6] that generates spiritual life. On the other hand, Askew presents herself as a *poor* and *blind* woman, two adjectives that do not really describe her condition as her family held posts at the court of both Henry VII and Henry VIII and she was not blind, in medical terms. As such, Askew adopts a communication strategy through which she subverts the meaning of the words on a double level; indeed, on a superficial reading she seems to follow the rules and recommendations imposed by the interrogators but, actually, she inverts them from within. These elements have outlined the value of Askew's verbal performances as a device to undermine the strict gender boundaries observed during the Renaissance. As David Parry (2008: 176) comments on Askew's and Hutchinson's literary representation,

> both Annes, as they are presented in the texts which have come down to us, conform to some extent to the gender norms of women as passive and inward; both Annes also subvert these norms in unsettling ways. Both play on their supposed weakness as women to exercise rhetorical power over their male interlocutors.

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5 See Aristotle, *Generation of animals*, II.iv.738b, IV.i.765b.

6 See Isaiah 55.10-11; Matthew 13.1-9, 18-32, 36-42; Mark 4.26-32; Luke 8.4-15; Luke 13.18-19.

As a consequence of this play on words, the subversion arises also in gender roles, showing this woman as the exact opposite to the feminine stereotype imposed by the Renaissance society, according to which women had to be meek people who bent to the will of men.[7]

Indeed, during her questionings, Askew provokes, evades and deflects the questions posed by the officers, as shown in the following example:

> To satisfy your expectation, good people (…), this was my first examination in the year of our Lord 1545, and in the month of March. First Christopher Dare examined me at Saddlers' Hall, being one of the quest, and asked if I did not believe that the sacrament hanging over the altar was the very body of Christ really. Then I demanded this question of him: wherefore Saint Stephen was stoned to death. And he said he could not tell. Then I answered that no more would I assoil his vain question (Foxe, "The first examination of Anne Askew").[8]

Here Askew swaps the roles of questioner/prisoner; she makes, as Tarez Samra Graban (2007: 402) notes, "a noticeable linguistic turn". She reveals herself as a cunning and intelligent woman who is able to control, direct and, in many cases, prevent what the examiners are willing to ask her, hoping to find her guilty. Her technique, as Parry (2008: 177) points out, deserves attention in that "Askew hides behind the words of scripture, to which her accusers cannot take exception, and refuses to divulge her interpretation, even though her implied interpretation is relatively plain".

In this light, Askew's behaviour challenges cultural and social strictures about gender: she spoke out against her husband in public, left him raise their children, challenged her accusers and defended her faith until she died. As Ward (2013: 35) highlights, in the mid-Tudor period, "(w)omen were intimately connected to marriages, the education of their children, and other domestic affairs that were important to maintaining a

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[7] Many contemporary critics consider Anne Askew as a proto-feminist. (Cf. John Pong Linton, "Scripted silences, reticence, and agency in Anne Askew's Examinations"; Paula McQuade, "'Except that they had offended the Lawe': Gender and jurisprudence in *The examinations of Anne Askew*"; Tarez Samra Graban, "Feminine irony and the art of linguistic cooperation in Anne Askew's sixteenth-century *Examinacyons*").

[8] This version of "The first examination of Anne Askew" (1583) is taken from (http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/16century/topic_3/askwexam.htm) (date of access: 12 June 2014).

stable and organized household", hence Askew's reaction subverts the female stereotype of that time, according to which a woman had to be passive and silent. Furthermore, Askew's example of a woman performing male roles demonstrates that the literature of the mid-Tudor period was relentlessly swapping the focus from male authority to female inclusion in society and religion. Indeed, as the above example has demonstrated, women's influence over men during the Renaissance was, to a large extent, ambiguous in that, as Tina Krontiris (1992: 10) recognizes,

> religion actually creates one of the paradoxes of the sixteenth century: on the one hand women were not enjoyed to silence while on the other they were permitted to break that silence to demonstrate their faith and devotion to God. In the name of the word of God, women could and did claim their right to speak independently from men.

In this light, Anne's silenced voice clearly highlights this paradox and goes further as seen in the following extract,

> And then doctor Standish desyered my lorde, to bid me saye my mynde, concerning that same text of S. Paule. I answered, that it was against saynt Paules lernynge, that I beynge a woman, shuld interprete the scriptures, specyallye where so manye wyse lerned men were (Askew, "The first examination").[9]

In these lines, again, the double level of communication impinges upon both the religious doctrine and her gender. Indeed, when she is asked to answer the question about the Scriptures, Askew deliberately deviates the conversation by means of her sexual identity, so that the subversive and "reformed" interpretation of the Holy Bible is hidden behind the same words that the examiners cannot condemn. Her skilled communication distracts and frustrates her accusers, as highlighted by Parry (2008: 178): "(i)t is the silences, the gaps between her words, which are subversive, pregnant with implied readings which undermine the official doctrine without doing so in clear propositions capable of being pinned down and condemned". Other striking examples of her witty dialectic can be found in the following extract:

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[9] This version of Askew's "The first examination before the Inquisitors A.D. 1545" can be found at (http://www.exclassics.com/foxe/foxe209.htm) (date of access: 14 June 2014).

> (…) Secondly, he said, that there was a woman who did testify that I should read, how God was not in temples made with hands. Then I showed him chapters vii and xvii, of the Acts of the Apostles; what Stephen and Paul had said therein. Whereupon he asked me how I took those sentences? I answered, I would not throw pearls amongst swine, for acorns were good enough (Askew, "The first examination").

Her wit outsmarts the accusers who, in the effort to demonstrate her as a guilty offender of the religious dogmas, style themselves as ignorant of the spiritual law.

Condemning women because of their intelligence seems to be a common topic in the sixteenth-seventeenth century literary output. Indeed, the mere fact that the "offender" depended on hearsay about heresy testifies to the intention of the jury not to consider the real evidence. In the same way, Askew, in breaking the silence in public debates and trials, showing her strength, courage and knowledge of theological issues, also cries out for the right to profess her religion, beliefs and freedom. For instance:

> Then the Byshoppes chaunceller rebuked me, and sayd, that I was muche to blame for utterynge the scriptures. For S. Paule (he sayd) forbode women to speake or to talke of the worde of God. I answered hym, that I knewe Paules meanynge so well as he, which is, I Corinthiorum xiiii. That a woman ought not to speake in the congregacyon by the waye of teachynge. And then I asked hym, how manye women he had seane, go into the pulpett and preache. He sayde, he never sawe non. Then I sayd, he ought to fynde no faute in poor women, except they had offended the lawe (Askew, "The first examination").

The power of her rebellion challenged directly the authorities' role, as she revealed a deeper knowledge of the Holy Scriptures:

> Eightly, he asked me if I did not think that private masses did help souls departed. And (I) said it was great idolatry to believe more in them than in the death which Christ died for us. Then they had me thence unto my Lord Mayor and he examined me, as they had before, and I answered him directly in all things as I answered the quest afore. Besides this my Lord Mayor laid one thing unto my charge which was never spoken of me but of them. And that was whether a mouse eating the host received God or no. This question did I never ask, but indeed they asked it of me, whereunto I made them no answer but smiled (Askew, "The first examination").

Anne, as a woman, is deeply aware of her social role and, notwithstanding this, her efforts to subvert the religious system to affirm her identity represent one of the best examples of human strength in literature. Her words are accurate and hit her accusers' sense of pride, as in the following extract: "Then he asked me, why I had so few words? And I answered, 'God hath given me the gift of knowledge, but not of utterance: and Solomon saith, that a woman of few words is the gift of God', Prov. ix.13" (Askew, "The first examination"). As this statement shows, Askew finds evidence for her reasons in the Bible and, on the one hand, she shows her apparent will to stick to the rules of submission which women were asked to obey, while, on the other hand, she demonstrates her knowledge of the Holy Scriptures.

The shrewd wit that emerges from Askew's use and knowledge of the Bible can also be found in the lines of the ballad taken into account, in which the references to religion are of essential importance to understand her point of view on religious matters. In this light, one of the principal elements to consider is the symbolic value evoked by the image of the garden, with its agricultural, religious and biological implications. Indeed, amongst the many visual images used by religion, the garden represents a meaningful *topos* in that it can be interpreted on the one hand, as the everlasting metaphor of life and, on the other hand as a system of limits beyond which men challenge God. Indeed, images are part of our life, often in the form of symbols and metaphors that connect the world in which we live to a structured system of interpretations. Religion entails a phenomenological association with images and metaphors. In this light, according to Lakoff and Johnson,[10] metaphors are part of the deep structures of our mentality and represent commonplace in religion[11] as well as in literature, in that they mirror the circumstances and attitudes of the society from which they originate. As such,

> [t]he garden is an outstanding image among the many visual ones we use for the law. The *topos* of the garden has a wide semantic range: it is the eternal metaphor of life and it is an ethical image indicating the active behavioural rules man must follow. The art of gardening reflects

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[10] See Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors we live by*.

[11] See David Tracy's "Metaphor and religion: The test case of Christian Texts" (1978: 91).

> the image of the body politic and mirrors the historical moment, as well as all their cultural expressions. (…) It embodies the ancient idea of the microcosm within a macrocosm: it keeps within human limits the vision of an immeasurable cosmos (Carpi 2012: 33-48).

The idea of a microcosm within a macrocosm reflects and evokes the relationship between finite and infinite, human limits and immeasurability of the universe. The same concept is here evoked by Askew's body. Indeed, this is made evident by the common biblical image of Askew's gendered body as a place in which the seeds of both truth as the word of God and falsehood, a reference to her religion, coexist. Focusing on this image of Askew as a garden, represented by her womb, it is possible to find natural, sexual and spiritual references to the symbolism that this metaphor expresses. The presence of the word garden derives from the medieval symbolism of the *hortus conclusus*[12] as a place which nobody can access:

> The woman's body is a labyrinth in which the man loses himself. It is a walled garden, the *hortus conclusus* of the Middle Ages, in which nature accomplishes its demoniac witchcrafts. The woman is the primary creator, the very first Prime Mover. She transforms a clot of excretions into the complex weft of a human being, that floats around the snake-like cord with which she will keep every man tied up ever after (Paglia 1993: 17, translation mine).

Moreover, the agricultural reference to Jesus' parable of the sower, in which the farmer represents the preacher whose duty is to spread the word of God, evokes the act of the human procreation, in which the female is the empty receptacle to be filled with the male seed. In this light, the ballad examined here narrates Askew's search for spiritual truth through the metaphor of planting the seeds in a garden. As she recounts,

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[12] Medieval exegesis itself used the image of the *hortus conclusus* to represent the Virgin Mary: "in classical and medieval texts, the uterus was thought to be the single most important part of female anatomy. (…) classical medical descriptions of the entrance to the uterus as a closed mouth, a set of pursed lips, are shadowed by another image, that of the uterus closed off by an imperforate membrane; uterus as sealed vessel. (…) the idea that the uterus was shaped like a jug survived at least into the early Middle Ages: (…) Is the patristic representation of female anatomy, in which the sealed womb is so crucial to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception" (Coyne Kelly 2000: 23-24).

> In me was sowne all kinde of fained seedes,
> with Popish ceremonies many a one,
> Masses of Requiem with other Jugling deeds,
> till Gods spirit out of my garden was gone ("Ballad", 196).

The symbolism associated with the metaphor of sowing the seeds (pregnancy) as a biological characteristic of womanhood also reflects a millenary tradition according to which

> [t]he cycles of nature are the women's cycles. Biologically, femininity is a sequence of recurrences on herself, that have a unique starting point and arrival. The centrality of woman gives her the stability of identity. She has not to become, she just is. Her centrality represents an enormous obstacle to man, to whom she hinders the search for identity. He must transform himself into an independent being, that is a human being, free from her (Paglia 1993: 14, my translation).

Thus, femininity expresses its double nature as both a reproductive organism that gives life to human beings and, at the same time, as a dangerous emblem of the life force; indeed, women's immanent power is represented by the duality of their essence, in that

> [t]he Bible has been branded with fire for having made the woman the scapegoat of the cosmic tragedy of man. But, in representing a male conspirator, the serpent, as God's enemy, the Genesis hesitates just to avoid showing its misogyny. The Bible intentionally eludes God's real enemy, the chthonic nature. The serpent is Eve, it is in her. She is both, the garden and the serpent (Paglia 1993: 16-17, my translation).

Hence, Askew's preaching activities were disturbing for those who considered women just females, unable to produce the male seed, in that the subversion of the roles went against natural and religious laws. As such, Askew's promiscuous spreading of the seed thus explicitly threatens both the role of the male preacher and the one of God. Her broken silence in favour of an active life dismantles one of the main principles of her times, showing that the word can be one of the means through which a human being affirms his/her identity.

Askew, in subverting the gender roles, disobeys not only the social and religious conventions but, according to her accusers, also goes against natural laws. This view is the result of the conception according to which

women are identified with nature. Indeed, as Camille Paglia (1993: 11-12, my translation) maintains,

> [t]he identification of the woman with nature was universal in the prehistory. In the hunting or agricultural communities depending on nature femininity was celebrated as the immanent principle of fertility. With the development of culture, arts and commerce brought about a concentration of resources that freed men from the atmospheric caprices and from the disadvantages of geography. Being nature kept more distant the importance of the feminine principle regressed.

Moreover, the Judaic religion, from which Christianity arouse, can be seen as the most evident anti-natural instance that based its principles on the role of man's superiority over a woman. To this extent, Paglia (2008: 13) argues that

> [t]he Old Testament affirms that nature was created by a god-father, and the differentiation between sexes and objects was a consequence of his being a male. (…) the evolution of the terrestrial cult to the celestial one confines the woman to an inferior dominion. Her mysterious powers to procreate and the similarity of the roundness of her breast, of her belly and of her hips to the outline of the earth had put her at the origin of the primitive symbolism. She was the model of the Great Mother's representations that scatter the very first beginning of religion all over the world. But maternal cults did not mean social freedom for women.

Thus, popular cultures have elaborated earth-based myths, especially around the symbolism that women's bodies evoke. It is on the grounds of the similarities that Earth and women share their "roundness of breasts, belly and hips" that the garden and the womb reinforce and epitomize the binary model upon which their symbolism is based.

On the same premises, Parry (2008: 166) explains,

> [t]here is a long tradition in devotional writing of seeing the believer (whether male or female) as feminine in relation to the masculine Christ. The believer is passive in relation to the initiative of divine grace. (…) The passivity of the believer in relation to grace was emphasized in the emergence of Protestant theology, as in Luther's lectures on Romans and Galatians, which figure Christ as the bridegroom in the bridechamber and the believer receiving saving grace as a woman passively conceiving a child (…).

The image of Christ as a bridegroom draws on his being the beginning and end of life; he embodies the passive woman who receives the seeds and the man who makes the woman pregnant, in other words, the great mystery of life. Once again, the references to passivity that characterize the ballad underline the effort to present Askew as both, a loyal woman who "receives" God in her garden but also as a human being determined to affirm her identity. In so doing, she offered the Catholic Church an example of how a woman had not to be seen exclusively as a "fertile receptacle" to be filled with God's seeds but also as a human being who knew the Holy Scriptures.

The double-levelled structure man-woman presence mentioned above can also be felt in Askew's ballad, in that her work is the result of the revision of two Protestant polemicists, John Bale and John Foxe. Parry (2008: 168) sees in their posthumous editions a polemic on religion through gender to the point that it is not possible to decide "whether or not Askew's voice is ventriloquised by Bale (…)".As a matter of fact, Askew's execution prevented any subsequent control over the works that Bale and Foxe published. This notwithstanding, Askew's gendered body becomes the means through which she expresses her rebellion against the religious system. Moreover, her doctrinal polemic shows two fundamental aspects: self-affirmation as a human being, not only as a woman, and female resistance.

Throughout Askew's narrative, her innovative and revolutionary awareness emerges in every word she writes down, as when she recounts her tortures at the Tower of London by Sir Anthony Kingstone, who was ordered to make Askew confess the names of other Protestants:

> Then they put me on the rack, because I confessed no ladies or gentlemen, to be of my opinion (…) the Lord Chancellor and Master Rich took pains to rack me with their own hands, till I was nearly dead. I fainted (…) and then they recovered me again. After that I sat two long hours arguing with the Lord Chancellor, upon the bare floor (…) With many flattering words, he tried to persuade me to leave my opinion (…) I said that I would rather die than break my faith (Askew, "The first examination").

The image that comes out from these lines is the one of a woman endowed with extraordinary spiritual and physical strength and a fine knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. Hence, the more the officers racked her, the more she refused to repent, showing them how a woman's body

can endure both spiritual and corporal pains. This emerges from the following extract:

> Touching the order of her racking in the Tower thus it was; first she was let down into a dungeon, where Sir Anthony Knevet, the lieutenant, commanded his jailor to pinch her with the rack. Which being done as much as he thought sufficient, he went about to take her down, supposing that he had done enough. But Wriothesley, the chancellor, not contented that she was loosed so soon, confessing nothing, commanded the lieutenant to strain her on the rack again: which because he denied to do, tendering the weakness of the woman, he was threatened therefore grievously (…). And so consequently upon the same, he and Master Rich, throwing off their gowns, would needs play the tormentors themselves; first asking her, if she were with child. To whom she answering again, said, "Ye shall not need to spare for that, but do your wills upon me" (Askew, "The first examination").

Thus, Askew's attitude towards her torturers and physical pain show an unconventional resistance to them. What emerges from these lines, as Ward (2013: 11) argues, is that "(…) Anne Askew, as a member of the weaker sex was choice material for Protestant martyrdom: she was seen by Bale as an example who can only be saved by God's grace, rather than as an autonomous self-willed woman standing up for her beliefs and her independence"; there is another element to ponder over here, in that Askew's life has primary relevance within the mid-Tudor religious frame because it clarifies the ways both Catholics and Protestants characterized women during this period. Indeed, if on the one hand for Catholics Askew was a heretic and her sins against religion and her family were unforgiveable crimes, on the other hand, the Protestants neglected her behaviour and stressed Askew's strength of character in the name of their religion. To this respect, Elaine V. Beilin (1987: 30) writes:

> On the one hand, the Catholic establishment seems to have assumed that Askew fit their preconceptions of weak and foolish womanhood and that she could easily be persuaded, or frightened, into recanting (…). On the other hand, the Reformers, although praising (her) resistance, also assumed Askew's inherent womanly weakness, and found it her singular importance for the cause: her courage, constancy, and fortitude, since they could not be a woman's, must have come from God (…).

There is another point to consider in the final lines of the extract mentioned above, that is the reference to her "being with a child". Pregnancy has always represented an exclusive condition for women, seen by men as a taboo. To this respect, Paglia (1993: 13, my translation) argues that

> [t]he woman was the idol of the ventral magic. It seemed as if she swelled and gave birth according to her own laws. The woman has always been a disturbing presence since the beginning of times. The man adored her but also feared her. She was the dark throat that had gushed him out and that would have swallowed him back. Men rallied around one another, creating culture as a defense against the feminine nature.

The symbolism associated with pregnancy seems to be the leading thread that guides one through the lines of Askew's works. As a matter of fact, this courageous woman, together with her "pregnant silences", has passed to her future readers new challenging perspectives to interpret the society in which she lived. Amongst the words, the verses and the intentional gaps, filled with silence, a pregnant silence that scorches her accusers' ears, she also makes us reflect on the relationship between ambivalence-ambiguity/woman.

In reference to these reflections, all the accusations laid against her by authorities represent a polemic on the Reformation politics and, at the same time, an innovative spiritual autobiography of a woman who dared to challenge her times. Thus, Anne Askew embodies the proto-feminist point of view in the way she refused to recant her story and, above of all, to repent, as shown in the following lines:

> I would, my lord, that all men knew my conversation and living in all points, for I am so sure of myself this hour, that there is none able to prove any dishonesty in me. If you know any who can do it, I pray you bring them forth (Askew, "The interrogation").[13]

These words, spoken in the context of the political instability before Henry VIII's death, reveal the power of Askew's courage without exceeding the use of the terms with which she chooses to demonstrate her truth. To

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[13] This version of Askew's "During the interrogation by Lord Bonner, when accused of being immoral, 1545" can be found at: http://www.exclassics.com/foxe/foxe209.htm (date of access: 14 June 2014).

this extent, the doctrinal polemic on which Anne Askew embarked outlines how verbal performances can undermine stable gender boundaries, and so the same "Ballad" mirrors the appropriation of Askew's female voice into Foxe's and Bale's male texts. Indeed, as Askew's example has demonstrated, the central issue in the religious background of the mid-Tudor period revolved around the definition of the nature of women, to the point that all discussions on females' roles in religious life seem to have developed from the struggle between the way women were perceived and the way they actually behaved. As a matter of fact, Askew's martyrdom represents an outstanding example of the gender-based dichotomy that characterised the Tudor religious and cultural background. As Ward (2013: 14) argues,

> [t]he Tudors made exceptions to explain why some women surpassed usual standards of women's behavior. Anne Askew, even Catherine Parr, could be seen as overstepping gender boundaries in a positive way because they did so in the name of Protestantism. These were exceptional women, and not all women could be expected to do the same – why eels would Foxe include Askew's example in his predominantly male-focused martyrology if not to draw attention to the extraordinary aspects of Askew's life?

Thus, to a close analysis, Askew's martyrdom has definitely brought about the subversion of the women's role in the mid-Tudor culture, shedding light on new gendered perspectives on the feminine involvement in religious and cultural debates of the modern period. This offers critics and scholars a new reading of the place of women in the sixteenth-seventeenth century and clues to understanding gender shifts through modern and innovative perspectives. In this light, Askew's "Ballad" has shown a significant subversion of gender stereotypes in religious matters, which dramatically outlined the patriarchal relegation of women to subordinate position in society, culture and religion. This meaningful foregrounding of female religious agency makes Askew's martyrdom one of the most representative examples of feminine involvement in the creation of the modern culture and society, through the accommodation of gender boundaries.

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"ALL IN A WIFE IS THE WORK OF HER HUSBAND": WILLIAM COBBETT'S NOT-SO-INCIDENTAL ADVICE ON FINDING AND RECOGNISING THE PERFECT WOMAN

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The majority of British didactic books/manuals dedicated to women were written by male authors who claimed for themselves the patriarchal right to mould women's characters and perpetuate various normative, ideological cultural norms.[1] Stressing their positions as moral guides, men went on to impart various 'truths' concerning female nature and offer guidelines for appropriate feminine behaviour. As Tague (2002: 22) aptly notes the aim of such practices was to fashion a woman who was fully aware of what being a woman denoted and thus necessitated, and who always compared her behaviour "against [existing] standards of ideal womanhood". The plethora of manuals was to facilitate women and their guardians with detailed suggestions on proper conduct. Though the majority of manuals were directed at women, there are also a few which were designed for both sexes, and aimed at legitimating notions of masculine authority and necessary female subordination. Apart from that, there were those anatomising female nature strictly *for the sake of men*. The latter are of utmost importance for scholars dealing with conduct as they perpetuate as well as uphold patriarchal ideology, and confirm Margaret Miles' (1991: 168) often-quoted opinion that "[m]en must receive coordinated cumulative information about women's nature and body if they are to manage women with the confidence that they thoroughly understand the

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[1] For more examples of such texts see my analyses of, for instance, Thomas Marriott's *Female conduct* or James Fordyce's *Sermons to young women*.

reasons for male and female familial and social roles". This way, men became equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills, allowing them to perform proper supervision and governance over their female dependants. Such cultural narratives also facilitated the choice of the ideal woman in the first place, offering clues on how to recognize and properly interpret female behaviour and features of character.

Conduct texts have significantly participated in the process of socialisation. Informing both sexes about what was demanded and expected of them was to guarantee the socio-political system working properly on a micro scale, which was then to solidify the external or more public gender politics. As needs to be reminded, such narratives of conduct should not be treated as descriptive but rather prescriptive since, as discussed by Michel Foucault, ideology is constantly at war with practice. As has been further noticed by feminist historians, such as Amanda Vickery (1999), women often negotiated the rules and regulations pertaining to their sex/gender or even used them to their own advantage. Moreover, not everyone possessed or could afford to spend money on (para)literary guidebooks. Still, moral narratives of conduct became a popular genre and continued the never-ceasing campaign to define both the models and antiparagons of female behaviour, offering advice both to women and men, all for the sake of their own happiness.

One of such prescriptive writers and lecturers in morals was William Cobbett (1763-1835), who is remembered as an outspoken politician, a ferocious pamphleteer and commentator, an educator and an acute observer of his times, that is the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. Equally hated and loved, he managed to divide public opinion into those who appreciated his intellect, political struggles and fight for reforms, and those who considered him a self-obsessed egoist in search of conflicts for the sake of a good banter, always promoting his always politicised persona.[2] Whatever the past or current verdict, Cobbett managed to imprint himself into the historical, political and social canvas of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. His diverse publications always included personal comments and scenes from his private life, and to such an extent that even his many earlier biographies are ultimately

[2] After his death, the *Morning Herald* wrote: "Cobbett was perhaps, the greatest egoist that ever lived, and everything that he did, and every sentence that he uttered, was important in his own estimation" (quoted in [na] 1835: 382).

a compilation of his own reflections and recollections taken from all of his publications. Always honest about his thoughts, opinions and deeds, although very changeable at the same time, Cobbett hoped that such self-exposure would facilitate the readers' understanding of his messages, add to the credibility of his opinions and lessons as well as help to see the practical benefits of his teachings and suggestions. As his 1835-biographers claim: "It is an especial characteristic of Cobbett's writings, that he is perpetually illustration from himself" ([na] 1835: 17). Importantly for his promotional and educational socio-technique, then, in most of his texts, Cobbett reminds his readers that he is a self-made man who worked hard to achieve his goals, and "he has to thank himself for all he knows" ([na] 1835: 29).[3]

Indeed, he had an eventful life and managed to live through much more than an average citizen of his times. In his own – and necessarily abbreviated – words:

> Thrown (...) on the wide world at a very early age, not more than eleven or twelve years, without money to support, without friends to advise, and without book-learning to assist me; passing a few years dependent solely on my own labour for my subsistence; then becoming a common soldier and leading a military life (...) for eight years; quitting that life after really (...) high promotion..., marrying at an early age, going at once to France to acquire the French language, thence to America; passing eight years there, becoming bookseller and author, and taking a prominent part in all the important discussions of the interesting period from 1793 to 1799; (...) conducting myself in the ever-active part which I took in that struggle (...); returning to England in 1800, resuming my labours here, suffering, during these twenty-nine years, two years of imprisonment, heavy fines, three years self-banishment to the other side of the Atlantic, and a total breaking of fortune (...), and, during these twenty-nine years (...) writing and publishing, every week of my life, (...) a periodical paper (...); writing and publishing ... a grammar of the French and another of the English language, a work on the Economy of the Cottage, a work on Forest Trees and Woodlands, a work on Gardening, an account of America, a book of sermons, a work on the Corn-plant, a History of the Protestant Reformation; all books of great and continued sale, and the last unquestionably the book of greatest circulation in the whole world, the Bible only excepted; ... having, during the same period (whether in exile or not) sustained a shop of the same size,

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[3] More about Cobbett's biography can be found in my "From one father to another: William Cobbett's advice on motherhood and maternity" (forthcoming).

> in London; (...) having, during these twenty-nine years of troubles, embarrassments, prisons, fines, and banishments, bred up a family of seven children to man's and woman's state (Introduction, 4, 9-11).[4]

Having such an experience, he demands from his readers, and from everyone else, respect for his actions and success achieved. As such, Cobbett fashions himself into a valuable source of advice on life and its vicissitudes; a mentor for the younger generation. As suggested by Sarah E. Newton (1994: 10), who researches American texts of advice, the socio-technique used by people such as Cobbett creates an effective narrative frame to "establish an immediate and intimate relationship of trust between writer and reader, a bond that will support the believability of what the writer asserts". Cobbett indeed uses this method while at the same time insists that, due to his experience and wisdom, he is obliged to share it with posterity.

While presenting himself to his readers, Cobbett states: "It is the duty, and ought to be the pleasure, of age and experience to warn and instruct youth and to come to the aid of inexperience" (Introduction, 1, 9). And this indeed becomes his rationale for writing his 1829 *Advice to young men and (incidentally) to young women in the middle and higher ranks of life. In a series of letters*, which is the focus of the present paper. Predicting objections and sneers from his adversaries – and there were many – Cobbett says in the manual: "(...) I believe that my example may have weight with many thousands" (*Letter IV*, 170, 116), and with this he, paradoxically, manages to position himself *both among and above* his prospective middle class readers. Simultaneously, he blurs the boundaries between the mild paternal tone and the preachy admonitions of an experienced mentor. Furthermore, he promises that what he plans to impart in this semi-epistolary book of conduct is to address the problems of the majority of men of his times. He ultimately aims to convey "every species of advice of which [he] deem[s] the utility to be unquestionable" (Introduction, 10, 13).[5] The opinions on the value of his works on conduct are less

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[4] Henceforth, all quotations from the book of conduct are indicated as letter-number, paragraph-entry and page number, unless it pertains to the Introduction. Capitalisation and italics are original unless indicated otherwise.

[5] Somewhat more humbly, he adds: "(...) though I do not affect to believe, that *every young man*, who shall read this work, will become able to perform labours of equal magnitude and importance, I do pretend, that *every* young man, who will attend to my advice, will become able to perform a great deal more than men generally do perform ...; and, that he will too, perform it with greater ease and satisfaction..." (*Letter I*, 6, 12).

varied than those concerning his life. His biographers judge that *Advice to young men* is "full of principles of lofty virtue and maxims of enduring truth" ([na] 1835: 254), while another author deems it "the highwater mark of Cobbett's literary attainment" (Carlyle 1904: 251). Since Cobbett died in 1835, *Advice to young men* could also be considered a collection of some of his final and most complete pronouncements on the conduct of life or even a kind of testament for posterity to remember him for.

As the title of this early nineteenth-century advice manual suggests, the collection of letters is designed mainly for young men of the middle class. In the over three hundred of his letters, Cobbett lays down the rules and regulations for a satisfying life of an industrious man (*Letter II*, 53, 47), who wishes to achieve variously defined success in his life, and, resultantly, may indulge in all forms of happiness in both the public and private sphere. Designating himself as an example to emulate, he then proceeds with defining youth (set between ages 14-20, according to him) as the most crucial, formative stage of a man's life, and he enumerates all the vices and virtues most common to this period of life. Displaying a very stern, if not fully killjoy, attitude towards life, he stresses the value of work in achieving public and personal success.[6] Only hard work will allow his model youth to avoid personal slavery, which he sees so prevalent in his times and detests whole-heartedly. The perfect man Cobbett strives to fashion is a necessarily a self-reliant man. The contemporary youth, Cobbett deems, follows "(...) the deleterious fashion of the day", which "has raised the minds of young men so much above their real rank and state of life" that in their lives they become nothing but "*showy slaves*" (*Letter I*, 16, 16). Thus, in the entries of *Letters I* and *II*, he enumerates the rules that should govern the life of a young man, which, in summary, include: sobriety in dress and behaviour; avoidance of vices such as gaming and overindulging in alcohol, food and coffee;[7] learning skills and acquiring knowledge suitable for the young man's station and future occupation; general fitness of mind and body; and, most significantly, the virtue of perseverance, which, in Cobbett's own words, is "a prime quality in

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[6] In one of his more extreme statements, he says: "(...) you have no right to live in this world; that being of hale body and sound mind, you have no right to any earthly existence, without doing *work* of some sort of other" (*Letter I*, 13, 15).

[7] When providing proof for his opinions, Cobbett often resorts to the ultimate argument that is the financial expense which a vice incurs; no reasonable man will, after all, agree to lose hard-earned money unnecessarily.

every pursuit" (*Letter I*, 46, 41).[8] Cobbett hopes to prepare his model youth for the pursuit of all major goals in a man's life, and, equally importantly, finding the perfect woman to take for a wife.

Before anyone manages to object to his authority in the matters of love or courting, he announces: "Some person will smile, and others laugh outright, at the idea of 'Cobbett's giving advice for conducting the affairs of love'" (Introduction, 9, 13). However, he assures that he still understands female nature and their influence on men, their conduct and well-being. After all, during his over sixty years of experience he supposedly managed to witness both the good and the bad of the female kind, and thus can easily draw very valuable conclusions for the younger generations of men. Importantly, he wishes to teach not only on courtship but necessarily on marriage.

Marriage seems for Cobbett the stage of life in which all the masculine virtues can be tested as well as benefitted from. The prevalent model of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century marriage is denoted by historians and sociologists as being affectionate or 'companionate'.[9] By that they generally mean relationships based on mutual love and reciprocal obligations of both spouses, stressing, however, that none of this means giving power or equal rights to women. On the contrary, in reality, for such a conjugal relationship to work voluntary submission and voluntary subservience were required on the part of the woman.[10] Officially, however, the ideological discourse stressed mutual recognition of conjugal duties and a joint endeavour towards a common goal – that is a happy life in and for the sake of prosperity. Marriage is indeed of utmost importance for Cobbett, and the subject of the value of conjugal relationships appears in many of his writings. In a different conduct text, Cobbett warns that without marriage and lawful procreation, England would

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8 Presenting himself as one who follows all of the discussed rules, he likewise advises to look up to America for exemplary behaviour. He states, for example: "I wish every English youth could see those of the United States of America; always *civil*, never *servile*" (*Letter I*, 37, 32). However, his love of America changed during his lifetime.

9 See for instance Vickery (1999).

10 Amanda Vickery (1999: 39) sees such a marriage as promoting "the mutual society, help and comfort of the partners", while at the same time citing letters of gentile women who needed to suppress their desire and limit their own freedom to achieve this goal.

plunge "into the miseries of debauchery and prostitution, and making a people what a herd of beasts now is" ("Forbidding marriage", 188).[11]

Another reason why Cobbett displays such a positive attitude towards marriage was that he himself allegedly found the perfect companion.[12] His own wife, Ann Reid, and his biographers mention only *in passim*,[13] he describes as "a companion, who, though deprived of all opportunity of acquiring what is *called learning*, had so much sense, so much useful knowledge, was so innocent, so just in all her ways, so pure in thought, word and deed, so disinterested, so generous, so devoted to me and her children, so free from all disguise, and, withal, so beautiful and so talkative, (...) so cheering (...)" (*Letter IV*, 216, 143) that he had never regretted marrying.[14] And the fact that he made such a wise choice of a spouse makes him, in his own eyes, the best possible advisor in the matters of reason and heart – precisely in this order. Falling head over heels in love with someone is madness for Cobbett, hence he discourages his readers from seeing women with 'heart's eyes' only. This insistence on a reasonable approach to love is the key guideline for Cobbett's model man. After all, the author states, a man "should never forget, that marriage, which is a state that every young person ought to have in view, is a thing to last *for life*; and at that, generally speaking, it is to make life *happy*, or *miserable*; (...) But to have the delights, as well as the cares, the choice has to be fortunate" (*Letter III*, 88, 71).

A young man who follows Cobbett's suggestions, then, will be able to discern between a good and a bad woman, and embark on the "life-enduring matrimonial voyage" (*Letter III*, 92, 75).[15] Following his own idea of companionship within relationships, Cobbett reminds his model reader that the woman he chooses deserves respect and affectionate treat-

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[11] Straightforwardly, he predicts that stigmatisation of marriage would make England "one great brothel" ("Forbidding marriage", 199).

[12] He saw his wife for the first when she was thirteen and he was almost 21 (*Letter III*, 94, 76).

[13] Lewis Melville, the editor of his posthumously published letters, mentions two references to Cobbett's wife in Thomas Moore's *Diary* and in Miss Mitford's *Recollections*. Both describe her as a quiet, sweet and motherly woman (Melville 1913: 73).

[14] For more on the relationship, see my forthcoming "From one father to another: William Cobbett's advice on motherhood and maternity".

[15] Importantly, Cobbett speaks against marriages of convenience, saying: "(...) marrying for the sake of money be, under any circumstance, despicable, if not disgraceful; if it be generally speaking, a species of legal prostitution" (*Letter III*, 86, 70).

ment because marriage requires from her absolute surrender and a complete change of identity. This is such a total transformation that the man needs to appreciate it. Cobbett states in his manual:

> (...) what [does] a young woman [give] up on her wedding day[?] she makes a surrender, an absolute surrender, of her liberty, for the joint lives of parties; she gives the husband the absolute right of causing her to live in what place, and in what manner and what society, he pleases; she gives him the power to take from her, and to use, for his own purposes, all her goods ...; and, above all, she surrenders to him *her person* (*Letter IV*, 178, 121-122).

In exchange for that voluntary submission, though never helplessness, she is to be protected and cherished by the benevolent husband. Benevolence here is an important word as, according to Cobbett, "a *bad husband* was never yet *a happy man*" (*Letter IV*, 224, 148). At the same time, however, Cobbett's understanding of the notion of benevolence does not equal lack of supervision or giving up power because a neglectful or weak husband risks fashioning for himself an evil woman. Therefore, even before marriage, when the young man has already mentally prepared himself to be a governor/head of a prospective family, he needs to make a shrewd evaluation of potential candidates for his wife. Very originally for a male conduct writer, he warns that if the man consciously chooses an imperfect woman, allowing himself to be fooled by her seemingly small faults, then the consequences he will suffer later on in life are all his own fault. As he explains: "To marry has been your own act; you have made the contract for your own gratification; you knew the character of the other party; (...) [Y]ou have no reason to complain" (*Letter III*, 90, 72-73). Attesting to the significance of the contract sanctioned by the Church and law, though the latter more than the former, he likewise offers answers to social problems described by other eighteenth-century authors, for example Daniel Defoe, who commented on the numerous instances of badly matched couples and its consequences in *Conjugal lewdness*. As such, Cobbett adds to the existing debate on restoring the value of marriage as the pillar of community and the (British) nation in general.

Resultantly, the subsequent entries of *Letters III* and *IV* – directed to the Lover and the Husband – contain a close study of men's object of desire, that is a meticulous description of a good woman as discovered, interpreted and properly managed by a prudent young man. Cobbett of-

ten resorts to statistics, using them as unquestionable evidence for the presented "truths" about women. These calculations, however, are never justified in any other way than basing them on his personal observations.

Even with this warning in mind, and despite one of his biographer's note that Cobbett was 'an adept' in the art of manipulation of facts (Carlyle 1904: 55), his book of advice may be seen as a very interesting, personal yet 'matter-of-fact' anatomy of female character and manners. Most certainly, however, one should not treat the fragments about women as added to the narrative *incidentally* which the title of the book seems to suggest. The perfect candidate for a wife is therefore subsequently analysed by Cobbett in terms of her outward and inward features. For the clarity of his 'semi-scientific' presentation Cobbett offers his male reader eight interconnected, imbedded and learnt virtues by which he should identify the potential candidate. What is important is that, although theoretically always perfectable, the woman should display almost at first meeting. Cobbett enumerates the virtues thus: "The things which you ought to desire in a wife are, 1. chastity; 2. sobriety; 3. industry; 4. frugality; 5. cleanliness; 6. knowledge of domestic affairs; 7. good temper; 8. beauty" (*Letter III*, 89, 71). These eight 'cardinal' virtues are easily recognisable in a woman as they reveal themselves in *symptoms* which Cobbett sets out to discuss.

Subsequently, Cobbett elaborates on his 'virtue criteria', beginning with the supreme female virtue, chastity, understood by him as modesty.[16] He states: "Chastity, perfect modesty, in word, deed, and even thought, is so essential, that, without it, no female is fit to be a wife" (*Letter III*, 90, 71). Unlike some other conduct book writers, Thomas Marriott for instance,[17] he insists not on 'staged' and temporary, public performance of virtue but advises the lover to scrutinise whether the virtue of chastity is

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[16] The author strongly cautions against vanity in women: "If she be vain of her person, very fond of dress, fond of flattery, at all given to gadding about, fond of what are called parties of pleasure, or coquetish (...); if either of these, she never will be trustworthy; worthy; she cannot change her nature" (*Letter III*, 93, 76).

[17] Thomas Marriott is the author of *Female conduct: Being an essay on the art of pleasing to be practised by the fair sex, before, and after marriage. A poem in two books. humbly dedicated, to Her Royal Highness, The Princess of Wales. Inscribed to Plautilla*. For more on his lessons, see my "'Ye Virgins, (...) Learn to Please': Thomas Marriott's Lessons on the Art of Pleasing and Ideal Femininity".

natural, inbred and permanent.[18] He likewise cautions the young man against what he calls "moderate chastity" (*Letter III*, 90, 72), as for him there is no such thing as compromise in female virtue. The same argument is relevant for sobriety in women, which for Cobbett is part and parcel of chastity. While superficially it denotes abstaining from alcohol, food and any other fleshly pleasure, he rather stresses sobriety of conduct, being "*steadiness, seriousness, carefulness,* [and] *scrupulous propriety* (...)" (*Letter III*, 92, 74). Only such a woman will be trustworthy enough to be a wife and facilitate her husband in the governing of the household. She is, after all, a contributor, even if quite passive,[19] to the economy of the household. Since Cobbett fiercely objects to having servants – unless it is absolutely necessary and even then as few as possible[20] – the exemplary wife should be the epitome of industriousness.

Disregarding the concept of a frail and helpless woman, educated and socialised to be a singing and dancing adornment of the household and its masculine head, Cobbett makes it clear that "[t]here is no state of life in which *industry* in the wife is not necessary to the happiness and prosperity of the family, at the head of the household affairs of which she is placed" (*Letter III*, 101, 82).[21] With this he clearly objects to the nineteenth-century ideals of a pale, weak and sickly woman who cannot or even should not contribute directly and actively to the household economy.[22] A woman who does not understand the basic economic tenets and requirements should be avoided at any cost according to Cobbett; hence,

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[18] Cobbett says: "it is with me, not enough that she cast down her eyes, or turn aside her head with a smile, when she hears an indelicate allusion: she ought to appear not to understand it" (*Letter III*, 90, 71-72).

[19] He explains for the sake of clarity: "She, therefore, ought to be qualified to begin, at once, to assist her husband in his earnings: the way in which she can most efficiently assist, is by taking care of his property; by expending his money to the greatest advantage, by wasting nothing" (*Letter III*, 123, 94).

[20] Cobbett is very anxious about servants and presents a negative portrait of this socio-economic group. Apart from the matters of expense, servants who, for instance, take care of the couple's children are often responsible for their deformities and deficiencies (*Letter V*, 255, 164). Female servants may also be a threat to the fidelity of the husband.

[21] Just as in the case of men, whom Cobbett informs that "We cannot all be 'knights' and 'gentlemen'" (*Letter I*, 23, 20), the writer explains that not all women should be raised as upper class 'good-for-nothings', lacking capability to sustain themselves in life.

[22] See for instance Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of perversity: Fantasies of feminine evil in fin-de-siecle culture*.

it is of utmost importance to immediately recognise the features of an industrious character in the opposite sex. The consequences of blindness to this feature of character are grave: "We discover, when it is too late, that we have not got a helpmate, but a burden; and, the fire of love being damped, the unfortunately educated creature, (...) is, unless she resolve to learn her duty, doomed to lead a life very nearly approaching to that of misery" (*Letter III*, 117, 91). Reading the outward signs in a woman's behaviour is, therefore, of the utmost importance. And industriousness is the most performative of all so Cobbett not only advises his reader to observe the woman's demeanour but also the dynamics of her mouth and the tone of her voice.

For instance, Cobbett confesses: "I never liked, your *sauntering*, soft-stepping girls, who move as it they were perfectly indifferent as to the result" (*Letter III*, 105, 84). Lack of goals in life and a propensity for laziness he likewise decodes in a woman's speech because, as Cobbett judges: "The pronunciation of an industrious person is generally *quick, distinct*, and the voice (...) *firm* at the least. Not masculine [though], as feminine as possible" (*Letter III*, 103, 83). And finally, since courting requires social activities such as dining with the candidate, the lover should carefully observe the woman's teeth:

> Look a little, also, at the labours of the *teeth*, for these correspond with those of the other members of the body, and with the operations of the mind. ... [S]he cannot make her *teeth* abandon their character. (...) [I]f her jaws move in slow time, and if she rather *squeeze* than bite the food; if she so deal with it as to leave you in doubt as to whether she mean finally to admit or reject it; if she deal with it thus, set her down as being (...) incorrigibly lazy (*Letter III*, 104, 84).

Such a woman will never be able to complement her husband in his attempts at governing a well-functioning family unit, and will inevitably object to domestic duties which await her, perhaps even deem them below her station. Cobbett, nevertheless, leaves no room for ignorance or pride in terms of economy in his "chaste domestic" (Wayne 1987: 59).[23] While his insistence on a woman's understanding of matters of economy and her

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[23] This term is used by Valerie Wayne in the context of the middle ages and the Renaissance, yet, as the tradition of conduct books and of patriarchal discourse on proper female conduct show, the ideal denoted as a 'chaste domestic' is implied across all centuries.

seemingly valuable participation in domestic governance could suggest that Cobbett allows his perfect woman significant agency, his final words to the lover, and future husband, re-instate the proper, patriarchal power relations and dynamics in the family.

Similarly to other male authors of books of conduct, Cobbett, therefore, reminds his readers that the power to govern is vested in the man, and wives are expected to give themselves totally to the husband: "But reason says, and God has said, that it is the duty of wives to be obedient to their husbands" (*Letter IV*, 186, 126). As such, the virtue of obedience is shown as *just* according to religious and secular reasons and should not be questioned by the woman. Considering the entire history of the discourse of virtue, Cobbett actually perpetuates Aristotelian notions of female virtue expressed only in subordination.[24] Apart from its religious undertones, the author stresses that submission and subjection are part and parcel of the marriage contract, and also reasonable: "[I]t is so clearly *just* that the authority should rest with him on whose head rests the whole responsibility, that a woman, when patiently reasoned with on the subject, must be a virago in her very nature not to submit with docility to the terms of her marriage vow" (*Letter IV*, 186, 127). Naturally, Cobbett predicts 'interventions' on the part of the woman, perhaps even attempts at rebellion;[25] however, such actions should be curbed from the beginning. Displaying the fear of the power of 'sisterhood', he likewise seems to recognise the danger of external influence on women, especially suggestions from other women, yet even in such case he offers a solution: "Women are a sisterhood. They make common cause in behalf of the sex; and, indeed, this is natural enough, when we consider the vast power that the law gives us over them. The law is for us, and they combine, wherever they can, to mitigate its effects. This is perfectly natural, and, to a certain extent, laudable, evincing fellow-feeling and public spirit" (*Letter IV*, 185, 126).

Nevertheless, there should be no doubt as to who holds the authority in the family. Cobbett, in his more benevolent tone, advises: "The wife ought to be *heard*, and *patiently* heard; she ought to be reasoned with,

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[24] Constance Jordan (1987: 29) discusses this Aristotelian perception of female virtue in her essay devoted to civic virtue in "Boccaccio's in-famous women: Gender and civic virtue in the *De mulieribus claris*".

[25] The writer predicts that she "may, with all her virtues, be (...) led to *a bold interference in the affairs of her husband*; may attempt to dictate to him in matters quite out of her own sphere" (*Letter IV*, 183, 125).

and, if possible, convinced; but if, after all endeavours in this ways, she remain opposed to the husband's opinion, his will *must* be obeyed" (*Letter IV*, 189, 128). A clever wife, then, is to understand that whatever the husband does is for the sake of the family, not for his own benefit, and he is the one responsible to the law; therefore, she should put all her trust in his decisions.[26] In stating this so firmly, Cobbett differs from many conduct writers who repeatedly advise women to use mild powers of persuasion in achieving what they want, of course, always making the husband feel that the decision is his.[27] Cobbett does not accept such scheming in any of the sexes, treating marriage as an honest union of people genuinely trusting and loving each other. This love and trust, however, is the result of the woman's acceptance of her subordinate position within the family. And only in such 'benign' conditions may the couple later raise children who will look up to them in search of patterns of proper behaviour.

Parenthood itself becomes a significant element of conduct books published in the late eighteenth century, as evidenced by the rise of contemporary studies on re-writing the history of fatherhood.[28] Indeed, Cobbett pays significant attention to the *father's* participation in family affairs,[29] yet he devotes many more entries of his manual to motherhood, confirming Amanda Vickery's (1999: 92) claim that "motherhood as a social role was an eighteenth-century invention". Cobbett extensively deals with women's *obligation* to have children and even the process of nursing. In case such matters fail to be discussed before marriage, Cobbett says, the husband should make the young wife immediately "see the justice of beginning to act upon the presumption, that there are *children coming*" (*Letter IV*, 153, 107). For him, it is once again part of the marriage contract, and Cobbett leaves no room for the woman's objection to procreation. For him "it is against nature to suppose that children can cease

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[26] "[I]t is her duty to obey all his lawful commands; and, if she have sense, she will perceive that it is a disgrace to herself to acknowledge, as a husband, a thing over which she has an absolute control" (*Letter IV*, 182.124).

[27] See Marriott's poetic text of conduct.

[28] See, for instance, Matthew McCormack, "'Married men and the fathers of families': Fatherhood and franchise reform in Britain" (2007: 43-54); Karen Harvey, *The little republic: Masculinity and domestic authority in eighteenth-century Britain* (2014); or Joanne Bailey, *Parenting in England, 1760-1830* (2012).

[29] For more, see my "From one father to another: William Cobbett's advice on motherhood and maternity", forthcoming.

to be born; they must and will come" (*Letter IV*, 209, 139). Being a father himself, he reminds his readers of the reproductive imperative[30] and continues with giving suggestions on what has to be called the proper management of the womb and breasts.[31]

Having established all the rules pertaining to proper female conduct – before and after marriage – he does not omit presenting negative examples of women, whom the youth has to steer away from. He criticises "guzzling" and extravangant women (*Letter III*, 91, 73 and 109, 87) whose habits have the potential to destroy the family, and, of course, no husband can stand a querulous and pertinent woman, whose presence in the house "must be extremely troublesome (...)" (*Letter III*, 127, 95). There is, however, one more category of women, whom Cobbett detests even more, and that is prostitutes. For someone who supposedly deeply cares for the fate of the underprivileged, he does not see any excuse or legitimate reason for women turning to this particular trade. He warns his youth, who, as Cobbett suspects, might encounter or even be tempted by a prostitute: "Prostitutes never *love*, and, for the far greater part, never did. Their passion, which is more *mere animal* than any thing else, is easily gratified; they (...) change not only without pain, but with pleasure; (...)" (*Letter III*, 100, 81). As such, he recognises the danger of straying away from the marriage bed, and, therefore, devotes a significant part of his manual to adultery. In his opinion about cheating he is, paradoxically, both extraordinary and conventional. Cobbett differs from other conduct writers, who focus only on what a woman can do once a husband decides to offer his affection to someone else, and attempts to explain the reasons for such behaviour. He does not tolerate adultery in any of the sexes but seemingly understands why a woman would decide to do it. And instead of blaming the woman or excusing the man, he unconventionally recognises fault in the male spouse. Being cast in a softer mould, as earlier manuals of conduct stated, women are more sensitive to changes and fluctuations in men's feelings, and may be pushed towards unlawful and disgraceful acts, like adultery, in search of affection.

Cobbett, at times, seems to display a progressive attitude towards women's satisfaction in marriage: "[A]s to women in the married state,

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30 He never, however, mentions anything related to the sexual act itself.

31 Cobbettian government of the pregnant body as well as the early stages of nurture are described in my "From one father to another: William Cobbett's advice on motherhood and maternity", forthcoming.

this argument assumes, that, when they fall, it is from their own vicious disposition; when the fact is, that, if you search the annals of conjugal infidelity, you will find, that nine times out of ten, the *fault is in the husband*. It is his neglect, his flagrant disregard, his frosty indifference, his foul example; it is to these that (...) he owes the infidelity of his wife (...)" (*Letter III*, 130, 96). He further states:

> If he have been cold and neglectful; if he have led a life of irregularity; if he have proved to her that *home* was not his delight; if he have made his house the place of resort for loose companions; (...) if he have introduced the habit of indulging in what are called '*innocent freedoms*;' if these, or any of these, the fault is his, he must take the consequences, and he has no right to inflict punishment on the offender, the offence being in fact of his own creating (*Letter IV*, 206, 138).

However, this is where his understanding and a more lenient attitude ends because when it comes to consequences of adultery, he is, conventionally, one could even say traditionally, against women. He explains his opinion thus:

> They say that *adultery* is *adultery*, in men as well as in them; and that, therefore, the offence is a great in the one case as in the other. As a crime (...) it certainly is; but, as to the *consequences*, there is a wide difference. (...) [T]he husband, by his breach of that vow, only brings *shame* upon his wife and family; whereas the wife, by a breach of her vow, may bring the husband a spurious offspring to maintain (...) (*Letter IV*, 199, 135).[32]

As such, he reiterates arguments used by conduct writers, from as far back as the Middle Ages, where a woman's infidelity is more heinous because it, most often, makes the husband raise illegitimate children. As for the advice on what to do after the wife's transgression, he seems in two minds. One the one hand, he claims: "Folly or misconduct in the husband, cannot, indeed, justify or even palliate infidelity in the wife, whose very nature ought to make her recoil at the thought of the offence; but it may, at the same time, deprive him of the right of inflicting punishment on her: (..). the husband must hold his peace" (*Letter IV*, 206, 138); on the other,

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[32] Cobbett also notices the double standards of his society, though he never deems them as such: "Men who have been guilty of the offence are not cut off from society, but women who have been guilty of it are" (*Letter IV*, 201.135).

he explains: “There is no excuse for continuing to live with an adultress; no inconvenience, no loss, no suffering, ought to deter a man from delivering himself from such a state of filthy infamy” (*Letter IV*, 205, 137). There seems to be no circumstance or love strong enough which would make a reasonable man decide to remain married to such a woman. To avoid making such choices, then, the husband needs to make sure that he not only controls and supervises the woman, but also offers her enough affection.

In conclusion, then, while Cobbett’s manual is yet another conventional example of cultural concerns about female conduct, his narrative is an ambiguous work – while it frequently praises women and their influence on men, which is a tendency initiated by many eighteenth century manuals, it simultaneously reduces them to the position of subordinated adjuncts. Being granted some power over the management of the household, women are in return to pleasurably surrender themselves to masculine authority. In practice, as the manual suggests, this means that the prospective wife should provide the man with comfortable conditions for pursuing his own career and facilitating further development of his masculine virtues, while enjoying its benefits as well. After all, as Cobbett preaches to his model youth: “without wives, *men are poor helpless mortals*” (*Letter IV*, 211, 141). In his sermon on marriage quoted earlier he even more explicitly adds: “Without woman, what is man? A poor, solitary, misanthropic creature; a rough, uncouth, a hard, unfeeling and almost brutal being” (“Forbidding marriage”, 188). Judging by the *Advice to young men*, the author seems perfectly aware of the overwhelming number of rules and regulations he presented and that they show marriage as a very difficult endeavour. However, in his writings, he insists on the benefits of formalised unions, because “the greatest of all earthly blessings are found in the married state” (“Forbidding marriage”, 188). Furthermore, suggesting in the *Advice to Young Men* that marriage is worth the trouble, he likewise presents his readers with a grim vision of a life without the carefully chosen metaphorical helpmeet: “What a life to lead!! No one to talk to without going from home, or without getting some one to come to you; no friend to sit and talk to (...) no soul having a common interest with you (...), and no care of you: no one to cheer you (...) to say all in one word, no one to *love* you (...)” (*Letter IV*, 213, 142). As such, marriage to a proper woman – meticulously and definitely not incidentally anatomised by Cobbett – is of undeniable benefit to the man.

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III

SUB ROSA: THE COVERT LIVES OF CONTEMPORARY WOMEN IN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

TELLING STORIES, TELLING LIVES: SHARON MAAS AND HER WORK[1]

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Sharon Maas, one of the most interesting writers of Guyanese origin writing in English, was born in Georgetown, Guyana in 1951. Her father David Westmaas was Press Secretary to Dr Cheddi Jagan. "My parents were political, progressive, liberal, leftist. My father, indeed, was a Marxist, for many years Press Secretary to the controversial Opposition Leader Cheddi Jagan. My mother was a leading feminist during feminism's dawn, an icon of Progress"[2] she writes about her parents. Her mother, Eileen Cox (1918-2014) was indeed one of the few Guyanese feminists and human rights activists. She was the first girl in the country to win a Guiana Scholarship and the first one to turn it down[3]. In 1971, Cox was instrumental in forming Guyana first consumer association. Eileen Cox is the author of numerous articles including "A Guyanese perspective of Jonestown, 1979"[4] concerning the famous mass suicide in Jonestown, which has become the subject matter of a novel *Children of paradise* (2014) by Fred D'Aquiar. Maas writes about her mother: "That 92-year-

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[1] I am very grateful to Sharon who has been gracious enough to read this text and offered her commentaries.

[2] "Running Away" (http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=40254) (date of Access, July 25, 2015). Eileen Cox "A Guyanese perspective of Jonestown, 1979" (http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=40255) (date of access July 26, 2015).

[3] Sharon Maas writes: "This is actually disputed – my mother says she didn't win it. My aunt says she did. I can't find any proof that she did" (e-mail August 4, 2015).

[4] Eileen Cox "A Guyanese perspective of Jonestown, 1979" (http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=40255) (date of access July 26, 2015).

old woman who appeared unable to harm a fly looked me straight in the eye and pronounced, 'I am fearless; I have no relatives who would be victimised because of what I say or do; I criticize whomever, whenever it is prudent to do so'"[5]. Sharon Mass notes that the generation of her mother's was brought up in traditional values which meant that a woman's place was in the kitchen among pots and pans, and her mother wanted to prove them wrong[6]. Eileen Cox is also the subject matter of Sharon Maas' contribution to the present volume[7].

Growing up in Guyana at time of change and in such an auspicious family gave the young Sharon the solid foundations of a future novelist. Talking about her childhood Maas writes:

> I grew up in Guyana. As a child of divorced middle-class parents, I had a muddled if basically happy childhood. Guyana was a wonderful place to grow up in back then, as anyone who shared that background will agree: Georgetown, an overgrown village, lush and green, a tree-shaded haven where everyone knew everyone else, or at least everyone else's aunty or second cousin. The Interior was untouched by nature, mysterious and vast. Guyana would have been paradise, if not for the political turbulences[8].

Incidentally, if one looks at the official tourist guides of Guyana, it is still often advertised as an ecological paradise and the theme of bountiful nature, natural resources and the need for the preservation of Guyana's unique ecosystem is frequently put forward as the chief preoccupation of Guyanese domestic policies. What for Walter Raleigh became a failed El-Dorado, today offers a different kind of gold, that of savannah, tropical rainforest and waterfalls, unspoiled by civilization. And this is the picture advertised by the Royal Geographical Society in the article entitled "Guyana: Ecology and wildlife":

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5 Earth Hero: Eileen, "I am fearless" (http://land-of-many-waters.blogspot.com /2012/03/earth-hero-eileen-i-am-fearless.html) (date of access July 26, 2015).

6 Earth Hero: Eileen: "I am fearless" (http://land-of-many-waters.blogspot.com /2012/03/earth-hero-eileen-i-am-fearless.html) (date of access July 26, 2015).

7 For more on Eileen Cox, see (http://www.kaieteurnewsonline.com /2014/11/30/consumer-advocate-eileen-cox-is-dead/) (date of access July 26, 2015).

8 "Running Away" (http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=40255) (date of access July 26, 2015).

> Due to around 90% of the population of Guyana living on the narrow coastal strip, Guyana's forested interior is left sparsely populated, except for Amerinidian villages. The country's low population density results in little human disturbance to flora and fauna habitats, however the destruction of the rainforest due to the country's weak economy, has taken its toll on many species including, giant river otters, ocelots and golden frogs.[9]

The natural bounty of the land was noticed by European colonial powers, most notably Britain, yet in a lecture concerning the state of the colony, published in 1892, E.F. IM Thurn, esq. feels the need to begin with the geographical position of the country as "so often is the Colonist of Guiana humiliated when at home by finding that the whereabouts of his home is unknown to so many" (1892: 20)[10].

The love of the land with its unique ecosystems and diverse racial make-up of the population are the most powerful aspects of Sharon Maas' writings, who following her idyllic childhood in Guyana, was educated both in Guyana and England. She worked as a journalist for the *Sunday Chronicle* and has travelled widely in South America, Europe and Asia recording her experiences in the *Chronicle*. She has lived in France and England and after almost two years in an Indian Ashram she moved to Germany where she currently resides. In 1973 she journeyed to India via England, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. She told us when in Poznań, she eventually wants to move to a Caribbean country to live in warmer climate (private conversation 04. 2014)[11] but "I now plan", Sharon writes, "to move to Guyana in 2017" (an email of August 4, 2015).

Her first novel, *Of marriageable age* (1999) was a family saga set in India, Guyana and England telling a story of diasporic Indians, whose lives span from 1920's Madras, 1940's Tamil Nandu, through the 1960s in Guyana and then Britain. The main characters are Savitri, the daughter of a cook in 1920's pre-war India, Nataraj (Nat) of mixed parentage, whom we first meet in an orphanage, run by the Christian nuns in 1947, under the name Paul, who turns out to be Savitri's son by an Englishman called David, and Sarojini, brought up in Georgetown in British Guiana, who

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[9] For more, see (http://www.rgs.org/WhatsOn/Past+events/Travel+Events/Guyana/Guyana+ecology.htm) (date of access July 26, 2015).

[10] I am grateful to Ms Marta Frątczak who have found this text and shared it with me.

[11] For more, see (http://www.sharonmaas.com/#!bio/c1ktj) (date of access July 26, 2015).

thinks she is Savitri's daughter. The story begins quite typically with Savitri's unhappy childhood in colonial India where, although talented and bright, she was not permitted to study with her brother and their neighbours' son; as it would not be appropriate for a young girl (2000: 83). Savitri is married at 17 – "old for a Indian girl" – (2000: 193), against her will and despite her love for David, she obeys the family decree. She later tells Saroj that "...daughters were always a headache for the poor Hindu fathers" (2000: 63). Her story of acceptance is juxtaposed with that of Saroj's rebellion against her father's decision to marry her off as soon as Saroj would turn thirteen, which is when she would have become "of marriageable age" (2000: 43). Saroj disagrees with her father's autocratic rule as much as with her mother's willingness to accept his will. Yet, despite the typical teenage problems of communication between mother and daughter, she admires her mother as the epitome of a good Indian wife in Guyana:

> Saroj now saw Ma as what she always had been: an excellent cook, a conscientious housekeeper, a devoted mother, a dutiful wife, a fervent Hindu. A typical Indian housewife, docile, subservient. Loving, good and strong; strong in the sense that all mothers are strong for their children, but nevertheless an impotent spirit in the background, coyed and cringing under Baba's foot. Baba's rule was despotic, his rule was law, and no-one dared disobey, least of all, Ma (2000: 54).

In the late 1950s British Guiana (which became Guyana in 1966) is a place where the values of the old continent slowly die despite the attempts to preserve the caste system. Because of its mixed race population it is also a fertile ground for constant culture clashes and the ever present racism, which is manifested in the story of Indrani, Saroj's older sister whose wedding sari is touched by Saroj's school friend of African extraction. "Indrani refused to wear the sari Trixie had touched. Baba sent a telegram to Calcutta asking for a new one to be rushed over by air-mail. The exquisite peacock-and-roses sari was still perfectly usable, though polluted by an African hand" (2000: 129).

The problem of the "disagreements" between the descendants of the African slaves and the descendants of the coolies, East Indian indentured workers, has already been noticed by E.F. Thurn. In his "Notes on British Guiana", Thurn demonstrates what is the nature of the crisis that the colony has been experiencing. He says that Guyana is in the "critical stages in

its history" and tries to discuss the circumstances of its position as well as "the methods the adoption of which seems to me most likely to turn the crisis in a favourable direction" (1892: 1). Thurn discusses the make-up of the country from the original "Redskins" (1892: 5), through Dutch and British settlers, African slaves making up the population of the West Indian negroes (1892: 7) to the East Indian and Chinese labourers. He provides his listeners/readers with the tables of population according to race and population according to occupation.

More than sixty years later than Thurn's report, the country, now the independent Republic of Guyana, is still in turmoil because of the ongoing conflicts between the Indians and the Africans which is frequently stressed in the novel in question. Maas has Ganesh, Saroj's brother, argue: "Baba, you said if Cheddi wins the election then Indians going to rule!", to which his father replies: "Indians outnumber Africans and as long as Hindus and Muslims stick together and vote together as one we will rule and keep those uppity Africans in their place – the country is going to the dogs I tell you, but God is on our side..." (2000: 17). Saroj's father's political enthusiasm is mentioned in connection with the Cheddi Jagan's "first successes at the polls: the winning of the 1957 election and the 1961 election" (2000: 145), which Maas attributes to the fact that "an Indian ran against an African and Indians outnumbered Africans" (2000: 145). The racial disagreements escalated when Forbes Burnham succeeded Jagan as Prime Minister in 1964; the Indian vs. African is foreground in family discourse: "It was a slap in Baba's face. He railed against the British government and the CIA, both of whom, he shouted, had plotted to bring down the Indian leader, suspecting him of Communism" (2000: 147).

The escalation of politically influenced racial violence is explained by Maas in a fragment where she talks about the 19th c. recruitment procedures: "In 1859 three Brahmin brothers, Devadas, Ramdas and Shridas were walking through the bazaar to the Kali temple in Calcutta when they were approached by a recruiter" (2000: 65). In 1964, "the descendants of Ramdas, Shridas and Devadas were living in Guyana. The new generation was not non-practicing Hindus, They were converting to Christianity, giving their children English, Christian names" (2000: 69). The framing of the historical processes and Guyanese politics of the post-liberation era makes the novel not only a family saga, but also, in part, a historical novel, in its scope and theme similar to Amitav Gosh's *The glass palace* (2000) published a year after Mass' novel. However, where Maas is con-

cerned primarily with women's lives – Nat's story is only important to show the fates of the mixed-race children in India, and is chiefly concerning Savitri's and Saroj's slow and sometimes painful "road to independence" and maturation, Gosh's novel, even though discussing similar topics such as family life during the time of war and political upheaval in Burma, focuses on male characters. Accused by Rukmini Bhaya Nair of "striking valorisation, almost Ivanhoe-ish" (2015: 167), Gosh's novel is nevertheless "tackling history within the boundaries of contemporary fiction" (2015: 167). Nair exonerates Gosh's poetics by calling it "a duty to create an imaginative grace out of the relatively recent memories of an embittered history of disgrace which I have suggested marks the teleology of the postcolonial novel" (2015: 167).

Analogous clemency can be used to counter Lisa E. J. Lau views of Maas' novel:

> With a willing suspension of cynicism on the part of the reader, Maas' debut novel could be quite a lot of fun, but it does require some tolerance from the reader. It is a carefully crafted piece of writing, praiseworthy for its ability to entertain and absorb the reader, but reads more like a fairy-tale for adults than any realistic portrayal of the life of diasporic Indians (Lau 2009).

The novel is elaborate and well-ordered, written in a language that is evocative of the smells and sounds of the world long gone and only retrieved through writing. Even though one may see Savitri as all too good, Baba too much of an Indian dominating father, and Sarojini a rather typical rebellious teenager, through their individual life stories, the novel manages to avoid blunt stereotyping while being a full-blown family saga with a feminist twist. And whether Lau wants it or not, it is the novel about women trying to survive through hardships and wars but also learning to accept their responsibilities. The story ends well, for Saroj finds out that the parent with a secret was not her mother and her supposed lover, but her father, who fathered a child with Parvati, a servant woman, and that daughter, adopted by Savitri, was Saroj. Falling in love with Nat, and finally being able to be with him, by dreaming of creating a hospital and an orphanage in the house that used to belong to David's parents; Saroj metaphorically and literally comes home.

The idea of home and heritage are also the subject matter of Maas's next novel entitled *Peacocks dancing* (2000) advertised on the 2001 pa-

perback edition as "[a]n exotic story of richness, ruin and roots". The novel is set in Guyana where the narrator, Rita Maraj, grows up like a wild flower, undomesticated and un-groomed, her unencumbered imagination mirroring that of the untamed Guyanese landscapes. In the words of Lalitha Nataraj (2009) "Sharon Maas tries to evoke a lush tale that traverses numerous boundaries: national, racial, religious, and economic". Rita's birth surrounded by the aura of illegitimacy: "...her birth was a calamity. Her mother, Lynette a coloured girl from a poor up-country family, died immediately after the delivery" (2001: 14). From her birth Rita is marked out twice, first as a "bastard", and then as a racial "mongrel": "Ronnie had given her the blood of Asia but from her mother she had received a perfect blend of African, European and Amerindian stock, which, in well-tuned synthesis with her father's contribution, had produced this forest-brownie of a girl ..." (2001: 22). Years later when as a teenager she visits her mother's family, she finally has the feeling of belonging, the feeling which repeatedly was taken away by her stepmother, Marilyn whose sole aim in life was to bring back racial (that is Indian) purity back to the Maraj family. As a result Rita grew up in the shadow of her adored beautiful younger sister, Isabelle. Rita was very much her father's daughter, following him into journalism, but she was also very much alienated from her immediate family. Rita's visit to her Granny and the words of her Aunty Doreen: "You is half-English, half-Amerindian, she said to her mother. 'So me and Lynette is quarter-white, quarter-Amerindian. And she is eighth-white, eighth-Amerindian" (2001: 181) gave the uglier daughter new perspective and drew a line between her unhappy past and, perhaps, not-so-unhappy future. She should probably be told what Saroj was told by Savitri in *Of marriageable age*: "'Ugly things can be beautiful inside, Ma told Saroj. 'The outside doesn't count. It's the inside that's real'" (2000: 14). After all, as Maas argues: "Guyanese loved nothing more than to explain and explore the extraordinary racial intermingling that made each ethnically unique. It was a form of identity-search, a way, of finding one's own place in the web of society..." (2001: 181).

The trip to visit her relatives is memorable for Rita because of yet another issue, that of the land beyond Georgetown, which Rita could fathom existed in its own right. Already Thurn noticed that most of the white, East Indian and African population live in the coastal area: "We have now fairly enough exhausted the enumeration of the presently utilised parts of the Colony. Beyond these limits, if we except the small scattered patches

which have for brief periods been worked for gold, little is even known" (1892: 22). The "beyond" is what was reached on foot and by boat, to which Rita from her early childhood felt particular affinity, rescuing animals and helping people in need. No wonder she is livid when she learns that the government is selling rainforest to foreign companies. The grown-up Rita tries to prevent that by writing an article "Government selling off Rainforest to Foreign Companies" (2001: 209) which is never published, only to find out that her stepmother sold part of the rainforest that she inherited from her family to "a Hudson-what's it, a Canadian company" (2001: 273). Marilyn did not feel that she was committing any kind of transgression. She needed money for her daughter Isabelle. Beautiful sister, Isabelle, who, according to Marilyn: "...has no prospects in this country, no future, none of us have" (2001: 232), is supposedly destined to be Miss Guyana, "...this year Miss Guyana would be Indian" (2001: 246).

Centuries old conflicts so succinctly shown in *Of marriageable age* are also part and parcel of Rita's world, as the country's political confusion that threatened the end of colonialism: "The Maraj fortune was too much bound up in the country for them to leave: it lay in sugar" (2001: 12). The plantation was sold by an Englishman after he was deserted by his three hundred slaves. The Maraj name was old money, that is why Marilyn was so intent on making it racially and religiously pure. In the 1960s Guyana, "Mixed-up blood is fine, Mixed-up religion, no. God don't like that" (2001: 182) as Granny explained to Rita.

> Ronnie Maraj, a Christian-Hindu, for instance, was friends with Shankar Roy, a Hindu, but although both were Indian, they were hated by the Farouks at the corner, who were Indian too, but Muslim. Mr Farouk, on the other hand, was friends with black Mr Knight across the road, even though blocks and Indians were officially enemies, because both had studied 'abroad' – different universities, different disiplines, but still 'abroad' – and were thus above hoi polloi. (They longed for association with Dr Wong, Polly's father, the Cambridge graduate.) Mrs Knight, who was white, was Mrs Wong's best friend, whereas Dr Wong often went with Mr Roy to the race-course and usually betted on the same horse. The Portuguese de Souzas at Number Four kept pretty much to themselves, though Mrs de Souza often visited white Mrs Knight, who dint her pure-blood Englishness, possessed an all-round popularity. Her opinion was second only to the Word of God: though Mrs de Souza was a lawyer and her husband a High Court magistrate,

> and Mrs Knight only a housewife and retired secretary and her husband a British Embassy employee (not even Consul), it was quite clear Who was Who in the hierarchy (2001: 21-22).

Similar hierarchies are found in the second part of the novel that is set in India. When the prospect of the mysterious inheritance appears, Marilyn immediately wants to send Isabelle to India, to marry her off to the unknown, and dream like prince, or rather maharajah. She does not see Rita as eligible: "These people are Indians, they won't want a half-breed. An apart from that she's illegitimate. You know what these Indians are like. Very strict" (2001: 230). In the end, the sisters go together to meet the prospective husband even though Rita belittles the "old-fashioned-ness" of India: "... people here don't find husbands and wives for their children, this isn't India. We stopped that long ago. We are free to find our own partners" (2001: 226). Since neither Marilyn, nor they themselves have ever been to India, they have no notion of what to expect, and their image is fed by images of fairy tale like royal riches, which in this case is almost true:

> Rani had created this safe soft perfect world, this world of golden platters overflowing with ambrosial eatables, of silk garments and emerald lawns and bowls filled with jewels you could plunge your hands into, cup and rise up, letting them ripple through your fingers like water. A world where peacocks strutted across brilliant lawns, their tails fanned out in glory. Rani had created this world and kept it perfect for him, which was why he did not, could not, fear Rani. Rani, who reigned with absolute jurisdiction within the far-flung walls of her empire (2001: 78).

Indeed one may accuse Maas of repeating the stereotypes about India, where palaces are juxtaposed with brothels, young abandoned princesses can be sold into prostitution, where incredible old wealth co-exists with credible new poverty. Although truly impressed by their long-lost relative, for Isabelle Rani's house is a unknown and unknowable labyrinth, Isabelle jokingly says that perhaps it is a harem, perhaps, "Rani's a lesbian" (2001: 315). Maas tries to explain the situation:

> Betrayed by the British Raj, those statesmen we had always been loyal to. Sold out! We had no choice! We had to merge; we were given no alternative! We had to destroy ourselves in order to survive – but how! All titles taken; no land, no more subjects. What could Regent maharani do? She was only a woman, and when all over Royal India even the

> most powerful of kings, even the most ancient of royal families were destroying themselves and merging, what could she do? Nothing. It is all Destiny. It is God's will and we have to accept it (2001: 317).

In the novel, Maas exposes Caroline's, Kamal's wife's, naïvete, whose knowledge of India was "entirely intellectual and totally cliched, picked up from a thousand books and articles written from a Western viewpoint and brimful of Western prejudices and Western condescension of which she herself was not in the least aware" (2001: 91). She has Isabelle express equally stereotypical view on India when she delivers a guide-book like speech on purdah: "...here in the East the women are kept separately. They aren't supposed to leave the home at all. And I think that's what she [the Rani, LS] expects of us!" (2001: 310). While Isabelle and Marilyn might have been too Indian in Guyana, in India, they are not Indian enough. For Isabelle, as much as for Rita, India is not the country of their origin, not even an imaginary homeland. It may, however, become home for Rita through her love for Kamal and their common cause of the search and rescue of his daughter Asha and other adolescent prostitutes. While Nataraj criticizes the novel:

> If I am being overly critical it's because I was under the impression that Maas was writing a story where a girl would travel to the country of her roots and do some soul searching. All I got was a tired text that revisited just about every stereotype (dirty Indians, sex-trafficking, opulent palaces) perceived in Western mainstream culture. Rita never gets past these stereotypes, and that really frustrated me – especially since Maas ends the book with Rita being some sort of heroic figure (I won't say what she does) as a result of her westernized consciousness (Nataraj 2009).

A lot of such criticism is entirely unjustified. In the novel, Rani sees the sisters as coming from a barbarian culture (2001: 312), and does not seem to hear Rita telling her that Guyana is not a smaller India transplanted into South America: "Isabelle is not like you, not really Indian. Where we grew up we do things differently" (2001: 334). Nataraj sees Rita's telling Rani about the differences between East and West Indians as repetitively uninteresting: "What a trite, and reductive statement – I'm so tired of hearing about the arranged marriage issue – it's almost as if there are no more nuances to explore in diasporic texts, so the arranged marriage thing is something to fall back on. It's a boring topic!" (Nataraj 2009). If it is

such a boring topic why, then, generations of writers from Hanif Kureishi's seminal *Buddha of suburbia* (1990), to *Monica Ali's Brick Lane* (2003) and many other novels and films are still puzzled with the issue. Likewise, the problem of raising children in families where modernity is always in a clash with old values, is never outdated. Asha the lost one, is lost because of Kamal who does not know how to deal with the pain of losing his wife and as a result cannot take care of his daughter: "...as an Indian man it would probably never have occurred to him to raise her on his own. Raising children here is woman's work" (2001: 382). The story is not only about the incessant process of negotiating identities in Guyanese fiction, it is also the coming of age novel which narrates the process of Rita's maturation. The Indian setting which is as new to Rita, as it was to Sharon Maas when she herself visited the country as a young woman, is described through the eyes of the protagonist who is as dismayed as she is overwhelmed with the picture. Human trafficking and child prostitution are topics perhaps not limited to India alone and judging by the amount of news concerning such issues far from negligible. India is not exoticized, it is exotic and will remain so which is part of its allure for Europeans and Americans. Such a perception feeds the interest in foreign literatures in English and is not a negative aspect. It might be irritating for anyone from India to be forever imprisoned in the discourses of difference – I am speaking from the position of a person coming from what was in the past, Eastern Europe, the country forever perceived through lack and want – yet poverty, prostitution and homelessness remain the plagues of the twenty first century and, by themselves, should never be passed over.

The problem of poverty which always seems to broaden the East – and – West divide is also the subject matter of *The speech of angels* (2003). The novel begins with three mottoes one each – from Marty Hanson-Roscoe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Thomas Carlyle, the last one being: "Music is well said to be the speech of angels". Such a thought was also part of the medieval imagination where musical harmony was seen as the gift from God, and subsequently in literature of the time the devil could not sing nor speak in verse (see Hildegard of Bingen's *Ordo Virtutum*). In the novel, an Indian girl, Jyothi, whose name means 'light' (2004: 285) is found on the street of Bombay and adopted by a German-Irish American couple Monika and Jack. Jyothi's family, was a family of poor washers, her father died but her mother remained a *dhobi,* a washer. As it turned out later, she had a step-father who beat her and was on the brink

of selling his six year old step-daughter into prostitution[12]. "It's a horrible practice...and against the law. Young girls, some as young as two or three, sold to the highest bidder and dedicated to the goddess Yellamma. They end up in the urban brothels" (2004: 76). As the couple is childless, she becomes their dream child, and after an arduous process of adoption, taken to Germany, where she is expected to show all the necessary talents to satisfy her adoptive parents' ambitions. But she does not. She finds it hard to learn German, to live their ordered German life, to excel in a German school. She does not really bond with her new mother, clings to her new father. "Travelling with Jyothi was like having a constant shadow. She never left his side" (2004: 107).

When Jack and Jyothi landed in Germany, she did not show any sign of recognition of Monica (2004: 120-121), any pleasure at seeing her and that initial impression has marred their relationship. Another problem was Jyothi's difficulty in learning German. Her adoptive parents and teachers diagnose her as dyslexic: "She tends to write words backwards. She writes the letters backwards...That is normal at the beginning...But at this stage – end of the second form – she should at least be showing signs of understanding the differences between backwards and forwards" (2004: 149). In short, Jyothi is not a bright little girl, a pearl taken out of the gutter to outshine other children. Soon they find out that "...she's not going to be an academic" (2004: 151). Angry at Monica, Jack tells her "Goddammit woman, if you wanted a perfect little German girl you should have got yourself one!" (2004: 136). Their household has always been based on the rules and regulations Monica introduced, but in their new situation Jack suddenly feels the atmosphere too suffocating, too constricted to be happy. The result is the cooling of his affection towards Monica and almost the break-up of the family. Monica, in turn, has always wanted to have a "normal", advertisement-like, family, with a smiling little girl playing with the neighbourhood children "...other people adopted children; adopted children belonged as much to the parents as biological children, it was love and attention that children received that made them an integral part of the family..." (2004: 153). Despite their efforts, Jyothi's was not a happy integration. She looked different and, according to the

[12] The man who is an out of work dhobi wants to sell Jyothi, he is not her father, he simply moved in with them claiming he is their new father, she never believed him (2004: 102).

teachers, she was not bright, she was shy and withdrawn and "her performance at school was atrocious" (2004: 155), while for Monica the blame was on herself as a child's academic achievement was "a reflection of a parent's skill" (2004: 155). Both mother and daughter felt like failures. At home, Monica was the one who was strict, and Jack, the one who made Jyothi smile. Because of Jack's musical interests they try the violin, and it becomes an instant success. "She liked the sounds it produced, she liked the act of producing such sounds, she liked the purity and ease with which they emerged, as if through magic" (2004: 156). It is through music that the relationship between Monica and Jyothi is salved. For her music "... was the speech of Angels. Jyothi has found her voice" (2004: 161). Grown up Jyothi remarks: "The violin had transformed me. The violin was the proof of my identity: I was European" (2004: 261).

Initially marked as an outsider, she exculpates herself with music, to the joy of her adoptive father. She does not really learn but simply hears music and plays it, as if music had the ability to flow through her. When she is famous, in order to impress a boy, and then the man he becomes, named Dean, she changes her name into Jade. While Jade is an international star, Jyothi remains a withdrawn and shy. She is forever in-between the East and the West. Feeling herself secluded and rootless, Jade decides to go to India but there she cannot play. During her first crisis in India, she learns that "If you use music to enhance yourself: if you use it to build up your notion of who you are; if you suck it like a parasite, using it for your own fame and glory: that is drawing from it" (2004: 284). At first she does not understand that she is using music to buttress her ego and "to gain the applause of the world", fame becoming the focus of her art (2004: 285). She has to learn that "[t]he less the artist, the greater the art" (2004: 285). Falling in love with Dean, and trying to find herself she begins to understand: "Rebellion rose up in me and translated itself into pure musical passion that cursed through my body and into the instrument and out again in a glorious fountain of pure expression" (2004: 299). Following her disappointment with Dean, Jyothi feels empty, yet Jade without music does not exist. "Now that music had died, how could I continue to exist?" (2004: 354). At the end she learns to "make music for its own sake" (2004: 369). In her attempts to turn herself into a European, her desperate endeavours to fit in, she has forgotten her roots in the East and the burden of fame which will never be a substitute for love.

The novel refrains from telling an overtly optimistic rags-to-riches story while still managing to depict the slums of Bombay with all its sights and smells and juxtaposes them with the ordered but emotionally lacking spaces of Germany and England. More than a story of a rescued child and second opportunities, this is a tale about displacement dispersing with a common conviction that if you nurture a child, s/he will flourish no matter what, and that sometimes this simply does not happen. This shows a world that is very foreign and very exotic indeed, still it does not omit what, at first, seems reductionist and stereotypical and has Jyothi observe: "Here in India all life is played out in the open for all the world to see: women peeling vegetables and washing clothes and bathing children and folding saris..." (2004: 260). Unlike Maas' two previous novels, however, this one does not offer a nineteenth-century like happy ending. Jyothi does not marry Dean, he remains unstable, shallow and untrustworthy, following one woman after another. Instead, Maas leaves the reader with an image of Jyothi in a Bombay street seeing another talented child, who, like herself, tapped her foot to the music. As a young girl Jyothi heard a boy, their employers' son, playing the sitar:

> Music! This was music! Nothing she had ever heard before was worthy of the name. Not the *filmi* songs her mother played on the tiny radio on the kitchen shelf. Not the blare of the loudspeakers above Chaitnrain's shop which several hours of the day bombarded the entire village with screeching female voices...She had seen a sitar before, she had even heard one played. But never before like this (2004: 6).

By going back to the same place she came from she pays the emotional toll and finally finds herself.

Maas' last novel to date, *The small fortune of Dorothea Q*. (2015) moves away from India and is set in Guyana and England, or more precisely, in Georgetown and London. It spans over thirty years and through the lives of three women, the title heroine Dorothea Q, her daughter Frederica (Rika) and her granddaughter Inca (Inky). As Maas admits the novel is the result of what "ifs" (2015: 477). The artifact of the story, the priceless stamp, the One Cent Magneta "...lies both in its uniqueness and its history. After a shipment of stamps from the UK failed to arrive in British Guiana, a new batch of stamps was printed locally. But the quality was poor, and so the Postmaster General of British Guiana ordered that each stamp be hand signed in order to prevent forgeries. Of the one cent stamps printed, only one survives, bear-

ing the initials of postal clerk Edmund Dalziel Wight". The said Edmund Dalziel Wight is an ancestor of Sharon Maas, her mother's great-grandfather, and it was her who often told her that story.

The novel then imagines the situation in which a second stamps survives in the family of Dorothea Quint and becomes both a bone of contention as well as the agent of final reconciliation between mother and daughter, grandmother and granddaughter. When Dorothea Q. arrives in London to live with her eldest daughter, Frederica, they both know it is going to be difficult. Grandma, famous for her political engagement in her youth is now bossy, demanding, hardly mobile and speaking Creole, to which both her daughter and her granddaughter have to get used to. The "bad English", as we find out later is a conscious choice on the part of Dorothea and well in line with contemporary postcolonial theories concerning language.[13] The situation is complicated due to the financial difficulties of recently widowed Frederica and the unhealed wounds neither of the older women want to discuss; nor do they want to tell Inky what the source of their mutual hostilities is. It takes almost an entire narrative, grandma's car accident and her near death experience, for the secrets to finally come to light, followed by reconciliation and Rika and Inky revisiting Guyana and the family house which Frederica ran away from many years before. Having lost her beloved twice, once, apparently to the war, and later, for real, in an accident, Dorothea did not know how to love her daughter: "The fear of loving too much, for love inevitably means loss" (2015: 461). All three women are strong characters. Although one may agree with Maas that youth is the time of unripe decisions, her characters live and learn to make amends. Maas seems to be saying that even family love has to be earned. After all "freedom and happiness come with letting go. It's clinging that makes us miserable: clinging to things, and ideas, and our own little selves" (2015: 476).

Maas has also contributed a piece of writing "The boy with golden hands" (2005) to *Stories of strength* edited by Jenna Glatzer. The stories are by various writers with the intention to help other people narrate various incidents of hardship and survival. Accordingly, "all proceeds benefit disaster relief charities". As Glatzer writes in the Introduction:

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[13] For more, see Ramchand (2004: 56-90).

> The World seems like a callous place sometimes, with strangers cutting each ether off in traffic, neighbours arguing about fence lines, and people fighting about everything from favourite sports team to political views. But things change in times of crisis. Almost instantly, we forget our pettiness and remember we all belong to the human race and are, in some abandoned (2005: 167).

For the post-Katrina victims, Maas' story might have a particular resonance.

Sharon Maas has a rare gift for storytelling, which is clearly visible in her more recent projects such as the rewriting of Mahabharata, entitled *Sons of Gods. Mahabharata retold* (2011). The book was published under a penname Aruna Sharan[14]. She is currently working on *The secret life of Winnie X*. set on a sugar plantation in early 20th century Guyana (an e-mail of August 4, 2015). When talking about her childhood in Guyana, she frequently admits to have spent many childhood hours reading novels or writing adventure stories of her own. She was a guest of honour at 2014, 10th Literature in English Symposium and told us that we all have stories within ourselves, and writing means simply letting them out. Her work has been translated into Danish, French, German, Spanish and Polish.

[14] "In the newest edition of the book, I have gone back to Sharon Maas and that will remain so" (an e-mail of August 4, 2015).

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Eileen Cox in conversation with Cheddi Jagan

by courtesy of Sharon Maas

THE WOMAN WHO WALKED THE WALK

SHARON MAAS

When my mother died last November, aged 96, her death made front-page news in Guyana. It wasn't long before the tributes poured in: telephone calls, cards, flowers, fruit baskets from people whose lives she had touched, condolence cards from the country's President, the Prime Minister, and the Opposition Leader. Mum was an icon in Guyana, a role model people of all persuasions looked up to. She made notable changes, and for this she received well-deserved accolades.

Mum had lived a very public life, and her achievements were well known in the small South American country where she had lived her whole life. For me, of course, her passing was far more personal, for I saw the whole picture.

Mum had another side to her, a private side. Her greatest achievement, in my eyes, was not so much what she *did*, but who she *was.* It's easy to say noble and motivational things, or make much-needed changes for the good of society. It's quite a different story to actually *live* the values you preach. Mum walked the walk as well as talk the talk, and there's a little anecdote that perfectly illustrates this.

First, the backstory: Mum married quite late in life and I was born soon after. We lived as a family for three years in a house she had built in a village just outside the capital city Georgetown. After her divorce she and I moved to my grandmother's house, and there we lived in an extended family. I was three at the time; when Mum went to work I was looked after by various aunts. When I was 15 the two of us moved back to her own house outside town. After the last of our relatives passed away, I and a USA-based cousin inherited the big family town house, which was rented out.

Two years ago it became apparent that mum was deteriorating physically, something had to be done. I needed money to take some steps so that mum could be properly taken care of.

She needed a full time carer, and her house needed an overhaul to accommodate her new situation. My plan was to update this house, and sell the bigger, more conveniently located town house to finance the renovation. However, mum had a life-interest on the town house and we could not sell without her permission. Which she refused to give. She had several arguments.

First argument: she didn't need the renovations. The old bathroom and kitchen were perfectly fine, and it didn't matter that the roof leaked and the windows were falling off, the wood was rotting and the pipes were rusting.

Second argument: she didn't want some stranger looking after her. She had Sego, a young man who dropped in every morning and evening to get her up and put her to bed. She had known and trusted him for many years and nobody else was to come into her home.

Third argument: she was living from the rent of the town house so what would she live from?

Fourth argument: her beloved Consumers Association, founded and run by her, was housed in the town house.

I was able to defuse all these arguments. I promised not to undertake any major updating of the house. Sego could be her full time carer, and she could live comfortably from the sale proceeds; and the Consumer Association had for several years been run from her beside telephone; the town house was only nominally the business address.

Still, Mum remained adamant: the town house should not be sold. And it was only after much probing that I discovered her real argument: she couldn't throw out her tenants. There were nine of them altogether, including children, living in the town house.

"These are poor people and they are paying low rent. How will they find new homes?" She couldn't put them out on the street! And that was why we could not sell the house.

I think this story speaks volumes. There are some landlords who will squeeze every last cent from his tenants: profit is everything. Mum was of a different calibre, the very opposite. She was actually running her own subsidised low-rent housing scheme, but privately, without making a fuss or drawing attention to it. And that attitude, to me, carried into everything she did, was her greatest achievement.

In the end we promised to help the tenants find adequate housing, and give them a golden handshake, and that is what we did.

My son moved to Guyana to help take care of her, we employed Sego full time, and she stayed in her own home and died in her own bed, as she always wanted. She simply did not wake up one day. Luckily, I happened to be in the country, but probably she had planned it that way: to wait for me to visit one last time.I think it would be true to say that though she was not a Christian in name, she very much embodied Christian values and ideals. She has always lived a most simple life, never expecting special favours, never living beyond her means, never distracted by myriad wants and personal desires. She cared about people regardless of race, religion, political affiliation, gender. Looks were irrelevant to her; she was without wile and without guile and indeed, was quite uninterested in finding a mate after her divorce. She was married to her mission: the betterment and upliftment of Guyanese society.

At times, when I was a child, I was even jealous because I thought she spent more time helping others than being with me. But that's just the way she was, and in the end it was good for me because it gave me a sense of independence and adventure, of daring to seek the unconventional.

I learned that the selflessness she embodied doesn't mean you have to be a doormat – no one who knew Mum's public life could ever accuse her of being a doormat! She taught me there is strength in humility and modesty, strength in putting the needs of others before your own, strength in caring, in serving. These are the values she truly lived all her life.

Though Mum was not typical of her generation of women, these are all typically female strengths... subtle strengths that tend to go unnoticed and undervalued, crushed by the typically male strengths of domination and aggression.

Yet water, soft though it is, wears away stone, and women have at all times and all places been the very backbone of society, precisely through those more subtle strengths and values.

Mum is the living example that these strengths can be cultivated and lived without loss of dignity and self-worth; that they can be the foundation for a life of true and lasting accomplishment, achievements in which the personal morphs into the public. This is how we make the world a better place, one woman, one man at a time.

SEEKING ONE'S (GUYANESE) SELF: *WEB OF SECRETS* (1996) BY DENISE HARRIS AND BUXTON SPICE (1999) BY OONYA KEMPADOO

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Guyanese female writers relatively late embarked on writing semi-autobiographical fiction. The first novels thematising their growing up in Guyana sketched against a complicated socio-political background of the Guyanese independence movement appeared in the 1980s with such works as *The last English plantation* (1986) by Jan Shinebourne or *Whole or a morning sky* (1986) by Grace Nichols. Nowadays, the theme of female self-discovery is a steady point on the map of the Guyanese writings with the female authors more and more decisively seeking an answer to the question of what it means to be a Guyanese female in the global(ized) world. The present paper is an attempt at comparative reading of two Guyanese life-narratives, which not only allow one to gain an insight into how the Guyanese females enunciate their identity but also how they situate themselves against such sensitive, at least in Guyana, notions as ethnic solidarity or national belonging. The novels in question are *Web of secrets* (1996) by Denise Harris[1] and *Buxton spice* (1999) by Oonya Kempadoo[2]. The au-

[1] Denise Harris is the daughter of Wilson Harris. She has travelled extensively, has been a journalist and a photographer, and currently works for UNICEF in New York. She herself, as the Peepal Publishing House, describes the novel as a fictional autobiography and the claim has never been disproved, neither by her, nor by her father or their extended family. However, the Harrises are very private people so most of the facts mentioned in the novel remain unverifiable; nevertheless, at least at a few points one may find indisputable correspondences with their real lives. For example the fifties, the times the novel is set in, are the times when Wilson Harris left his first wife and daughter, and soon after left Guyana, and went to London where he lived with his second wife. This

thors/protagonists of the said novels, though born in different socio-political realities, are poignantly forced to confront their complex national heritage, as well as their familial and personal traumas, and to compromise between their various conflicted identities as the Africans, the East-Indians and the Guyanese. The ways in which they try to find their place in the new (post)colonial world may be informative not only for those interested in the Guyanese literature, but also for those investigating the Caribbean, or even broadly postcolonial, female writings and cultural identities.

Web of secrets (1996) centres on a history of Margaret, a teenage Guyanese girl, who lives in the rapidly changing world unavoidably heading towards postcolonial nationalism. Forced to define herself as a Guyanese female, and not a British subject, she starts discovering her familial and national history and thus she unwinds the titular *web of secrets*. The main symbol in the novel is that of a house and the narration opens at the moment when Margaret's grandmother, Kathleen, starts seeing cracks in the walls of their perfectly maintained home. Conventionally in the postcolonial novel, and analogously in *Web of secrets*, the house is a symbol of the colonial subject's marginalization from the public sphere as well as a repository of individual and familial identity (George 1999: 19). Gaston Bachelard famously writes that "a house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability" (1994: 17). "[It] is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories, dreams of mankind. (…) [w]ithout it man would be a dispersed being" (Bachelard 1994: 6-7). A house, then, is inseparable from memory; its disintegration or ruin, would make one an incomplete being. Writing on postcolonial homes, Rosemary George argues that Bachelard's theory does not accept any ambiguity inherent in the postcolonial condition; postcolonial literature consciously challenges the order of the domestic space, which is associated with colonialism and, through its apparent disintegration, changes chaos into resistance (George 1999: 21). The disorder, then, is only superficial, as it allows traumas to resurface and marks "the need for postcolonial identity to also be rooted in a tangible space" (Upstone 2009: 115).

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chain of events corresponds to Margaret's – the protagonist's – descriptions of her father and her family life. Also the fictional surname of the grandmother, Harriot, brings to mind Denise Harris' own family.

[2] The time presented in the novel corresponds with the years spent by the Kempadoos in Guyana across the 1970s, when the father of the author, a writer and journalist – Peter Kempadoo (b. 1926) – was working in the emerging Guyanese media.

The multilayered symbolism of the house is only deepened through its intimate connection with Kathleen's madness. Female madness in the Caribbean fiction usually "signifies a crisis of identity for both the female subject and, symbolically, the nation" and it starts manifesting itself "when female characters find themselves most vulnerable and are forced into a direct collision with colonial values" (Ashworth 2014: 209). In *Web of secrets,* both Kathleen and her nation are at a very vulnerable moment when the world outside starts spinning towards a change which cannot be stopped and which necessitates confrontation with the past and it is telling that her neighbours immediately locate its source in the house and its unnatural relationship to the past:

> I still feel it was that house. There were always rumours and strange stories about that place. There was never any record of Kathleen Harriot's grandparents burial… the only record was a verbal one of them fading fast (…) no one, no one, could ever remember an actual funeral taking place (*WS*,13).

Hence, Kathleen's madness could be anticipated and its onset seems by no means destructive for her family. Paradoxically, it opens a possibility of the past once lost to reappear and, putting it metaphorically, to complete the world of the living; it also makes Margaret's discovery of her familial traumas possible and triggers the process of her self-definition.

Significantly enough, Margaret herself utilizes the space of the house to both understand what is happening to her grandmother and to locate the true source of Kathleen's disquietude. Margaret hides "under the dining table listening to every word", waits in the corners or listens through the walls so as to reconstruct a coherent familial narrative (*WS*, 40). Furthermore, she is physically bound to the house's lost history. It is in her, that Kathleen sees the ghost of her dead sister, Iris, literally coming back to haunt her. Just like Iris, Margaret is a loner who walks her own paths, reads far too many books and even her skin is dark, the feature she undoubtedly takes after Iris, who was always "called the dark one" (*WS*, 86). This physical darkness is symptomatic as it makes Margaret the beneficiary of the family's dark secrets and the African blood that runs in their veins. Therefore Kathleen knows that the girl will be expecting answers from her: "the old woman knows the child's eyes are focused on her. Lately the child has been following her (…) Iris's eyes, the child eyes…" (*WS*, 87, 88). The house, then, is a monument to frozen memory that now

demands recognition, and the cracks in its walls signify repressed memories and people forcibly excluded from the domestic space and the family's memory: "…break…crack… (…) the wall… mother… father… web… now what in the world brought on all that…*things that were long done with*" (*WS*, 26; emphasis in the original, MF).

From the beginning of her illness cracks appear with great intensity and the more Kathleen tries to cover them up, the more they reveal themselves; eventually, the woman decides not to fight the inevitable and she gives herself fully to her illusions. Therefore the novel purposefully blurs the boundaries between the real and the unreal, resorting to the convention of magical realism, which opens the house to marvellous possibilities and enables the traumas of the past to resurface and thus be confronted (Upstone 2009: 137). Rebecca Ashworth adds that the Caribbean novels about female madness through "[r]ejecting classical realism (…) challenge the Western hegemonic epistemology" and thus the legacy of the colonial ideology (Ashworth 2014: 209). In *Web of secrets* Kathleen poignantly challenges her traumas and her memories also come back as ghosts who speak to Kathleen and thus, through her incoherent mumblings, to Margaret. Such a construction of the presented reality makes the reader wonder if what one is observing is real, of if the cracks were only imagined by Kathleen. There is no doubt, however, as to who Kathleen believes she sees, and the two main ghosts who enter the house through the cracks are Hope, the one responsible for the family's disconnection from their African roots, and Iris, the one whom Kathleen herself silenced and whose vengeance, as she believes, is the primary cause of all her problems.[3]

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[3] Hope was born in 1850 and christened "hope of their race" (*WS*, 20); she was a miraculous child that could pass as a white, and in the Guianese caste system where one's skin tone had a direct effect on one's social standing her skin was her future. For this reason, "[t]he moment the white people kept mistaking her for a white and assuming her mother to be nursemaid" (*WS*, 20), Hope's parents decided not to tamper with her chances of getting properly married and they became invisible. Hope never knew that her mother was raped by a passing white man "that no one ever cared or bothered to put a name to" (*WS*, 155). The next of the entering ghosts is Iris, whose repression from the family memory is the result of both her grave sin and Kathleen's own doings. Namely, Iris had an incestuous relationship with her brother, Stan, from which she had a son, Compton. The boy was raised by Kathleen as her own, and was her only son and the child she openly favoured over her own daughters. Her firm denial of her sister's existence, even after Iris' death was also a result of her personal guilt. More precisely, Kath-

The present and the past intertwine in the novel on yet another dimension, and Margaret's own process of self-determination, which after all constitutes the main axis of the novel, is triggered not only by her grandmother's embrace of the past but also by her most personal and delicate traumatic experience – the death of her mother. This unexpected blow forces Margaret's reconciliation with Kathleen and it binds them on both real and marvellous levels. There are two versions of Stephanie's demise, one recognized publicly and the other known only to Kathleen and Margaret. From the medical point of view, Stephanie dies due to malignant breast cancer, but Margaret sees her illness as something evil that "crawled into my mother's body" (*WS*, 147). Since neither her mother, nor grandmother, ever talk to her about cancer she automatically assumes the fault of a baku, the creature she brought home some time before her mother's illness, and which she wanted to bribe in order to ensure prosperity for her family abandoned by the father and their main bread winner.[4]

Through blaming the baku, Margaret recognizes her own agency in the tragedy which seems to her a result of her own negligence. Being deeply ashamed of her deeds, she confides in her pet bird, Arabella, a parrot brought from the bush whom Margaret keeps in a cage placed in her room and who, as she believes, understands her every word and answers some of her questions. Margaret discloses all her secrets to Arabella, including her continuous sense of strangeness; as she says at some point: "Would you believe, even though I was born here I feel I'm just as much a stranger as you are, Arabella… [I] only gradually came to realize that, so it must be even more difficult for you" (*WS*, 96). Now Margaret once

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leen firmly believes that she, having entered into a contract with God, traded Iris' life for Compton's; when the boy fell seriously ill, she prayed for Iris to die in his place; thus she sees herself responsible for Iris' demise and this awareness lies at the core of her madness.

[4] To Guyana the stories of baku came from Suriname and, before that, from Africa with the slaves. Baku in West-African languages means short human or little brother, but the term may also have been derived from *bacucu* (banana). Baku is a "nocturnal gremlin-like spirit", who looks like a small human being, and reportedly lives on bananas and milk. Customarily bakus are sealed in bottles or pots, but once the lid is removed, they may become dangerous (Plantenga 2003: 152). In Guyana, the maliciousness or benevolence of a baku is thought to depend on the body it once inhabited and it is believed that the baku may either bestow wealth and health on its owner or, should he feel neglected, exercise vengeance.

again opens up to the bird, saying "[h]ow was I to know he would act so quickly…Oh I certainly underestimated him" (*WS*, 147). What Margaret is not aware of is the fact that the presence of the baku is perfectly known to her grandmother. Kathleen is informed of the baku's existence by the ghost of her dead husband, John, who warns Kathleen of an ugly little creature that lives under their stairs and who may bring only bad luck. Hence the reader knows that Margaret and Kathleen are bound in their secret knowledge of each other's sins, which they nevertheless do not share for quite some time, until the seminal moment of Margaret's self-revelation.

Following the death of her mother, burdened by the weight of her unexpressed guilt, Margaret starts acting strangely. People say that she has been poisoned by her grandmother's madness and she even has poignant visions of her house being consumed by wood ants; in a rare moment of lucidity, she herself realizes that her illness must be inseparable from her grandmother's, and then she finally turns to Kathleen and tells her everything she has eavesdropped, heard or deduced during her investigations. The healing power of such a disclosure is immense. In their traumatic memory, they become one body, linked by the sound of the beating heart:

> My grandmother didn't laugh (…) she listened, taking it all in (…) she smiled…a crack of a smile broke across her face (…) then she cradled my head on her chest of bone and held me against her as if I were her child, as if I were her daughter. I could hear the drumming sound beating against her bone chest (*WS*, 168).

The grandmother's initial reaction to the truth being spelled out is physical, rather than verbal. Cathy Caruth writes that the body is linked with history and that it has the ability to bridge the gap between the living and the dead, it may betray our "*not knowing* the difference between life and death" (Caruth 1996: 37). Furthermore, some histories may only be recreated within the realms of meaningful relationships. Their value lies not so much in the act of empathy or understanding as in providing the impulse and safe space to finally tell the story (Caruth 1996: 41-42). By the same token, the history of Margaret may be only told in relation to her grandmother, who is her gateway to the past, history and truth. The womb-like symbolism of the scene suggest that new life is to be born from their reconciliation with themselves and their pasts. Tellingly enough, the frame of the novel is provided by Margaret and her adult choice to come back to

Guyana and tell her story there, which implies that true reconciliation with oneself and one's past is possible only in her home-land.

More or less twenty years after Margaret from *Web of secrets* started first discovering her self-identity, Oonya Kempadoo's main protagonist, Lula, embarks on a similar journey in the now independent Guyana. *Buxton spice*, just like *Web of secrets*, is a novel about (dis)covering secrets by an inquisitive girl, who out of snippets of information reconstructs the world she lives in and grows to understand her own liminal position within its realms. The novel opens with a promise to the reader "I got to know all the secrets of the house – like I knew all the trees in the yard" (*BS*[5], 3) and gradually Lula discloses what she has learnt about her*self*, her family and homeland. Just like Oonya's, Lula's family is of mixed East-Indian provenance and her father, "a Dark cool Madrasi (…) [f]ollower of Mahatma Gandhi" (*BS*, 27), a writer and a reporter, is a close reflection of Peter Kempadoo. Guyana from Lula's memory is not a land of national(ist) enthusiasm but that of unstable political construction, whose people are torn between claiming their national belonging and escaping it. Even though Lula's domestic space does not disintegrate like Margaret's did, it is tellingly marked by absences: "This table [family table] used to hold more of us but the two eldest girls had long left home – gone back to England" (*BS*, 26). The motif of emigration, enigmatically called "going Away", permeates the novel, and gives Guyana a sense of temporality. Every family either has someone who emigrated, or is planning to do so. "Having connections with people from Away" (*BS*, 120), is a source of pride, respect and income and the very fact that Away is consistently capitalized gives off its mythical aura. Within this already ambiguous world, Lula's family occupies an unclear position. They may be Guyanese but contaminated by foreign ways; for instance, Lula's father's discipline methods are a laughing matter across the neighbourhood: "We got put up in our room for punishment and the whole village thought this was ridiculous, a joke" (*BS*, 121). Besides, they are overeducated, which alienates them from the real world: "Education, dat's what happen to them. Too much. Look at all dem books dey have in de place!" (*BS*, 70).

However, the major reason for their incompatibility lies in their mixed racial origin. Though the father is clearly East-Indian, the mother has a

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[5] All the quotations come from Kempadoo, Oonya. 1999. *Buxton spice*. London: Phoenix, which is henceforth referred to as *BS*.

"strong European nose, flat forehead, and the curve of her Creole lips" (*BS*, 27). To makes matter worse, Lula's father comes from an East-Indian plantation family but her mother is called "bourgeois" (*BS*, 27), which situates them somewhere in-between the classes. Besides, they do not claim any clear religious allegiance and, tied to political opposition, they remain outside the dominant party known as PNC – the People's National Congress. In this liminal positioning, Lula seeks her own belonging to Guyana. To this purpose, she employs the help of a semi-real listener who, due to his timeless nature, is supposed to make sense of the chaos that surrounds her. The listener is Buxton spice, the titular mango tree:

> I knew it could hear things going on everywhere in Guyana. Sounds that went on in Berbice Mad House, New Amsterdam Town Hall, the President's House in Georgetown, Linden Bauxite Workers Union. It could hear the sugar cane being crushed through the big iron rollers in Enmore Estate (…) all these things and more. All the horrible dark-road secrets, the plotting ach scheming. But it wouldn't tell me things (*BS*, 34).

The tree, by virtue of its rootedness in time and space, is thought to hear and know more about the history of the land than it wishes to disclose. It is Lula's link to the outside world and a repository of all the dark secrets which she wishes to learn about. With its aid, she embarks on a mission of discovering the truth, in which she could anchor her*self*.

The dark secrets Lula grows to learn are those of racial violence, sectarianism and her own impossibility of a clear self-definition according to the homogenous categories of belonging. Initially, as a liminal being, she is sensitive to any promise of a coherent identity construct. In a country where ethnicity overlaps with political allegiance, it is first offered by the East-Indian national narration and second by the leftist ideology. Born into a mixed East-Indian family, she naturally shapes her identity within the existing discourse of difference between East-Indians and Afro-Guyanese and the primary construct of identity Lula is offered by the Guyanese society is a rigid ethno-national narration. Namely, Lula lives in the village where, after the racial riots of the 1960s, East-Indians are now in a minority: "Tamarind Grove was black race people, strong PNC party people. Dads, Bunty family and Aunty Babe was the only East Indians. And my family was mixed – Indian, black and white" (*BS*, 49). Hence, she naturally shapes her identity against the other – the Afro-Guyanese. When she describes the coast of Guyana she does so in such words:

> Black people lived in one village, Indians the next. Black, Indians. So it went, all along the coast of Guyana to Mahaica. Even if you didn't see people, you could tell which village was black, which was coolie. Blacks had unpainted houses and clap-hand churches; Indians paint, front gardens, mosques and temples. Was always people lining on the road in a black village. Mothers and children out till ten at night. Not so in an Indian village. But all had Catholic churches and rumshops by the main road (*BS*, 50).

Lula is visibly fixed on minor differences[6] that separate the two groups and she does not hide her disregard for "their" way of life. In short, the Afro-Guyanese are less ordered, lazier, noisy in their clap-hand churches and they raise children contemptibly. What manifests itself in this passage is Lula's emotional attitude to difference. As Slavoj Žižek claims, there is an unavoidably passionate element to any ethnic and national identification as the 'other' embodies threat to our ways. "What really bothers us about the 'other'", writes Žižek (1993: 202), "is the peculiar way he organizes his enjoyment, precisely the surplus, the "excess" that pertains to this way: the smell of "their" food, "their" noisy songs and dances, "their" strange manners, "their" attitude to work".

Lula's *disidentification* with the Afro-Guyanese is also deeply rooted in the political discourse, namely the country is being run by the PNC, which is an Afro-Guyanese organization. In repeating the colonial stereotypes about the Africans, she indirectly disclaims their right to wield power and implicitly contrasts them with *autostereotypes* of the East-Indians.[7] In other words, she inscribes herself into the East-Indian ethnonarration. Needless to say, the Afro-Guyanese disidentified themselves from the East-Indians in poignant ways. In the 1970s the process of urbanization facilitated competitiveness on the labour market and the so far dominant Afro-Guyanese middle class – teachers, clerks, policemen – felt

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[6] Minor difference is understood here accordingly to Vamik Volkan's definition: "when the neighbour is our enemy and is tinged with our unwanted parts, we do not want to acknowledge any likeness to us. Therefore, we focus on minor differences – or create them – in order to stress dissimilarity and the existence of a gap between us" (1988: 105).

[7] Both terms disidentification and autostereotypes are borrowed from the book *Ethnic conflict and terrorism: the origins and dynamics of civil wars* (2005) by Joseph Soaters, where he describes identification as a bond with those whom we consider being like ourselves and disidentification as seeking differences between ourselves and our enemies (Soaters 2005: 79).

threatened by the rapidly growing number of educated East-Indians. The consequence was "the uncovering of old prejudices" in an attempt to protect their domain (Alexander 2000: 70). In such a sectarian world, they nevertheless, as Lula notes, all have Catholic churches and rumshops in the villages, which is an unmistakable evidence of their colonial legacy and an allusion to many cultural elements that in fact unite them into one national body. Paradoxically, them becoming similar in many respects under the colonial rule, yet strengthens their desire to preserve their distinctness from *the other*. As Vamik Volkan argues when cultural or social rituals that allow for peaceful maintenance and replaying of minor differences cease to effectively contain aggression, then comes the outburst of violence (1988: 103). The traces of past madness surround Lula. For example, during her raids across the neighbourhood she encounters "the ruins of an old mosque [that] wasn't ancient ruins, just a few years old, looked like it was half built and then something had bumped into it (…)". From her mother, she learns their provenance: "Mums said it was Riots made it so (…) [f]ires and bombs chasing Indians out" (*BS*, 49). The ruins are a physical manifestation of Guyana's traumatic past.

Contrary to what one may expect, her experience of racial violence inflicted on the East-Indian community by the Afro-Guyanese does not make Lula uncritically accept the East-Indian identity. Instead, it triggers a yet deeper sense of *non*belonging, leading Lula to doubt her own place in this binary world. Her family's racial ambiguity protects them from being direct victims of the attacks, but it does not help her understand the logics of racial discrimination. Thus, she turns for help to the mango tree:

> Why you don' tell me nothing? (…) Race Riots. You know about dat. You know dat Burnham cause dat. You must know he well – Our Leader Comrade Linden Forbes Burnham. Yes. He have bug-eye just like you. And he always hearing everyt'ing like you (…) He make black people hate Indians. He take everyt'ing de Indians had an say is government own (…) You must'e see all dat. You is a black Buxton Spice or what? If you know so much, *how come, we is par coolie an we living in Tamarind Grove? And DeAbros is Putagee, an they living here too*? (BS, 59; italics mine, MF)

They, as "par coolie" do not fit in with the sectarian picture of Tamarind Grove and so do not other families, especially the Portuguese, who elude any possible classifications. The Portuguese came to Guyana in the 1840s

from Madeira; their poverty placed them in one line with the East-Indian and Chinese indenture workers, and their Roman Catholic denomination outside the dominant colonial class (Rodway 2005 [1912]: 184). The British did not even include the Portuguese in the category of Europeans; as Lula writes, they are 'Putagee': "all the Portuguese families in Guyana was related: Fernandez, Rodriguez, Gomes, DaSilva, Deguiar, DaCosta, DeAbro and others. Some of them got rich (…) but they were still 'Putagee', not even local whites" (*BS*, 65). Such and similar racial and cultural inconsistencies, both serious and funny as when her Roman Catholic neighbours tried to employ obeah, prove that sectarian ideology is illogical and unfair even in racial discrimination.

Since Buxton Spice has no answers to Lula's uncomfortable questions concerning the illogicality that surround her, she turns for coherence towards the dominant political ideology. The state promises her a panethnic unity that would make her part of the dominant order and would answer all her identification dilemmas. This unity is symbolized by the uniforms put on by more and more young people in the neighbourhood. Lula truly envies Mikey, her older friend, who has joined the paramilitary People's Militia and "got a brown uniform with a broad black canvas belt and black Army boots and was training to use a gun" (*BS*, 163). Hence, when school offers Lula a chance to also get uniformed, she is more than happy to embrace it:

> When I entered Secondary School at thirteen, it was the first time in my life I wore a uniform. All the years being taught at home, it was the thing I had envied most (…) I going to be just like every other child in the school. We the uniformed ones, would be invincible, a clan, a force to be reckoned with. I going to belong and it don't matter if I Indian, black or Dougla, if I fat or fine, that uniform would make me one of them (*BS*, 164).

For the first time in the novel Lula uses the collective pronoun *we* to describe her allegiance to the only available all-inclusive category of belonging – the communist nation – that seems a proper alternative to her fragmented identity. What manifests itself in her emotional declaration of allegiance is a simple truth of extremism. Namely, with no stable sense of belonging, Lula could be an easy prey for any ideology that would explain everything what Buxton Spice could not. In the Guyana of the 1970s, the country riddled with socio-economic and racial differ-

ences, such a unifying power is provided by Forbes Burnham, the leader, who uses the rhetoric of national progress, common good, a better future to unite the Guyanese under the banner of the communist dictum. As he is reported to say: "You all have to pay for schoolbooks? No. Soon you wouldn't have to pay for school uniforms, *that's* what I doing for you – providing a future" (*BS*, 90; emphasis in the original, MF). In this glorious national future, even an East-Indian of mixed origin, with no clearly defined class belonging or religious allegiance, can fully belong. Now Lula knows that her enemies are not her Afro-Guyanese neighbours but those who oppose the state. Paradoxically, however, the moment Lula puts on her dreamed-of uniform her hope of belonging is utterly shattered.

Contrary to Lula's expectations, her uniform, instead of sameness, only highlights her difference. More precisely, it occurs to be more red than brown, and earns her nicknames such as "Crispy Biscuit". This moment of hurtful disillusion is also a moment of epiphany when she starts seeing her school reality as a state-within-the-state where their headmaster, Mr Brown, is the equivalent of Forbes Burnham. The PNC teachers abuse those who do not belong to the party and the children are raised in an atmosphere of absolute obedience to one line of thinking. Furthermore, the idleness she at the beginning read as a negative and inbred feature of the Afro-Guyanese community, now is part and parcel of her school-life and, by extension, the whole country. Its source lies not in one's ethnicity or race, but it is provoked by the system:

> We had everything – the land, water, equipment, seeds – but no expertise or desire. Like in the nation, productivity was zero. It was one of our small triumphs. Even the teacher didn't want to produce. None of us would benefit even if we did. (…) We wasn't any different to the government workers – like Guyana Electricity Corporation men *(BS*, 165-166).

The choice not to produce and not to contribute is a triumph against the system and a sign of resistance. In other words, Lula, in somewhat Žižkan terms, becomes the one who 'knows too much' and thus "pierce[s] the true functioning of social reality". This reality, then, "dissolves itself" (2008 [1998]: 15) in front of her eyes. Moreover, ideology feeds on "discordance between what people are effectively not doing and what they are doing" and it is fuelled by the "false representation of

[the] social reality to which they belong" (2008 [1998]: 27). Here false representations may be paraphrased as the falsity of unification and absolute belonging, which is nothing but illusionary. Ethnic divisions, colonial stereotypes, and political conflicts run in Guyana so deep that their eradication seems almost impossible. Even if the Guyanese resemble one another more than they resemble the people from the countries of their origin (Hyles 2014: 122), in the novel they are still fixed on proving their minor differences.

The last touching scene testifies perfectly to the above-mentioned observation when Lula's close friend, Judy, a Portuguese girl, is caught with Andre, an Afro-Guyanese boy. The exposure of their teenage affair is far from innocent and it changes into a display of racial hatred. It causes the literal panic of Judy's mother, who is disgusted equally by her daughter's shamelessness as by her being with a black boy. She tries to make Judy publicly admit that she was raped: "Judy … watch me. He beat you to make you not talk? Judy jerking still. Is rape, you know. Black man does rape… *but he can't rape you if you get away to go an' take it*!!" (*BS*, 181; emphasis in the original, MF). Judy's mother, herself not-quite-white Portuguese, is trying to actively use the stereotype of African's excessive sexual appetite and their implicit desire to rape white women that may be traced back to the story of Caliban and Miranda. This attempt at changing the reality to fit stereotypes is alarming and testifies to the persistence of the colonial representations that are only masked by political ideology. Even though they are neighbours, at this particular moment it occurs that there is practically no true and profound pan-ethnic dialogue in the Guyanese society. The demise of colonialism, then, did not annihilate the racial stereotypes, which signals that in Guyana, even living door to door with each other, it is impossible to live outside the constraining categories of ethnic divisions.

Therefore, when the reality of leaving the country forever catches up with Lula, her loss of the place she wished to belong to mingles with her longing for freedom from any imposed categories. On her final day, she addresses Buxton Spice for the last time, seeing its rumbling as a sign of protest:

> What de hell you grumbling bout? We have British Passport, *we don't have to stay*! All dese years we here, you know bout t'ings and wouldn't tell me nothing. You the one always spying. Well we goin now! You could stay and watch people suffer more. You could take

> over de whole house. Spread out yuh fat feet and break open de septic takn! (*BS*, 164; emphasis in the original, MF).

In her words "what de hell you grumbling bout" one may read both a desire to run away and a sense of guilt that they chose not to challenge the reality and actively fight for liberation within the body of their own nation. Passports, along with flags, anthems or monuments, are traditional marks of national belonging and national identity (Smith 1991: 77). Here the British Passport is a mark of citizenship, but it does not imply Lula's self-definition as British or English; it only enables her to transgress borders and to claim civil rights that should be guaranteed by any democratic state. As Sajna Ivic indicates: "[p]ostmodern citizenship, perceived as based on the postmodern notion of identity, is not defined by nation or culture. It is a state of mind, a mental construct, which is founded on the subjective feeling of belonging" (Ivic 2011: 9). For this reason, Lula's subjective feeling of belonging, or non-belonging, does not deter her from claiming rights from Britain, the former colonizer, that are not guaranteed at home.

One may thus conclude that *Buxton spice*, though contentwise similar to *Web of secrets*, leads one towards divergent conclusions. First of all, it does not end with return, but emigration, but it nevertheless contains no absolutist message and it, metaphorically, leaves the door open for Lula. Moreover, *Buxton Spice* provides one with a broad socio-cultural perspective on why Oonya Kempadoo places herself in-between nations and does not display an exclusive loyalty to any particular national identity. Her choice is not based on a feeble hope that Caribbean cultural hybridity would erase national borders and she also does not argue for a pan-ethnic Indian solidarity that would bind all the East-Indians into one diasporic body. Nevertheless, unlike Denise Harris, she also does not recognise the redemptive power of remembering, or working through, her national and personal traumas instead trying to escape the memory of ethno-national struggle that followed the Guyanese independence. It still remains to be seen which of the strategies, the one embodied by Harris or Kempadoo, will untimely prove most helpful in burring the Guyanese ethno-national divisions.

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HYSTERICALLY SPEAKING AND RESISTING: A READING OF FADIA FAQIR'S SANE MADNESS-ISM IN *PILLARS OF SALT*[1]

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Much Madness is
Divinest Sense--
To a Discerning Eye.
Emily Dickinson

Fadia Faqir, an Anglo-Arab author, is known for her fiction, most famously, in my opinion, *Pillars of salt* (1996). Her fiction and nonfiction address the sexual, social, and economic oppression of women, and her best stories feature clever plots, adroit narration, use of varied speech idioms, and engaging psychological insights. Her female characters come to present a plurality of consciousness in opposition to the dominant social order and cultural script and a resistance to not only patriarchal hegemonic structures of dominance but also to oppressive colonialism and imperialism. This essay explores Faqir's representation of madness in *Pillars of salt* and the links or shifting alliances between madness and woman as "bad". Madness-ism can be construed, in Faqir's framing, as the space where the realities of a "bad" Bedouin woman are interrogated, negotiated, and rewritten. Madness in this instance is not reductive, effacing subjecthood; rather, it takes on positive aspects, acting as a catalyst for the continuation of revolutionary potentialities.

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[1] This essay was written during my Sabbatical leave 2013/14, when I was a Fulbrighter at Champlain College in Vermont.

As Maha, the bearer of the double burden, material and ideological, of colonial and patriarchal society, narrates her story and speaks in her own words, she defies the socio-cultural constructs placed on women living in colonial Jordan, the phallocentric constructions of a violent culture that threw her into a mental asylum. Through the voice of Maha, Faqir exposes madness as a discourse of double otherness: the Other of the man, and the Other of the colonialist. Maha refuses to accept the double bindings of her patriarchal and colonial society, and she becomes an active agent for herself and other women within her society who have endured submission under the bestiality of colonialism and the phallocratic structures and mores of their own culture. In the mental asylum, Maha changes her discomfort into a base of resistance, a citadel of life, and she creates a set of ethics for and about Arab women.

In her multivocalic novel, Faqir renegotiates the notion of madness and sanity, showing that they are manufactured constructs that are often defined by the ones who have domineering power. Maha, the Bedouin woman, who is "free like a Swallow" (*Pillars*[2], 13), is dubbed mad by her brother Daffash, but through the impassioned narrativization of her story, she manages to dislodge herself from her confinement at the mental hospital and to de-center her madness by loudly proclaiming her presence not as a "bad" Bedouin but as a resilient Bedouin asserting her self-determination . Even though Maha occupies the madhouse in her rational mind, she is not insane. She writes herself into the dominant discourse of madness not by affirming it, but by destabilizing it and answering back to the hegemonic Arab's ubiquitous cultural *grand recit,* which seems to pigeonhole Arab women in a bad-centric niche. Through her appropriation of the label madness which is used against "bad" women, she inverts its function not only to expose the "real madness" inherent in the prevalent social conditions and cultural iconographies but also to question the fixed assumptions of "bad" women, which come to unveil the dynamic operations of social control and oppression.

Readers and critics have examined *Pillars of salt* from different and multiple perspectives. Its body of scholarship, embodied in a variety of viewpoints, helps to reveal its intricate complexities and its ambivalence. Many readers value the book as a postmodern novel, and they draw upon

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[2] All the quotations come from Faqir, Fadia. 1996. *Pillars of salt*. Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink which is henceforth referred to as *Pillars*.

its orientalist and colonialist leanings as well as upon its double colonization of women in patriarchal and colonial societies. A number of other studies dwell on the novel's language, style, and narrative technique as well as on its value as an Anglophone Arab text which is reflective of the author's hyphenated reality, a reality which is envisioned both transculturally and translinguistically. No essays are written about/on the concept of madness-ism as it is represented in the novel, however. It seems that most of the readers are oblivious to this concept, and they, therefore, fail to engage with it. Thus, in this essay, I draw upon that concept within the framework of the novel itself and as part of the feminist critical dialogue.

Madwomen, generally speaking, predominate over madmen in the world's cultural imagination and in people's consciousness. A case in point is the way the madwoman shows her face in the looking glass of Western literature in kaleidoscopic reflections and in diverse projections. A substantial body of feminist theory and textual analysis has grown up around the madwoman figure. Elaine Showalter (1985: 3-4) writes:

> Contemporary feminist philosophers, literary critics and social theorists have been the first to call attention to the existence of a fundamental alliance between 'woman' and 'madness.' They have shown how women, within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and the body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind.

Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic" in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jane in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The yellow wallpaper", Susan in Doris Lessing's "To room nineteen", Antoinette in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Edna in Kate Chopin's *The awakening*, and Esther in Sylvia Plath's *The bell jar* are all a parade of women in Western literature who have given rise to the madwoman and her intricate complexities in women's literary production.

What is madness, one might ask? This question cannot be answered with one simple definition, since the cargo of significations of the concept of madness varies according to the cultural, historical, literary, and even individual context. In *Reasoning about madness*, J.K. Wing suggests that there are considerable ambiguities associated with the term "madness", used as it is in both medical as well as in cultural contexts. He notes that madness has a plethora of meanings: It "can stand for every variety of un-

reason from foolery to psychosis, and for any set of ideas or actions that is unacceptable or incomprehensible in terms of traditional social norms" (Wing 1978: 2). No matter how many multiple meanings we have, there is a common connection or thread that we should bear in mind. In *Madness in literature*, Lillian Feder writes: "The connection among [all forms of madness] is a concern–however primitive or sophisticated– with mind, with deviation of some norm or thought and feeling, whether as a threat, a challenge or a field of exploration which must yield revelation" (Feder 1980: xi-xii). In *Madness and modernism*, Louis Sass explains that madness is "a condition involving decline or even disappearance of the role of rational factors in the organization of human conduct and experience" (Sass 1992: 1). Also, in his book on madness and creativity, Daniel Nettle (2001: 9) states that "madness is not so much mental malfunction as a state of hyperfunction of certain mental characteristics".

Clearly, madness in fiction is more than a represented state of mind. Michel Foucault, in his book *Madness and civilization*, exposes the systemized oppressive ideologies that lie behind the reform of the asylum, and he shows the invention of madness as a disease of our civilization in which the others are chosen to live out the chaos that we refuse to face in ourselves. Admittedly, historians have interrogated the relationship and link between civilization and mental illness for at least six hundred years. The fourteenth-century Tunisian historian, Ibn Khaldun, witnessed the mental upheavals that erupted when nomadic Arabs began to settle in urban settings. In her seminal study *Une psychiatre moderne pour le Maghreb (Modern psychology for the Maghreb)* (1994), Moroccan psychiatrist and researcher Ghita El Khayat carefully traces the evolution of psychiatric treatment through the Arab world, beginning with the first mental asylum founded in 765 A.D. in Bagdad. She traces the development of psychiatric treatment throughout the Arab world, and she also studies the history of mental illness and its effects on the well beingness of families with regard to the health of Moroccan society.

Even though an intellectual debt is owed to historians and medical experts as well as to Foucault's study on madness, Foucault's study has been critiqued by many feminist theorists and critics since it fails to take account of sexual difference. How can madness be conceived outside its sexual difference? Isn't the human mind distinctly gendered? Why do theorists depend overtly on male forms of madness or mental illness? Why aren't female experiences allowed to be examined? Over the years,

many feminists began to ask questions about the female mad. They took it upon themselves to study the subject and realm of women's "madness" and their "nervous depression" and to supply the gender analysis and feminist critique missing from the history of madness. Their numerous groundbreaking studies, which call attention to the fundamental alliance between woman and madness, reverberate across the latter part of the twentieth century.

Phyllis Chesler's *Women and madness* (1972), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth century imagination* (1979), Shoshana Felman's *Writing and madness: Literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis* (1985), Elaine Showalter's *The female malady: Women, madness and English culture, 1830-1980* (1985), Jill Astbury's *Crazy for you: The making of women's madness* (1996), and Rebecca Shannonhouse's *Out of her mind: Women writing on madness* (2000) are but a few of the critical studies over the course of almost thirty years that blaze a path from the clinical to the literary realms (primarily white-Anglophone) of women's expression on, and about, mental health in Western European and American societies.

The close association between women and madness has a long history. In her study on women and madness, Chesler questions a "female psychology" conditioned by an oppressive and patriarchal male culture. "It is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must 'adjust' to and accept the behavioral norms for her sex even though these kinds of behavior are generally regarded as less socially desirable. . . . The ethic of mental health is masculine in our culture" (Chesler 1997: 68-69). Also, one of the most illuminating critiques which examines the significance behind the madwoman in society is to be found in Gilbert and Gubar's comprehensive study of the major women writers in the nineteenth century. These two critics identify the figure of the madwoman as part of a sophisticated literary strategy which gives nineteenth-century women writing its "revisionary" and "revolutionary" edge (1979: 80). This strategy consists in "assaulting, revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature, especially . . . the paradigmatic polarities of angel and monster" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 76).

Madness has been and continues to be a dominant theme not only in Western, white Anglo-European women's discourse but also in the Near or Far East, connoting Arab or Asian peoples. The fictional character of the insane woman emerges in Arabic literature, and even though the shape

of Arab social life is clearly different from that of the West, the Arab world does share with Europe and America the essential configurations of gender inequality that gives rise to the madwoman in Arabic literature. Arab women writers depict madwomen in their literature and choose heroines who are eccentric and "mad" to destabilize the image of the "Angel of the House", which is one of the most persistent images of women in the literary imagination of both in the West and in the East. In fact, it is not unusual in most Arab countries to label non-conformist thinking or bad behavior of women as "mad", "crazy", or "insane" without intending the clinical meaning of the word itself. By creating the "mad" or "monster" woman and placing her in a central, narrating role, Arab women writers enable their characters to resist their marginalization of space and voice and to question the validity of binary oppositions in which women in patriarchal societies are defined in terms of lack, irrationality, and silence.

In their fiction, many Arab women writers in the twentieth century weigh the extent and effectiveness of the madwoman's challenge to the reigning norms of a male-dominated society. Some of these writers hail from places such as Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Radwa Ashour, Salwa Bakr, Hanan al-Shaykh, and Fadia Faqir, to name a few only, empower their "mad" women characters by giving them the voice and the space to tell their stories. Their female characters, who endure emotional instability and bodily deprivation, oppression and fear, isolation and marginalization, and physical ailments, come to expose the "real madness" which infuses the prevalent Arab social conditions and the cultural conditioning and to unsettle or dismantle the patriarchal discourse which dubs women mad when they come to challenge the status quo or to go against the norms.

Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of salt* is a novel of masterful style and skillful storytelling. Faqir gives breath to three narratives which intricately weave fact and fable to the point that we too feel like Maha and Um Saad within a mental asylum, sane but surrounded by society's utter lunacy. Again, we are drenched, swimming in circles around the fanatical underlying theme that laces this novel and every other Arabic novel, the independent woman is man's arch enemy. This reality is reenacted for us time and time again as a woman's soul and character are plucked to irrevocable pieces and coined as madness.

Faqir follows Maha, "daughter of Maliha, daughter of Sabha" (*Pillars*, 5), of the Qasim tribe, a native Bedouin settlement not far from the Dead Sea of Jordan. Maha's story is one that pertains a distinctive attraction with an earthly and grounded style that speaks directly to us like water to land. Her narrative flourishes throughout the novel and becomes the blossom we cannot seem to smell enough. Her narrative is rich in pastoral imagery as we see Maha's instinctive bond with mother nature grow in the absence of her mother. As she buries her husband's ravaged body with her bare hands, she is also able to give birth to his son on the fertile banks of her land. Like she says, "The soul of your mother. I want you close to the earth" (*Pillars*, 144). Even while in the mental asylum, the sound of the village constantly infiltrates her stream of consciousness, and the country moods are enmeshed with her own. Maha comes to represent a resilient phenomenon as she, like the land, can endure harshest conditions of abuse and neglect and still potentially bear seeds of growth and change.

Maha's culture, although located outside of the greater urban influence, struggles with the traditional cycles of oppression one finds in the city landscape. Faqir uses Maha, a "tigress" (*Pillars*, 11), from a fatherly perspective, as the central focus of the story in order to examine how one woman's struggle to exist as a productive member within a society, rather than simply co-existing among the males as part of a separate and subservient demographic, illuminates the gender and familial dynamic within this Bedouin tribal culture, from which one can observe with a clearer perspective the larger feminist struggle within the Arab world.

In the novel, Faqir explores the realm of madness through exploration of the socio-economical as well as the cultural and colonial parameters that shape Maha's life, and she revises, through direct questioning, the conventional understandings of madness, understandings that dominated until quite recently. The story is told through the perspectives of three different yet equally significant characters: Maha, a strong-minded Bedouin girl, the story teller, an odd man with a hybrid character who is the self-proclaimed "best story teller in Arabia" (*Pillars*, 1), and Um Saad, whom we meet in the confines of a dull hospital room. Faqir sheds light on the abject effects of traditionalism, colonial politics, and economic hardships that have influenced Maha and that have triggered her to produce an account of herself and to write herself in history, as Helene Cixous would say. Faqir uses Maha's voice for the evolving female self which struggles to find a means of rebirth and expression in a world which denies its ex-

istence. Maha's voice is a woman's voice that is more than a physiological quality. It never becomes trapped in her throat; instead, it becomes the "narrative instrument that permits her to be a literary medium, to vie with the male in the process of textual creation", as Fadwa Malti-Douglas explains a woman's voice in her study on gender and discourse in Arab-Islamic society (1991: 10).

Maha, institutionalized by her brother Daffash at al Fuheis mental asylum for her disobedience and for her refusal to be socialized into the traditional feminine role, uses her voice in this deterritorialized space, fashions and nurtures a feminine speech, *une écriture féminine*, to use Helene Cixous's concept, and engages new processes of selfhood. Her language of femininity, when pushed to excess, when shouted and asserted, and when disruptive and demanding, deconstruct into its opposite and makes available to her an experience of power and agentic protest previously denied to her by virtue of her gender. Even though Arab women from this region are keepers and transmitters of oral tradition and they have been speaking for centuries, their speech has been contained within tribal and/or family boundaries. Maha's speech and confident articulacy reign; they are her expression of selfhood, and her "madness" is a performance rather than a property of her mind. Even the English doctor, portrayed as devoid of any humanity or emotion and depicted as "a link to the colonialist network, as a spokesman for the occupying power" (*Pillars*, 127), as Frantz Fanon asserts in his *A dying colonialism*, is unable to silence Maha and stop her from talking, with his heavy medication and with his electroshock instruments. In response to the English doctor who falsely acts as a moral arbiter, Maha breaks out laughing. The power of laughter to challenge hierarchical norms and "liberate, to a certain extent, from censorship [and] oppression" has been explicated by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984: 93-94).

Maha's decision to stave off madness and to speak herself out of her mental asylum or enclosure and write her own script constitutes a clear rejection of more traditional therapeutic situations in which women are written into potentially destructive female roles and female fates. In her living speech, Maha becomes more empowered through her act of narration, and she also becomes more self-conscious and aware of her position through producing her own story. As she says, "I would not listen to old advice. My body burst with heat and life. . . . Women of Hamia, you were living in a heap of dung" (*Pillars*, 54)

In her novel which allows for an explicit and implicit interplay of voices, Faqir narrativizes madness by calling attention to the existence of a fundamental alliance between "woman", "colonial politics", and "madness". The link between psychological disorders and the horrifying experience of colonialism was made most cogently by Frantz Fanon in his classic *Black skin, white masks*. Even though Fanon does not admit that both colonialism and nationalism are gendered discourses, his linkage of agency, revolution and the domestic domain with madness, or mental illness, as a general colonial condition, is clearly evident. In her narrative, defiantly voiced through her "mad" mind, Maha herself, even though she goes through sleepless nights, crying fits and depression, and a clipping of her hair, which symbolizes, according to Fadia Suyoufie (2008: 232), an "effacement of one of the most valued signs of [her] femininity", is energized by memory and by images of colour and a submerged but nevertheless present network of female alliances, which come to solidify and unify her story and to allow for both the subversion of the male power of the brother/colonizer and an assertion of the undefeated self. Even though every strand of hair is stripped from Maha's head, her narrative threads are the only testament to truth, which is not only a form of resistance against misrepresentation, domination, and oppression but also of emancipation. Maha, who refuses to be erased by masculine domination and by colonization, locates the truth within her center, her unveiled female subjectivity. She is a woman who revolts against manifold systems of oppression, who dismantles the master narrative of patriarchy, and who finally produces a decolonized history of a Bedouin woman consonant with a colonized Jordan.

In her language, Faqir, like Virginia Woolf, cuts through what Woolf in *A room of one's own* calls the "masculine sentence". Through madness, Maha writes herself into the dominant discourse, obscured by an alliance or a blend of patriarchies, both foreign and native, colonial and indigenous, not by affirming it, but by destabilizing it. In her narrative, she seeks a way out of the bondage of acquiescence and journeys to a kind of understanding which is not compliance but a form of resistance. It is her voice and her story which find a way out of the suffocating system of authority which is imaged in the text at a most obvious level through her brother, who epitomizes both the colonized "civilized" consciousness of Fanon's *Black skin, white masks* and the two forms of patriarchy, the colonial and the indigenous.

Maha's voice and her story articulate a sense of selfhood and a sense of an unbroken land, a place never understood by the colonizer.

Maha becomes the imaginary location of the story teller's dreams, demonizations, and fears. The story teller, Sami al Adjnabi, is an elusive character who defies identification. Faqir's use of supernatural elements in his characterization serves to emphasize his unclassifiable nature and his abnormal biorhythm. He is evidently mercurial, amoral, has uncanny powers, and exhibits an insatiable hunger for stories. He insinuates himself into people's lives suddenly and vanishes from them without any explanation. It is the way he uses his subversive powers with Maha and the way he describes her as an anomaly that turn our full attention to his narrative which reinscribes the boundaries of traditional gender roles. What he says is not coherent or plausible, and it is characterized by incomprehensibility, fragmentation of narrations, disruptions in spatiality and temporality, and existential and ontological questioning. The un-understandability of his narrative is infused with chaos, irrationality, delusions, and paranoia which swell and progress but never come to yield coherence.

The storyteller interprets Maha as sexually transgressive and thus morally inadequate and/or politically radical and/or defeminized. His self-legitimizing, yet un(self)conscious, cultural tendency toward othering, determines how he creates Maha as an enchantress with terrible power who rules and deceives men and who is unconquerable and has no trace of sadness or mercy within her soul. Since men discredit women the moment they resist and speak back, the storyteller comes to vilify Maha and present her as an "evil witch", a "she-demon", and a "black widow", all the while scheming to "kill her poor brother Daffash to inherit the farm" (*Pillars*, 29) and to sabotage the village's success. He represents Arab societal thought as a whole– that women are inherently bad and men are inherently good, and his narrative is indicative of his colonial and orientalist perspectives. Any news of a hardworking, virtuous, and successful woman must be a fabrication or a distortion. He does not accept that Harb, a man, actually fell in love with Maha. Love is an impossibility for the storyteller, so Maha must have enchanted Harb. He also could not accept the fact that Daffash is a gluttonous and cruel leech, so Maha must have tarnished his no doubt luminous reputation.

The relationship between Maha and her husband Harb, the "twin of her soul", (*Pillars*, 9) is a true expression of love. Harb treats his wife as a companion, not as an object. He refuses to hurt her on their wedding

night. When speaking of her virginity, he said, "Maha I cannot do it. . . I just cannot hurt you on our wedding night" (*Pillars*, 45). Maha is given the chance to give her virginity up to him under her own conditions, when she is ready. Harb plays a vital role in her quest for self-fulfillment, which is usually entwined, if not equated, with her pursuit of sexual *jouissance*. Maha and Harb finally end up consummating their marriage in the Dead Sea. They are energized by the waters of the sea which serves as a marker for a kind of rootedness, a touchstone, and a source of psychic wholeness. Clearly, they commune with the spirit of the sea:

> Hand in hand we immersed our bodies in the warm water which had been heated by the blazing sun all day. Hands holding, questioning, resisting, then surrendering. . . . My whole body shivered as I received him. . . . The stars winked and the horizon grew wider, becoming limitless (*Pillars*, 54).

For Faqir, sex is never primarily a vehicle for pleasurable sensation or physical rejuvenation, but a path to self-transcendence, existential understanding, and mystical insight. Maha and her husband Harb position themselves within humanity and in meaningful relation to the vast Divine creation manifested in the natural world.

Various concepts of love that are elaborated in Plato's dialogue "The symposium" are alluded to in *Pillars of salt*, and they also contribute to its narrative structure, such as the quest for romantic love as the ultimate form of spiritual experience. An idea in "The symposium" that Maha finds especially congenial is one advanced by Aristophanes, who proposes that every human being is a male or female half of an originally hermaphroditic whole. Everyone has a predestined mate in the world, and yearns for a sense of fulfilment that can only be experienced through union with this individual who embodies his or her lost, contrasexual half.

Contrary to Harb, Daffash becomes an accomplice in the colonial enterprise. He becomes a puppet in the hands of the colonizers and the Turkish Pashas, who are mere conduits to the occupation of the land of Jordan. He is infatuated with their ways and seduced by their seemingly modern civilization. In her narrative, Maha speaks of the ways Daffash has internalized the English ways of colonizing Jordan and of robbing her of her livelihood. Often, Daffash is seen destroying his family's farm and home in order to win the foreign powers over. Maha is infuriated when she discovers that Daffash had given the wool mattresses her mother had woven

to his friend, the Pasha, so that he could use them at his party. Also, Daffash sells the family's cow, the horse, and the camels so that he could get a Land Rover to leave a good impression on his women Western friends. In addition to robbing his family of their sustenance and living, he fights vigorously to marry an English woman, Rosebell, so that he could "move towards the white man and his bundles of money" (*Pillars*, 60). Of course, Rosebell gives "the Bedouin horseman a shoulder as cold as her homeland" (*Pillars*, 60).

Unlike Harb, who loves Maha and cherishes her strength and her love for the land, Daffash attempts at colonizing his sister's mind and body. He is very abusive toward his sister and treats her inhumanely. He does not like it when she tills the land, and when she comes home to check on her father, he never helps her to plough the fields. Instead, for him, she embodies "the face of miseries" (*Pillars*, 126). Most importantly, Daffash, blinded to gender inequality and the sinister impact of colonial powers by the self-righteousness built into male privilege and by the desire to emulate the colonialist, hits Maha brutally when she lashes out at the English administrators of the mandate and when she spits in the face of the English officer. Even though Maha resists when he finally strips her of her land, which her father had bequeathed her and when he takes her son away from her, she is finally overpowered: "Men in white pulled, punched and handcuffed me", she recalls. "I was flung across the shoulder. The world went upside down…" (*Pillars*, 218).

Daffash's decision to sacrifice Maha to an insanity and to commit her to a mental asylum reveals not only his need to tame his "bad" sister who refuses to bend to his will and demands but also his blind allegiance to colonial powers. Maha's stigmatization with madness or the hysterics of badness projects onto women a judgment as to what is inferior or second-class, what is repugnant and bad, and what is disgraceful and shameful. Faqir, who suggests that women who are recognized as mad are nothing more than women who challenge phallogocentrism, situates the cause of Maha's madness within a political and social network rather than locating this cause in the mind or body of that woman. Madness can be seen in this case as the performance of the devalued feminine role. As Phyllis Chesler's *Women and madness* famously argues that "what we consider 'madness,' whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex role stereotype" (Chesler 1997: 56-57).

The storyteller's narrative about Maha, full of fabrications and lies, functions as both a moralizing warning and radical model, especially directed at women who are disruptive and subversive and who practice what is viewed by their culture as abhorrent, noisy politics. As long as Maha continues to follow the ready-made script presented to her by her patriarchal society and as long as she performs the prescribed, mind-numbing duties of a good sister and a woman, she is determined as a virtuous woman, the bearer of positive values, who is free to function within the limited space of her home. Julia Kristeva's view of femininity not as an essence but as a patriarchal construct and a position of marginality, provide an explanation for a divided view of woman as Madonna and Whore. Toril Moi (1989: 127) observes:

> Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will . . . share in the disconcerting properties of *all* frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. It is this position which has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as the representatives of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God.

When, however, Maha struggles against the will of men and their androcentric norms by refusing to cook for the British pasha and to marry Sheikh Talib and when she protests actively against her brother's dismissive, patronizing, and authoritarian attitude and against the fact that he is a colonial subject himself who has internalized the superiority of the "White" man and chased after them in the city "like a loyal dog" (*Pillars*, 43), her circle of confinement narrows and she is labeled right away as a madwoman whose place is in the mental asylum. Daffash is a rapist, a loyal servant of the English who occupy his country, and a violent patriarchal figure who wields power and control over his sister. He "yanks [her] hair" (*Pillars*, 21) and calls her all the names in the book such as a "filthy rat", "the ugliest woman on earth" (*Pillars*, 23), "daughter-of-the-dog" (*Pillars*, 164), and "owl face" (*Pillars*, 203).

Maha never fails to push and persevere and to fight back with her words, her actions, and her decisions. She has faculty of independence, defiance, and inner strength. When Daffash tells her to sign the deed of cession, she courageously refuses, saying "I would rather you killed me. . . . But not in front of my son" (*Pillars*, 202). Also, when she finds out that

the men she is cooking for are the English officers, she causes a big scene and wrenches "the eagle off the chest of an elderly man, threw it on the ground and stamped on it" (*Pillars*, 162). The climax of her defiance reaches its peak in her largest moment of publically denouncing and defying her brother to the village. Our heart soars as we read: "I cleared my throat and said in a low voice, 'First, I don't talk to rapists…Second, I don't talk to disobedient sons. Third, I don't talk to servants of the English'" (*Pillars*, 217). Maha's words and strict decisiveness proudly and clearly throw off the oppressive, misogynistic domination of her brother, the ongoing occupation, and the still burning anger at her brother's mistreatment of their honorable father and their land. Maha's defiance to carve a satisfactory existence is thus a threat not only to her brother and patriarchal forces but also to the colonial forces prevalent during and after the British mandate of Jordan.

In *Pillars of salt*, Faqir questions the very concept of "madness", and she expresses the need for a depathologization of mental illnesses. She explores and ultimately rejects a medical reading of women's mental illness, and she suggests that in a cultural context, "madness", as a volatile concept, can be viewed as a label imposed to control women who deviate from traditional social norms. In other words, "madness" is used as a method of hegemonic social control of women who cease to be subservient. In her mosaic of narrative threads, Faqir invites her readers to go beyond a medical reading of madness to a political one by questioning, enacting, and destabilizing both the "femininity" of madness and the "madness" of femininity. The condemnation of Maha as "insane", the ease with which she is sent to the insane asylum, and the fact that the village seems to accept this occurrence as commonplace, insubstantial, and without question for they are inclined to believe in the treachery and evil ways of women, represents an ironic commentary on the place or lack thereof of women in Jordanian society. The fact that Maha, sexually strong and capable of separating the two aspects of sex, recreational and procreational, independent, and financially capable, is ultimately crucified as "insane" as a result of these characteristics emphasizes the cruel dominance men have in society and the seeming absurdity for a woman to possess a legitimate status and a uniform space to be called her own.

Faqir inverts the nature of spatial confinement, the mental asylum, into a transformative and free space in which speaking loudly and narrating introspectively and retrospectively unfold the memories of Maha, an on-

going process which leads to her self-affirmation and self-realization. Appropriating the label of madness and subverting it is a political act which allows the reader to reevaluate and revise the prevailing logic which labels Maha mad. As a narrating subject, Maha asserts herself through her ever-generative voice, which is a site of unfettered freedom and power, and she moves from victimization to a more active role characterized by her ability to, in some degree, unsettle the world around her. As an agent of a revolutionary struggle, she possesses a resistant and progressive truth which hinders the storyteller's muddied representation of her. She disrupts the sites and instances of oppression, of cultural impotence, and of political castration, and she destabilizes the storyteller's representation of her in a way that presses all of us to examine cultural assumptions and practices that objectify, exclude, or label women mad. If the silence of women is the response desired by the social order, then silence cannot function as a subversive, disruptive means to the ends of social justice and change.

The last chapter of the book written in the words of the storyteller, whose voice reverberates throughout the far corners of society, is, ironically enough, suggestive of Maha's resistant truth and her sense of individuation and self-determination, which, while compromised, nonetheless proves powerful. The storyteller says that there was not an orange orchard anymore and that poisonous plants destroyed the sweet fruits. Evidently, the destruction of the garden, in which Maha spent and invested most of her time, energy, and passion, shows that a part of her has been destroyed as well. It shows that physically she has been conquered by society and the village, which represent the poisonous plants, slowly infecting her and hindering her progress through constraints posed by her brother and the other men in the village. The depiction of the famine with darkness, fire, and destruction shows not only her period of struggle with her brother, the village, and the sinister effects of colonialism, but it also makes clear how she fought strongly against society's will. The ambiguities of destruction and creativity which exist within the image of lifelessness and of the "shimmer of pinnacles" (*Pillars*, 227) play off each other in the final pages. Maha might have been somewhat destroyed in a way when she entered the mental asylum, but the description of the blister gushing pus and then healing slowly shows that she has started to heal slowly. In fact, her quest for healing and a regeneration of the self form the substance of her story.

Pillars of salt expands our understanding of the way madness is represented in literature and how its trajectory is mapped. For Faqir, much

madness is "divinest sense". It is true that Maha is in the insane asylum, but she does not embody a silenced and colonized consciousness. She is not insane. Her "insanity" is equated with a protest against reigning social and political norms. As the "mad" woman, she has the most control because she sees the most; she is the ultimate seer of the text and she is the sanest of the times. Within a blend of patriarchies, both foreign and native, colonial and indigenous, she is able to create a space to articulate a sense of a brilliant and an unbroken or unhinged mind, a mind never finally understood by the storyteller and the colonizer. Her "madness" should not be seen as passivity and silence but as a resistance of the imagination, even though the state of madness as seen is disputed in the first place.

The footprints we see in the last chapter of the book suggest that Maha will not perish and that her memory will stay here on earth through her story. Her storytelling keeps her life and memories alive so that she will not perish from the earth and be buried in the sand. Maha lives in a mental asylum now, but inside her mind and inside her soul, she moves freely, creates stories, and remembers old memories. Maha lives on through her story and the story of others, and she inspires social activism and institutional reform on the ground. The last line, "Soon, we shall all perish" (*Pillars*, 227), shows that death is inevitable and that without storytelling or other means, people's memories will vanish with time, that the wind will blow and a new layer of sand will cover the old memories and life.

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FEMALE OPPRESSION IN THE NAME OF GOD: A READING OF MANETTE ANSAY'S *VINEGAR HILL* IN RELATION TO NEW FEMINIST THOUGHT

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Manette Ansay's works are an interesting subject for the examination of the connections between feminist theory and fiction. Her writings span four decades during which the second wave feminism has so actively developed. Ansay is the author of six novels, including *Good things I wish you* (2009), *Midnight champagne* (1999), as well as a collection of short stories and a memoir, *Limbo* (2001). Her awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, a Pushcart Prize, the Nelson Algren Prize and two Great Lakes Book Awards. While Ansay's writings challenge the fixed, patriarchal roles of women, her works likewise reflect her Catholic upbringing – she grew up in Wisconsin, developed her own response to religious oppression and faced personal her struggles with her Catholic faith. Exploring the feminist issues as portrayed in Ansay's first novel, *Vinegar Hill* (1994), this paper focuses on and stresses the idea of female oppression in the name of God as revealed throughout the inherited religious assumptions pervading the novel.[1] To understand the validity of the problems raised by Ansay, the paper will first present the ideas behind feminist theology as well as its history. This overview of the multifarious concepts which lead to the establishment of feminist theology will then facilitate the analysis of Ansay's main protagonists and her actions.

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[1] The novel is chosen as one of the Oprah Book Club Selection and has sold over a million copies worldwide.

Female oppression has not got one universal pattern, experienced by all women the same way and acting out the same responses. From the early waves of feminism's calling for equality, to its modern form advocating difference, feminism has gone a long way. The movement offered a politics of resistance to deconstruct male domination by developing a female discourse not tied to traditional fixed roles, asserting patriarchy as a social system, granting privilege status to males permitting their dominance over females. Throughout the three prominent waves of feminism a diversity of liberal, radical, Marxist, multicultural, psychoanalytical, ecofeminism and at last, the post-modern stances developed and aimed at answering 'the woman question' in new ways that have not been experienced before. Modern feminism used the term 'patriarchy'[2] to describe causes of women's oppression, subordinating the female to the male.

Despite its diversity, modern feminism seeks to break down the traditional patriarchal roles that subjugated women, devalued them, prevented them from defining themselves on their own terms and from making them free of male domination. As a critique of patriarchy, feminism is basically the affirmation of the humanity of women. In her comprehensive study on feminism, Rosemarie Tong maintains that postmodern feminists' rejection of the traditional oppressive symbols helps feminists speak and write in ways that overcome the binary oppositions of traditional patriarchal thought. She states, "Postmodern feminists erase the lines between masculine and feminine, sex and gender, male and female. They seek to break down the conceptual grids that have prevented women from defining themselves in their own terms rather than through men's terms" (Tong 2009: 9). In this context, Rosemary Radford Ruether (2004: 3), one of the key authors dealing with feminism and religion, defines feminism as "a critical stance that challenges the patriarchal gender paradigm that associates males with human characteristics defined as superior and dominant (rationality, power) and females with those defined as inferior and auxiliary (intuition, passivity)".

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[2] Patriarchy is a social system marked by the supremacy of the father in the family and the dependence of women and children. It implies the institutions of male rule and privilege, and is dependent on female subordination. Historically, patriarchy has manifested itself in the social, legal, political and economic organization of different cultures where male interests dominate. The term is derived from Greek origin and literally means "the rule of the father". See Veronica Beechey, *On patriarchy* and Gerda Lerner, *The creation of patriarchy*.

Out of these multiple and diverse forms of feminism emerged feminist theologians who believed that patriarchy is deeply entrenched in the religious institutions of the society. Religion, as a patriarchal force of oppression of women, is used as an effective tool, manipulated to serve political or social goals to exercise power. Feminists, such as Elizabeth Johnson, Carol Christ, Naomi Goldenberg and Z. Budapest, believed that through their codes and doctrines both the state and the church have been teaching that women were made *of* man and *for* men, and, as such, were inferior beings subject to men. They urged women to move away from traditional patriarchal codes of the church that is incapable of providing them with a sense of humanity and of offering liberation. Another feminist writer, Gila Stopler in her article, "A rank usurpation of power", demonstrates the role of patriarchal religion and culture in the subordination of women as it permeates secular laws allowing religious teachings to perpetuate patriarchal hegemony. From another perspective, Bridget Walker (1999) elaborates on the idea that Christian missions were serving the goals of colonialism. She states, "Religious authority has often been allied with social, political, and economic power" (Walker 1999: 16).

As shown, dividing humanity into two parts of unequal status and power, patriarchy embedded in all institutions fits into the religious practice glorifying man's interests and viewpoints, while women submit to serve him. Thus, the adoption by a nation of these set of codes perpetuates the patriarchal religious hegemony throughout history. What follows then is that a man is the 'image of God', while the woman is blamed for the 'original sin'.[3] In this context, Ruether (1983: 95) states, "Within history, woman's subjugation is both the reflection of her inferior nature and the punishment for her responsibility for sin". As a result, patriarchy is believed to be the 'natural order' and the 'will of God'. Moreover, women are rendered silent in churches, their humanity is devalued and their experience insignificant.[4]

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[3] The patriarchal construction of Eve, thus, allowed men to stereotype all women as the source of evil and the cause of the 'downfall of man'. The American activist, Evelyn Reed (1972: 28), asserts that "from that of the Biblical Eve who, in the later patriarchal era, was made responsible for the 'downfall of man' …. In reality, what occurred at that major turning point in social evolution was the downfall of woman".

[4] The writings and thoughts of prominent church fathers were especially influential in early Christian doctrine. For example, St. Augustine's belief was that God did not create woman for any reason other than "procreation". The same mood could be traced in the

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1990: xviii) maintains that biblical religion and theology is "sexist to the core" and that "western language and patriarchal religion have 'erased' women from history and made them 'non-beings'". Elizabeth Johnson (1994: 5) adds that the exclusive use of male metaphor in speaking about God "serves in manifold ways to support an imaginative and structural world that excludes or subordinates women. It undermines women's human dignity as equally created in the image of God". In view of such ideas, and summarising her ideas on the role of feminist theology, Ruether (2004: 3) states,

> Feminist theology takes feminist critique and reconstruction of gender paradigms into the theological realm. They question patterns of theology that justify male dominance and female subordination, such as exclusive male language for God, the view that males are more like God than females, that only males can represent God as leaders in church and society, or that women are created by God to be subordinate to males and thus sin by rejecting this subordination.

Furthermore, in *Sexism and God-talk*, Ruether (1983: 12) asserts a conviction within feminist theology that women's experience is to be "a basic source of content as well as a criterion of truth". Ruether believes that all theology begins in experience, reflecting one's relation to the other and the divine. What follows is that, according to her, it was time for women to speak up for themselves, rejecting man's experience as the ultimate truth. Announcing this new beginning from the traditional delusive assumptions is the "critical principle of feminist theology", which is to say:

> Whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine, or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption (Ruether 1983: 18-19).

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writings of other church fathers and theologians, such as St. Tertullian, who likens all women to Eve calling them "the devil's gateway"; Thomas Aquinas, who defined women as "defective and misbegotten"; Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, who states that it is a fact of nature that men are superior to women who were found inferior and subordinate beings; and others, such as Martin Luther and John Knox, who believed that man is the "image of God" and Eve is to be blamed for the "original sin". For further readings see Mary Rose D'Angelo, *Women and Christian origins*; Pamela Brubaker, *Women and Christianity*.

Susan Frank Parsons (2004: 130) states that the emphasis in feminist theology has been on 'method'; "on the critique of methods of traditional male theology, and on the development of an alternative method for speaking about God". It was Mary Daly, the most influential of feminist theologians, who warned against this. Noted for her strong critique of patriarchy and of traditional religion, Daly argues that women should claim and determine a method of their own, one that is appropriate for their experience. In her most controversial work, *Beyond God the Father*, Daly argues that Christian faith characterizes God as a male figure in language and personification, and that the patriarchal structure of the church has been a major factor in women's oppression. Thus, women, as a gender, have been oppressed and subjugated in the name of God. Arguing against this gendered ideology upheld by the church, Daly emphasizes that God was not human and thus beyond gender.

Daly argues that the concept of God the Father, and therefore male, predominates Christian culture and has become the backbone of a patriarchal system legitimized to suppress and reinforce their inferior definitions: "Patriarchal religion has served to perpetuate all of these dynamics of delusion, naming them 'natural' and bestowing its supernatural blessings upon them. The system has been advertised as "according to the divine plan" (Daly 1973: 3). Exposing patriarchy that underlies theological tradition, Daly (1973: 4) states: "The entire conceptual system of theology and ethics, developed under the conditions of patriarchy, have been the products of males and tend to serve the interests of sexist society". Daly further emphasizes the relation between patriarchy and the oppression of women: "If God in 'his' heaven is a father ruling 'his' people, then it is in the 'nature' of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated" (Daly 1973: 13).

Whereas the first generation of radical feminist theologians simply replaced God with Goddess, Daly moves far beyond the idea of gender. Rejecting the whole concept of the transcendence of God, she states, "what must be done away with is the whole idea of the Supreme Being distinct from and in control of the world, keeping humans in infantile subjection" (Daly 1973: 18). Instead, Daly posits the total immanence of God, God as verb, not noun; God as no longer over and above creation. Daly proposes the death of God the Father in favour of God the verb.

Furthermore, in her boldest and most famous statement, "If God is male, then male is God" (Daly 1973: 19), Daly provides a radical critique

of the core symbols of Christian tradition. She calls for a reconstruction of the doctrine of God, stripping away patriarchal symbols of God as father and Christ as the male-image of God. Opposing this gendered concept, Daly (1973: 29) urges the new waves of feminism to reach "outward and inward toward the God beyond and beneath the gods who have stolen our identity". In other words, she calls for the "dethroning of man and his God" (Parsons 2004: 124).

Feminist theology and its intricacies presented in the previous paragraphs lie at the core of Ansay's novel, titled *Vinegar Hill*. While narrating the life of Ellen Greer, Ansay offers her readers an interesting example of dealing with female oppression in the name of God. The story spans the journey of Ellen Grier's life from repression to self-liberation. With her unemployed husband, James, and their two children (Amy and Herbert) she moves in with her in-laws, Mary-Margaret and Fritz Grier. Ellen then has to find the strength to accept and endure living in a loveless and dull home full of bitterness and ever-present sour smell. The house "is thick with the smell of old age, of pale gray skin and many dry roasts and silent suppers" (*Vinegar Hill*, 7). The setting is dominated by ever-lasting darkness, religious rituals and the presence of St. Michael's Church 'perched' high on the hill overlooking all. Living up to the church's expectations as an obedient and submissive Catholic wife, nursing her mother-in-law, as well as being a good mother and teacher, Ellen's efforts running the house and working as a teacher remain unappreciated throughout the story. Ellen resembles a muted woman who is repressed, unappreciated and even unrecognized. Thinking, "it's like I'm invisible" (*Vinegar Hill*, 45), Ellen strives for any communication with her unemployed husband: "Talk to me", Ellen said, "but he listened to her the way you'd listen to a faucet drip" (*Vinegar Hill*, 6). But lately "she's realized that he doesn't listen, or if he does, he quickly forgets" (*Vinegar Hill*, 19), and the distance between them "grows like a shadow at the end of a long hard way" (*Vinegar Hill*, 88).

The novel is full of oppressive patriarchal images. Taking "sacred vows" upon herself, Ellen "must always obey him [James], because man is the head of woman as God is the head of the Church" (*Vinegar Hill*, 122). Fritz's often repeated words – "Children should be seen and not heard", a proverb that was originally meant upon women and their silence – likewise remind both Ellen and her daughter, Amy, their position with the household and the family. Fritz also likes to tell his granddaughter that

all women are devils: "you really are devils, all of you. You are born with it in you, like a bull is born to meanness. Devils to the last" (*Vinegar Hill*, 213). Even Mary-Margaret does not care for girls: "it is boys who mean the future, the family blood, the family name" (*Vinegar Hill*, 9). Unsurprisingly, then, spoils her son and the grandson. Surrounded by such people, Ellen takes pills every night so that she can sleep. She "is filled with loneliness as dense as clay inside her" (*Vinegar Hill*, 10), and the only advice she receives from her sisters and mother, as the key to a happy marriage and strong faith in God, is: "Disguise yourself. Don't say what you feel" (*Vinegar Hill*, 46). Ellen thinks of the house as "a toy house, with toy children and toy mothers and fathers" (*Vinegar Hill*, 26).[5] Ellen is passive and submissive throughout the story. But the readers impatiently await Ellen's revolutionary act.

In *The pedagogy of the oppressed*, Paulo Freire ([1968] 1970: 31) argues that it is the "fear of freedom" that afflicts both the oppressor and the oppressed. This theory is further manifested in a double strategy: oppressors fear "losing the 'freedom' to oppress" in the sense that they feel safe and empowered by the fixed roles that patriarchy has endowed them; as well as the oppressed who fear "to embrace freedom" (Freire [1968] 1970: 31). Freire ([1968] 1970: 32) argues that the oppressed, thus, suffers from a duality established in his psyche: "Although they desire authentic existence, they fear it". This is likewise visible in Ellen's later words: "*I am afraid to go, but I am more afraid to stay*" (*Vinegar Hill*, 237). Her fear to "embrace freedom", however, does not last long.

Nevertheless, Ellen does decide to leave James and abandon the house, "before her own rage grows into something she cannot control" (*Vinegar Hill*, 235). Before, when Ellen's divorced friend Barb had urged her to leave her husband, Ellen thought of it as a terrible selfish act, "a mortal sin" (*Vinegar Hill*, 178). But now Ellen thinks: "what has she got

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[5] One cannot help but recall Ibsen's *A doll's house*, and in particular when Nora asks her husband, "what do you consider is my most sacred duty?" When he answers her, "your duty to your husband and children", Nora objects, reaching out for freedom, she liberates herself: "I have another duty, just as sacred…My duty to myself…I believe that before everything else I'm a human being – just as much as you are…or at any rate I shall try to become one. I know quite well that most people would agree with you, Torvald, and that you have a warrant for it in books; but I can't be satisfied any longer with what most people say, and with what's in books. I must think things out for myself and try to understand them".

to lose? She imagines herself sitting by this bed for many years, growing thinner, grayer, brittle, the good Christian wife, the good Christian mother" (*Vinegar Hill*, 232). Having nothing to lose, Ellen decides to leave James:

> She will tell James now, in the quiet darkness, the lamp beside the bed casting a rosy calm over what she must say…. *I have to take care of myself for a while*…He will not think it's a dream. *You're not going anywhere*, he will say… Or worse, he will look at her as if she hasn't spoken, as if she isn't even there. And if that were to happen, she would not know what to do, because tonight, for the first time in months, she is certain that she *is* there, she *is* someone, a person whose life is of value, and if James failed to recognize that now, she would never be able to forgive him (*Vinegar Hill*, 237).

Simone Beauvoir ([1949] 1997: 301) famously argues, "One is not born a woman, but rather, becomes, a woman". This, in turn, means that she can change her condition, take responsibility of choosing her own life away from the passivity that man imposes upon her. Thus, liberation is not a question of asserting oneself as woman, but of becoming a 'full-scale' human being. Ellen's departure will thus complete her liberation in that sense; she will assert herself as a human being that exists with her own choices in life.

Although Ansay focuses deeply upon Ellen's experience, she allows her omniscient narrator to reveal the psyches of other women in the novel as well. For example, the story eventually unfolds the secret buried deep inside Mary-Margaret, who has lived all her life with a brutal husband:

> He surprised Mary-Margaret one cold, bright January day as she lifted her skirts in the backhouse. She did not have time to think. He hit her once in the forehead with a brick and pulled her out into the snow. Blood ran into her eyes as she ran blindly, her only thought to move, to keep moving, until the brick found the back of her head. Then she lay still as he emptied himself inside her, and when he finished, he pissed yellow circles around her body. The warmth of his urine melted the snow and stung against her face (*Vinegar Hill*, 165).

Mary-Margaret thinks that "she had had enough with Fritz's rough hands… she made up her mind to go against God and Nature… to refuse the marriage bed and the new souls it might bring" (*Vinegar Hill*, 164-165). To punish her brutal husband, and refusing to bear more children by

him, Mary-Margaret kills her babies with the help of her mother and sister. Having killed her newborn babies marks her ultimate frustration and desperation. When Ellen finds out about this secret, she reflects: "What kind of woman would kill two newborn babies? But she already knows the answer: a desperate woman. A woman who was trapped. A woman who was driven to do something, anything, to change the way things were. *What might I be driven to?*" (*Vinegar Hill*, 235). Thinking of herself, Ellen fears to be drawn into a similar spiral of frustration and, this is yet another reason why she decides to leave.

Apart from Mary-Margaret, Ansay also discusses the fate of the eleven-year-old Amy (Ellen's daughter), who was told to write a journal at school. Therein, she meditates: "Perhaps there is no God or perhaps all of us together make up God, but with a guardian angel you don't need anyone but yourself, and soon, if you pay attention, you don't even need your guardian angel anymore" (*Vinegar Hill*, 114). When Father Bork reads Amy's journal, he makes her confess and tells her to repent her sinful act. Resisting her daughter being brought up in such repression, Ellen tells her: "Father Bork is wrong. You don't have anything to be sorry for… Don't listen to what they say. Just don't listen" (*Vinegar Hill*, 122-123). Once again, the readers begin to sense a revolution coming, and await longing for it.

Ellen's decision to leave marks hope for the future of feminism. On her behalf, Germaine Greer (2000: 425) sees optimism in the future of feminism. She states that "female power will rush upon us in the persons of women who have nothing to lose, having lost everything already". Indeed, when Ellen accidentally finds out that her husband has invested her money that she saved in the bank, she gets furious. "Ellen's anger is like fire", the narrator tells us, which is followed by Ellen taking the hose and aiming water at James, the door and the windows. Finally, "it comes to her what she is doing, what she has been doing. She is writing her name in wet block letters six feet tall" (*Vinegar Hill*, 190). Thus, eventually, Ellen finds out that she has written her name in big block letters. Naming herself initiates the beginning of further revolutionary acts. Thus, Ansay finally reflects hope for the future of feminism, hope for men and women living equally together in an egalitarian society free from oppression, free of patriarchy.

Ellen's actions echo what Daly (1973: 6) calls an "ontological spiritual revolution", which meant to move beyond the "Non-Being" to

reach the "New Being". She emphasizes this "non-being" as the state of alienation and degradation of women which is inherent in oppressive structures. This critical existential conflict, Daly (1973: 24) argues, is not between the self and abstract nothingness, but "between the self and the structures that have given such crippling security. This requires confronting the shock of non-being with courage to be". This "shock of non-being" is perceived in a woman's awakening to the awful reality of her oppression, her non-being in a patriarchal society. Rejection is part of the process of awakening. Ansay showed earlier in the novel, to escape the feelings of hollowness and 'non-being', Ellen walks alone every night in the dark:

> Ellen almost trips on the threshold in her hurry to get outside. The cold air tastes sweet; she closes the door and breathes deeply, chasing the sour smell of the house from her lungs. These after-dinner walks are the only time she can take for herself… (*Vinegar Hill*, 14).

However, by the end of the novel, Ellen loses her energy:

> She just doesn't seem to have the energy anymore, she is tired, short-tempered, her mind always wandering… she has always been a skillful teacher, a good mother. She doesn't understand why that has changed, why lately she isn't interested in anything anymore (*Vinegar Hill*, 120).

To develop courage in the face of annihilation, Daly proposes her concept of "Be-ing", and not only to confront the fear of nothingness. New Being is the creative power that women discover in themselves which is free of patriarchal preconceived images In other words, Daly urges women to sin; "Sin Big" yet not to achieve equality, but for a complete reconstruction of values, language and expression. To sin, then, is to overcome oppression and invent new values and language that represent women's experiences. Thus, she urges women to have the "Courage to Be, the Courage to See, the Courage to Sin" (Daly 1973: xxv), to oppose patriarchal structures and resist oppression, to self-name objects in their own way to express their experience. For Daly, then, the courage to see unveils the patriarchal images and envisions new ways of living; and the courage to sin is the fundamental self-naming of women, the courage to reject oppression and overcome patriarchy.

As has been shown, Ansay gradually unfolds Ellen's impatience and anger at her husband, her in-laws, herself and the church.[6] At the same time, the author gives us more and more intimate insight into her thoughts as. For instance, when James asks Ellen of her opinion on the Pope, she reveals her sinful thoughts:

> But she had said, *I'm not sure any of that stuff is true*. Surely he can sense what this might mean. Like Heaven, he is part of the natural order of things, something not to be questioned. And like Heaven, he has become more distant, more unknowable; like God, James has been slipping away. Ellen has tried to be more religious, to recapture what she used to feel when she prayed…She tries to feel the smugness of faith, to know she is important and that her life has great, if hidden, meaning. But the more she has tried to claim God, the more He has rejected her. She wants to be lost in Him, but He vomits her out again and again, and each time He asks even more from her before He'll permit her return. She is proud, she is defiant, she is selfish, she is sinful (*Vinegar Hill*, 138-139).

Finally, Ellen finds the courage to sin. It seems that at last she meets the reader's expectations and decides to break free from patriarchal fixed images. Putting an end to her passivity, Ellen's anger at her husband and the church seems to offer hope for the future.

Being passive and marginalized throughout the novel, Ellen thus awakens to the ugly reality of her passive and oppressive life, fixed within patriarchal molds. Ansay describes Ellen's emerging sense of her Self, of "Be-coming" at the end of the novel as a transformation from 'Non-Being' into what Daly terms as a "New Being". Having the "courage to sin" by the end of the novel, Ellen takes the last walk at night with her daughter as "the steeple of Saint Michael's is invisible" (*Vinegar Hill*, 240), thus marking Ellen's decisive break from all religious assumptions that oppress her and her daughter. Breaking free from fixed patriarchal roles, and before they become like Mary-Margaret, Ellen finally overcomes her fear to "embrace freedom" and decides to "Sin Big" and go against God and the church. This revolutionary act marks her sense of awakening. She can now see beyond patriarchy; her "emancipatory trans-

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[6] The narrator reveals Ellen's thoughts: "Only God knew what was in store for her. Only God could make decisions based on all the facts. Yet lately God seemed so far removed" (*Vinegar Hill*, 45).

formation" is manifested in her ability of "Naming" and having the "power to speak" of her experience from her position of marginality.

To conclude, feminists adopt various strategies to subvert patriarchal ways of speaking about the divine. Ruether (1983: 46) initiates the use of the term "God/ess" to reach "that yet unnamable understanding of the divine that would transcend patriarchal limitations and signal redemptive experience for women as well as men". Fiorenza turns to the symbol "G*d" to "destabilize" our way of thinking and speaking of the divine. She emphasizes the "feminist scale of values" for answering 'the woman question'. In response to traditional religion, Ruether calls for a "counter feminist theology" or what Carol Christ (1977: 177) terms as "revolutionary feminist theology" that asserts on difference between men and women, accepting the characteristics of each sex. Revolutionary feminists believe that religion is an expression of the self. Accordingly, it is not just the political and legal patriarchal structures that must be deconstructed, but the social and cultural institutions represented in family relations and religion that must also be reconstructed. Society should be free of genders, where man and woman co-exist and complement each other, and when woman's difference is the root of her equality. As seen in the case of Ellen Grier, equality has not liberated her; rather, differences should be maintained. As Mansay shows through *Vinegar Hill*, God created men and women equal in value but different in roles. Difference is force, affirming the existence of both sexes and acknowledging the values of both.

To challenge and oppose female religious oppression is to deconstruct patriarchal interpretations associated to them and to reinterpret religious symbols and not discard them. The answer to the 'woman question' is thus not losing faith completely. Religion *does* have the power to serve women as a greater source of liberation than as being the origin of suppression and subjugation. However, what Ansay does is realize Ellen's gradual self-awareness and liberation *only* through her breaking away from the church and its patriarchal fixed molds. As such, Ansay proves that she herself has not truly resolved her personal conflict with religion and her Catholic upbringing yet.

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