

ON WOMEN, CHRISTIANITY, AND HISTORY:
AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHÈLE ROBERTS

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Michèle Roberts was born in 1949 in Hertfordshire, England, and has been writing fiction and poetry since the 1970s. The daughter of an English Protestant father and a Catholic French mother, she was brought up bilingual and educated at a convent school, before going to university, where she read English Language and Literature at Somerville College, Oxford. She has had a variety of jobs in her life: librarian, computer clerk, cook, pregnancy counsellor, creative writing teacher, etc. She has lived for some time in Thailand, where she worked for the British Council, and also in Italy. It was in her university years when Roberts became involved in the Women's Liberation Movement, whose agenda she has always supported, and in her youth she was poetry editor of feminist magazines such as *Spare Rib* and *City Limits*.

She wrote her first novel, *A Piece of the Night*, in 1978, and many others have followed since: *The Visitation* (1983), her controversial *The Wild Girl* (1984), *The Book of Mrs. Noah* (1987), *In the Red Kitchen* (1990), *Daughters of the House* (1992), winner of the W. H. Smith Literary Award, *Flesh and Blood* (1994), *Impossible Saints* (1997), *Fair Exchange* (1999) and, more recently, *The Looking Glass* (2000). She is also the author of several volumes of poetry, gathered together in *All the Selves I was* (1995) and two volumes of short stories, *During Mother's Absence* (1993) and *Playing Sardines* (2001). Female subjectivity is always the main topic in her writing, though this is often combined with the rewriting of Biblical sources or criticism of Christianity and of the patriarchal bias of traditional history, by which she attempts to vindicate women's social and historical position in Western culture. She has also published a compilation of her critical essays in *Food, Sex and God: On Inspiration and Writing* (1998), where she includes the best of her work as a book reviewer, too.

She is now Professor of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia and has recently published a new novel, *The Mistressclass* (April 2003). This conversation took place at her French home in La Mayenne in June, 2000, as part of the research for my Ph.D. on her use of female autobiography and Catholic mythology.

Your first novel, A Piece of the Night, showed a female character who discovered her lesbianism, and lesbianism has undoubtedly been a powerful concept in literature for the rejection of patriarchy. However, you soon turned to other subjects and images. Are you not interested in lesbianism as a feminist device any more?

That's a difficult question. I haven't really written about it since, I think, because it became translated into a more general image of women loving each other, and women being

friends and sisters, so in a sense this sexual side was left behind. Also it is a purely biographical thing: in my twenties I had lesbian love affairs and they were very important to me, and then in my late twenties I fell in love with a man again and I returned—or whatever you call it—to being heterosexual again. So I think in a way, because I wasn't living a lesbian life any more, I stopped writing about it directly. I'm sure there's more to say about it though, and funnily enough, I now want to write about it again. I think in my first book there's a very idealistic notion of the lesbian: she's a heroine, she has escaped from patriarchy, I know she's a woman in a struggle, but I think she's a bit like a saint. I think I wasn't very comfortable with that image of the lesbian; it wasn't very real in a way, but then because I wasn't living a lesbian life any more, I wasn't so certain what the reality of lesbian women was. I think now, as I turn older, I want to look back and recapture some of the images I hadn't dealt with for a long time, and I'm interested in lesbianism again. I think I'd like to write about it again.

When in the 1970s you collaborated in the writing of Tales I Tell My Mother (1978), and again in 1987 in More Tales I Tell My Mother, you showed your interest in collective, or collaborative writing. Do you still consider it a useful strategy for women writing and feminism in general?

Yes, I do, but I think the literary climate has changed with the changes in the political climate. I think in the seventies there was an ideology of feminism and, therefore, for women to be sisterly and united and do things together. It was very normal, very ordinary to be in a group; I was in many, many groups doing many different things, some of them to do with writing, some not. And I think now it's a very different climate for writers, it's more individualistic and, in that sense, more isolated. So I go on believing in groups, but I've found that I tend to work in groups for specific commissions. In the mid-nineties, for example, I was commissioned to write a play, so I worked for a theatre group and it's been through theatre that I've done more collaborative work. I do believe in it, but I don't find myself actually writing in groups any more. Maybe that has to do with being a young writer as well; I think when you're young you need to learn how to do things. There weren't any creative writing classes or degrees at university for creative writing, so it was very natural to be in a group to learn. So, yes, in the abstract, I think it's a good tool for women.

In your first novels you depicted women as embodying different female archetypes and we can notice Jung's theories were very present there. Are they still in your mind when you write? Or maybe you've got over that phase?

I think it is about phases in a way, but I don't quite use that word. I feel like that bird, the magpie, who flies around collecting things to make a nest. I think at one point—it happened particularly with *The Wild Girl*, my book about Mary Magdalene, and to some extent with *The Visitation*—for those two books, Jung was very important, or, not so much Jung, but feminist readings of Jung. I read some very good feminist critiques and developments of Jungian thought that I found very exciting, and I think now they don't speak to me in the same way, but for that moment they were important.

The exploration of female archetypes was for you an attempt to achieve female completeness through the harmonious mixing of them. Are you still concerned with the idea of finding female completeness?

I think, because I so took in all the archetypes when I was that young woman, that I'm now tired of them in a way and I don't think about being a complete woman any more. I just get on with writing. I feel what I do as a writer now is invent a female character that in a sense comes from inside me and also from outside me, and the imagination does the work. So maybe it's that I don't use that language any more—archetypes—and I'm not so bothered about completeness. I think maybe that's a confidence thing, that I'm not a complete woman and that's all right.

We can see in the subjects and images of many of your works the recurring presence of Christian traditions, symbols and settings. Do you feel you'd have missed something important if you hadn't received such a traditional Christian education? I mean, do you think your literary sensibility, or maybe your viewpoint towards female sexuality, would have been different?

Sure, yes, completely. Because when you talk about your own past, all you can say really is "I accept my history" and I think you try and understand it and discover why you think what you think, where your thinking comes from. Because you inherit things, your parents give you culture, tradition, spirituality, and all I can say is "I have to accept Catholicism." It was my mother's gift to me, and my father's gift was very interesting because it was a much more sort of English and Protestant Christianity. The conflict between my parents about "Was it better to be a Protestant or a Catholic?" was very, very enriching for me, because it made me see that you could quarrel with your inheritance, you didn't just have to accept everything.

So, given facts, I think Catholicism ended up being part of me, and I can't really say for good or for bad. When I was young I thought for bad the whole time; well, I still think Catholicism has in lots of ways a very bad effect, particularly on women; I do think it's a misogynistic religion, I hate its hierarchy, the way it stumps out freedom of thought, the way it takes over your emotional life. I think that's what Catholicism does, it kills people emotionally, so I do think it's a bad religion. But Catholicism also gives you this culture of stories and I think that's the great bridge for me, the stories of the saints. It's also got a fantastic tradition of women writers, there's a tradition of women mystics. Right way back from the dawn of recorded history, you'll find writings by women and that was the only place for a long time where women could be writers; it was to be in the Church, to be a nun in a convent. Then what other women did, which I loved finding out about, is this tradition of becoming a mystic, of finding God without the Church or without priests, being heretics, and that's my literary tradition, I realise.

So the Catholic Church gave me this rather beautiful tradition of heretical writing, which I cherish, I really do. So in that sense, I'm now thinking, "Well, it wasn't all bad, was it?"; like Teresa of Avila, I mean, she was almost a heretic, all the way through. I read and read and read about her when I was writing *Impossible Saints*, and it was so interesting how she became very, very close to being condemned by the Inquisition. So that fascinates me, because that's my image of the feminist actually, it's the heretic.

I'm sure you've been asked this question many times, but do you think French feminist theory has been more relevant for your work than Anglo-American theory? I mean, do you feel yourself more influenced by French feminist thinking than by Anglo-American thinking?

Yes, and I think the reason is because I'm so interested in psychoanalysis: it feels true. I mean, I've fought my way through to thinking there is something useful here. I do read theory and yes, I find it very fascinating. There's a sense in which psychoanalysis strikes a chord, physically almost, because I know the unconscious exists, I experience it, and French feminist theory has helped me to think about that sense of the body being involved with writing and then this current of strangeness and chaos which is the unconscious. And I think I feel at home in that, and I know why: it's because of the sea, because I grew up, when I was in France, near the sea and I spent a long, long time just being in the sea, swimming, looking at the sea, and I've got the sea inside me, and the sea was what was between England and France, and it's where I felt most at home as a child, because I never knew "Was I English? Was I French?" On the sea, back and forth in a boat, I was at home, and somehow the sea and the unconscious became the same thing.

So French feminism is about nurturance in some strange way; it returns you, I think, to wateriness and to things changing and being very fluid, whereas my experience of Anglo-American feminism is much more solid, it's about the united or the complete woman, and I think now a lot of those women are very interested actually in French feminism. But I love Cixous, I found her extraordinary. I can't always understand her, sometimes she drives me mad and I'd like to throw the book across the room. What I found really interesting is that when you hear her speak, you can understand her, it's as though her writing in a book is not quite adequate, her body is needed to complete what she's saying, and I have found that extraordinary; reading essays by her is so difficult and then I go and hear her speak at a conference and everything is clear, because there is this body speaking, so that's always the proof of her theory, I think. And Kristeva, I love just that thing she said about the emotions; she said, "These currents of bodily feeling that we call emotions," so she immediately gets you away from abstract words back to the body. So yes, I've found that really, really important.

But can I say something? And this is my polemic. I don't feel that my books are an illustration of theory, because I get asked that a lot by English students. It really enrages me. There's a certain kind of academic person who thinks that if you are interested in theory, then a novel is somehow just an illustration of a theory, and I don't feel that. I feel like I'm working together with it. That's perhaps arrogant, but that's how I feel, that you explore things in a novel that you cannot explore in theory and I suppose what I like about their theory is much closer to creative writing anyway; it's not traditional theory, it's much closer to poetry in lots of ways. But I still feel that I'm not just kind of copying out their theories in my novels.

For Fernando Galván, the innovative style and concerns of The Book of Mrs. Noah seem to mark a new phase in your writing. Do you see your literary career now as a constant evolution or more as a sum of different concerns and strategies? How do you evaluate your literary career now?

I can't think about it in phases. I think these are just different ways of looking at it, that you can use different models, so that if you use the model of phases, then I'd agree pretty well with what Fernando was saying. For example, I think my last two novels are a phase in which I have explored very womanly concerns, less critically perhaps than in the past. I've valued them in these novels and I call them my womanly phase, and I think the next novel I'll do will be much harsher and briefer and I will return to the city as a subject. So that is a very valid model.

I think, in another sense, every novel feels like something completely new when you are actually beginning to write it and feeling inspired, and the most recent model I've got is a sexual model actually, it's about being in love. I've looked back at my novels and I've seen that there is a muse for every single novel: a person I've been very, very upset with. For example, I think my mother was the muse for at least the first three novels. She's a dominant, important figure in my imagination. I think my father was the muse for *Impossible Saints*. It's a book which is absolutely about my relationship to my own father: he inspired that book; he hated it; he really found it very painful and uncomfortable. And then there's been a couple of men recently I've fallen madly in love with. This is a terrible thing to admit, but anyway it's the truth. You know, I didn't have a love affair, but instead I wrote the book, and I think in a way you could say—and this is a very problematic image to use—that making a book is like making a baby; it's not the same, because I think it's a different kind of work, but I think you could use pregnancy as an image, as a womanly creation. So I can laugh because I haven't had children myself—I was infertile—but I think I've had ten children by different people, some children engendered by my mother, some by my dear husband, for example *Daughters of the House*, *In the Red Kitchen*, and then, more recently, two babies by other men as it were.

That's a beautiful image.

Well, it's fun, it's a very sexy image. It's about being very unfaithful, I think, and having a career as a very promiscuous woman, going about the world, falling in love and making novels. So that's my current image. I've never told this to anybody! *[She laughs]*

When reading Daughters of the House and Impossible Saints, I felt attracted by the way you experimented with female autobiography, mixing and confusing it with story-telling, and I could see these two genres also play an important role in Flesh and Blood and The Wild Girl. What do you try to express by mixing them?

I think it's partly a simple literary obsession with forms of narrative. I suppose, as I've got older, I've become more sophisticated, because you can't help it. You read and read, you think about what you are reading: what is the shape of this? how is this made?, and I've become very, very fascinated by the way storytelling is like a big river and it goes into different streams, almost it feels like a physical impulse sometimes. I don't know if it is also a personal theory, it feels like my idea, but I know many other people think it too. There's a human need to make a shape for the story that we all have and, therefore, you can look at history as forms of storytelling. So, in that sense, autobiography and biography are not very different from fiction: similar impulses and similar stylistic devices are there to make a beautiful shape or a truthful shape.

And I suppose also there's some kind of political homage: because women's autobiographies have been lost, because women have not been encouraged to tell their life stories, I want to tell them; I want to rescue women from history. It's almost like how we communicate with dead people: I think all the dead women who came before us are a part of the history of the world and yet I feel their stories are somehow alive somewhere. This is my image, a very Catholic image perhaps, that you don't die, in a sense, and that there's an eternal life. For me that's through language, if I dive and capture it. If I could find out about the lives of women in the past who are dead, then somehow they come back to life when we read their stories. So there's that political—I think it's political—feminist wish to resurrect lost, dead, gone voices, and particularly, for me, female ones, I must say.

The use of autobiography in your novels is closely related to your fictionalisation of history and historical characters in Impossible Saints, Daughters of the House or Fair Exchange. To what extent do you find it relevant for feminist writing to question this traditional patriarchal discipline, to deconstruct the opposition between history and fiction?

I think it's very important to do it, because I think what's interesting is the shape of the woman's autobiography. It's usually different from that of a man: biographies of famous men are very phallic, up to the peak and then down to death. All they need is events, whereas events aren't reported in a woman's life. You might have to really think about it to find them. I think just as a woman's life might be able to swing back and forth, then they'd use different narrative devices. And I think just to say a simple statement—that the life of any woman is worth hearing about—is a profoundly subversive political comment really.

You offer very interesting subversions of saints' lives in Impossible Saints. Did you do a lot of research for each of the women characters or did you already have a wide knowledge of women saints from your education?

Well, I had a lot of knowledge already, because I went to convent school and I had a very strong Catholic education till the age of sixteen, so we heard a lot of stories. Then we also went to catechism classes and there were saints' days in church, so in that sense Catholic culture gives you those saints' lives, although you don't think about them critically at all. It wasn't really until after years and years of having been a feminist that I rediscovered the lives of saints, and then I rediscovered them through two books I had owned for about ten years on my shelves. One was *The Life of Santa Teresa*, her autobiography, and the other was *The Golden Legend*, by de Voragine, which I had in French. I just had a sort of illumination, really; I thought, "I need to look at this again."

Of course, in *The Golden Legend* there are many, many women saints, and I was picking out the ones that lit up for me. It's because—nobody has seen this, I thought it was very subtle, but it is so subtle that no one has seen it at all—in *Impossible Saints*, obviously the main story is that of Josephine, based on the life of Saint Teresa, but all the other saints were like alternative versions of what her life could have been like, saying "What if she did this?" "What if she did that?" But there's a structure: the other stories begin with like a bad father; Petronilla's got a really bad father, Jesus Christ, God the Father, Saint Peter, all

these men; she's kind of crushed. So the bad father begins, and the book ends with a good father. The stories work through the idea of a bad father who oppresses the daughter and then we get the rebellion of the daughter in various ways: we get various ways in which the daughter fights her father, loves him, flirts with him, gets raped by him. But finally I felt I'd worked through to somewhere when there's this good father—it's a joke, there's this priest, he's a good father—and he falls in love with a woman and has a happy love affair. That's the last story of the book, so there's a real development, but no one that I know has ever seen this, they just think, "Oh, well, lots of stories." I got really angry!

Another powerful image in your fiction is that of houses as places where the women protagonists return or want to live. The house plays a very important role, for example, in Daughters of the House, and also in Impossible Saints, being the convent Josephine wants to found for herself and her companions. Besides, you've suggested that your female characters are often homeless women in search of a house and how the house represents, in a way, the maternal body. Can you comment on this?

Yes, that's true. I think it's important to say that I worked out for myself that I was writing about homelessness. I didn't really decide to; I suddenly looked back—I think I'd written about seven novels by then—and I realised that I'd always written about homeless women, so I thought "this must mean something." And I realised it meant something about feminism: that if you were a feminist, maybe that meant you had to leave home in some very deep way and be a traveller; be someone who was emerging in the world, who was going away and then maybe coming back, but then going away; someone who was out in the wood. Clearly, then, the house you left was the house of your mother and it meant perhaps you felt an ambivalence about the traditional feminine role of the woman who belongs in the house. I think I knew that I'd always been a traveller, with very mixed feelings about longing to love her, but also in a way being frightened by it, because I think there's a sense in which the house can be a frightening place. It may swallow you up, maybe it's a prison, maybe you can never get out again.

Then, maybe, also bad things happen in houses, as we know they do: the house can be a very dangerous place, it's where many women get beaten up by their husbands. So it's not just this kind of beautiful symbol of security and creativity. But I think also my books chart the longings of the homeless woman to find a home. I'm still writing about it. My most recent book, *The Looking Glass*, is also about a homeless woman. She's an orphan and has to leave every house. It's a motif that comes back and back and back. I think in *In the Red Kitchen* I let my woman character have a house. She has no way to make any money, she works as a prostitute and she manages to buy a house, but it's a very temporary place. Yes, I love houses, but obviously I've got these very mixed feelings about them.

You often portray difficult mother-daughter relationships in your novels. In Impossible Saints, for example, the mother-daughter conflict appears in nearly all the women characters and it has to do, as you said, with the daughter's search for autonomy away from the nurturing mother. To what extent is this conflict real in women's lives? Did your interest come from your own experience as a daughter?

Very much so, and I think what many women find is—maybe it's just my generation—that however wonderful our mothers were, which they were, struggling always, there was a sense in which they found they had to give us an image of what it was to be a woman and my generation wasn't in agreement with this image. So there was inevitable conflict. It's perhaps beyond the level of the surface that it's to do with politics and feminism and, in a way, with how you cope with difference. Traditionally, in psychoanalysis, Freud says, "Well, it's very easy for the girl in a way; she grows up, she identifies with her mother, she becomes a woman." What if you can't totally identify with your mother? Because you're scared, you don't really want to be like her totally. You may love her, but you don't want to identify with her, so what do you do? I think that's what makes you leave home, go out into the world to find other versions of what it means to be a woman. I think there's a very deep unconscious level on which something else is going on, which is about real passion, about love. Maybe it's because you do identify at some deep level as a baby perhaps, so closely with your mother, that you love her so much you have to tear yourself away perhaps, to become an autonomous being.

So maybe it's not that the mother is like a bad mother or a villain or she's cruel. Maybe it's just that she is powerful, like a goddess, and you have to become your own goddess, so you have to go far away from her. I do think that happened to me. I think something very painful did go on for our mothers, which was, I think, that my mother could not be a feminist. Her upbringing made that impossible: she was brought up in a very bourgeois family; she was very deeply Catholic; she married a foreigner. That was, in a way, her bid for freedom, that was her way of leaving home to go that far away across the sea. She worked as a teacher, she was a very strong woman, she couldn't really acknowledge that she loved other women and I found this very, very distressing and very painful in my childhood, that she was a woman who believed that men had more interesting lives, men were more interesting to talk to. So I knew that she valued men much more than women, but of course she was the exception who all the men loved.

So I think as a daughter I felt very unloved by my mother. It is very hard to say this, but I did feel it, profoundly, profoundly unloved and uncherished as a daughter. So I fought her to get her love. In my way, I was trying to leave her, because she was so strong and so powerful and so dominant, how could I become myself except to leave her? In another way, I was coming back to her saying, "Please love me, please love me," so I was completely ambivalent: going away, coming back, going away, coming back. And there's a very beautiful Greek myth which I wrote poems about, Demeter and Persephone; Persephone is the daughter who goes away from her mother and comes back, goes away and comes back ... This really spoke to me.

The image of the maternal and maternal nurturance seems to be very important in your work. I see your female characters often have identities in crisis: to what extent are these crises related to a search for maternal nurturance?

I think in those moments of crisis you can feel that you need it. There are certain times in your life when you need to be in a treat, and if you haven't got anyone to do this for you, to comfort you, nurture you, caress you, you do it for yourself: you go to bed, you pull the covers over your head ... So you could call that, I think, maternal nurturance. I think

kindness is very, very important, and I didn't have much in my childhood. I mean, I had good parents who looked after us in terms of you have a safe house to live in, enough food to eat, etc. You get everything that children are supposed to need. What I lacked was that sense of physical kindness from my mother. It's very painful to say this, but it's true, she didn't speak to us, she never caressed us, she just wasn't that sort of woman. So I grew up feeling I lacked that, and I think one of the things I found with the woman's movement is a simple sense of maternal and sisterly nurturance. I know that sounds very romantic, but I feel it's true for me and, in my friendships with other women, there is a lot of kindness, a lot of looking after each other. Well, other things happen too, like a little bit of competitiveness or envy or fighting, but there's this sense of love, of really taking care of a being. That's a very important part of feminism for me.

We can notice in your fiction that the father-daughter relationship is also presented in a conflictive way, often suggesting a relationship of dependence and domination, of love and hate, which seems to spring from your own personal conflict with the figure of the father as embodiment of patriarchal authority. How do you evaluate now your perceptions of this conflict?

God, that's what makes you write a novel, I could take two years responding! I think *Impossible Saints* was a complete breakthrough novel for me. It was very, very hard to write, because it was the first novel where I really actively took this image of the daughter and the father having a kind of sexual relationship through fantasy, but it was important, it was there, and it was so hidden. I knew that I had great problems with my father, I knew he and I had loved each other very much and I knew that we'd also fought a lot. I had incredible fights with my father, and it wasn't till I wrote *Impossible Saints*, which was just before he died, that I was able—perhaps I was old enough—to say “I desire my father.” And this was shattering because, of course, as a Catholic child, I felt very evil and very wicked for having these sexual feelings towards my father. And now I can gather it's very common in little girls, that the father is presented like a god, especially the conventional father such as I had: he was away all day, he came in late at night, we ran around giving him food and looking after him. He was a god; he was God. So I think you would fall in love, and your first sexual feelings, the first man you see is your own father, so now I can think it's normal, it's natural. As a child, of course, I didn't know that, so I felt very excited, very passionate about it, but very scared, because he—this is the bit I discovered—had very sexual feelings for me too and, of course, this was what made me feel wicked. I blamed myself and I didn't know, again, that this is normal.

So it wasn't that he actively or physically abused me, and I've got that clear, but I think in his fantasy he was, if not actually abusive, then too intimate. He flirted too much with me and that was very damaging for me. But I think it was a kind of gift in the end. In a funny way I decided it hadn't killed me. I felt damaged by it for a long time, but eventually, working it out when I meant to write a book about it, I thought, “Well, my father gave me what he could give me and some of it was like a fruit with spines on it, but inside something good.” I think now when I look back that I look back at a relationship which was absolutely passionate and loving and I think, “Well, that's all right,” because I knew my father was loving me and I think that's something wonderful to know. He might have

loved me in ways which were flawed or not quite right, or too much one way or the other. He might also have neglected me, which he did. He was not a very good father. He didn't actually know how to be a good father to children. He loved me too much like a lover, but I suppose I've ended up thinking, "Well, he loved in his own way, the best he could."

So I was loved, and I can now better admit that, but I think as well he was a bad father and that's true. But I, in the end, felt, well, when I'm on my death bed, people will say about me, "She had many faults, she didn't always love people well." It's about being human, isn't it?; that's where you get to in the end. I guess it's difficult to be good parents, particularly because a lot of people become parents when they're still very young, so they haven't sorted out their own relationships with their own parents. So the way they deal with their children is about their own conflicts and their own problems. Now I see that, but that's very recent. It took me a long time.

Food and cooking are pervasive images in most of your fiction and they seem to carry some sort of liberating force. In Impossible Saints, for example, cooking seems to be the central activity in Josephine's convent. In these times of anorexia and eating disorders, to what extent can we vindicate eating and cooking as sources of power? I presume this is a very controversial subject.

Yes, it is. That's why it's interesting. Absolutely. That's why I want to write about it a lot, because there's so much to say about it. It's such a huge subject again. I've been writing stories about it recently. I think, in one very simple way, cooking is a very ancient traditional image for female creativity. So given I want to reclaim things for women, you can very simply reclaim cooking and say, "This is powerful, it's fun, it's creative." Of course, throughout history women have had this task in culture of so giving to others, and saints have used it as an image. So there's a long tradition of women saints sometimes doing without food to transcend the body, which they felt horrid, because Catholicism taught you that the female body was somehow more corrupt and more evil than the male one and you had to rise above it to find God.

So women were very interested, I think, in doing without food. There are books written about holy anorexia. It was a good thing for women saints, but also, at the same time, some of the women mystics would talk about eating as the way of knowing God. So the imagery around Holy Communion, for example, is very powerful and rich, of incorporating God as man, as body into yourself. Of course, as a woman, I need to start to think about breastfeeding. It's actually the mother who gives herself through the breast, and the magical, mystical milk, the land of milk and honey, is the milk of the breast; that's really what the mystics are going on about, it's those feelings of bliss.

So I think food fascinates me, because, on the one hand, it's very earthy and ordinary, and sort of invisible; in another way, it's got all these wonderful, mystical, spiritual associations; and, in yet another way, it's a source of enormous conflict for modern women. I've been involved with that, I'm not separate from it. My twin sister was anorexic for many years and I had an eating disorder, I think, in the other way. I used to eat a lot when I was nervous or depressed or unhappy, in the same way that I smoked a lot. So I felt I knew about it in a very deep way, the anxieties around food that modern women have and how food can be a comfort. It can stand in place of a person, and I eventually worked

out that it was in a sense my substitute for this mother, this maternal nurturance. I couldn't always provide that for myself in a spiritual or intellectual way and then it's very easy to eat and to eat too much for comfort. So there was a sort of psychological thing going on that I was very interested in exploring. And, of course, there's another aspect which is obvious but true, I think, which is that we are surrounded by images of thin women in our culture, which is, I think, an absolute denial in a sense of the powerful body of the mother, because maternal bodies are big, solid, strong bodies, and this is completely denied in these pictures of very thin models.

So it's difficult to grow up as a woman without being very self-conscious about your own body and very prone to an anxiety about eating. It's very rare to find a woman who hasn't done some diet in her life or felt quite anxious about eating. So I suppose, having gone through, to some extent, those anxieties myself, I wanted to reclaim food as a source of pleasure for women, because it was almost like a sin, I thought, for women. That's what "sin" means in conventional English vernacular discourse; "sinful" means something that's fattening, and you get in advertisements for cream cakes: "It's naughty, but nice." Isn't it amazing? It's not sinful to bomb Iraq or to go and rape somebody, but it's sinful to eat a cake. So I really want to explore what was quite terrifying for me as a young woman, the sensations of pleasure to do with eating, and I'm quite sure it connects to the fact that I was very deprived as a baby, or depressed, because my poor mother had two babies to feed, and she did this terrible regime of every four hours you fed the baby, but in between, nothing, so she said we'd be crying with hunger for three hours up to four. So I think I grew up feeling deprived, badly nourished and starving, and I connect to those feelings when other people talk about what I feel as their instinct of mortification.

So it's a very complicated issue and the only way I can think about it is to write stories about it. Recently, I've written a story about a woman who is obsessed with eating and cooking. She's also a stocker. She's madly in love with this man who is a chef, she went to his cookery classes and learned to cook. She imagines that he is madly in love with her, and as the story goes on you realise that she's in a way insane, because she thinks he's in love with her. She's cooking, cooking and talking, and at the end of the book she breaks into his house and she's meant to kill him, cook him and eat him. And I was so pleased that I laughed a lot writing that story, because I thought I was really confronting the desires at the bottom of the fear in eating. In my case, obviously, it was the desire to eat everything, and I think a lot of women feel that. Maybe they don't, but I was interested in it. This story is coming out in a collection next year.¹

Nicole Ward Jouve has said that each of your novels is innovative in form; and, indeed, you seem to experiment a great deal with structure and the way of narrating. Is this experimentation linked to your perception of the main subject in each novel? To what extent do you think each content demands a particular form?

Yes, I do, absolutely. Just generally, I think, what's the point of writing a novel if you just repeat all forms of patterns? That's just boring. Also I think, specifically, that to write a

1. Roberts refers here to *Playing Sardines*, published in June 2001, and the story "The Cookery Lesson."

novel is to solve a problem, that you write a novel to sort out some kind of obsession, some sort of imagery that is governing your dreams, circling round your head and you can't get rid of it. The answer is to explore it in a novel. So the form and the content are absolutely integrated: you can't have one without the other. To pose the question of the novel in itself is to think about the form of it, and then of course to answer the question that the novel poses is to develop the form.

So I think you must be formally experimenting in every novel, otherwise you cannot be a novelist, even if it is quite a mild experiment, like with *Fair Exchange*. It was a kind of traditional form of the feminine, historical romance used for feminist purposes. I mean, that's not terribly radical, but that was a form of experiment. Or it could have been more extreme, like in *Flesh and Blood*. I think that's my most formally difficult novel. I'm not very fond of it because of that.

Your literary production includes ten novels, poetry and several short stories, apart from contributions to drama and film-making. Do you feel more at ease with the novel than with the short story when writing fiction?

I don't know really, because people think of some of my novels as having a lot of short stories in them, and they do. I mean, *Impossible Saints* is full of short stories; *Flesh and Blood* too. The way I've used narration in many of my books, like *In the Red Kitchen*, or the newer *The Looking Glass*, means I've used many different narrative voices, so there's different stories being plaited together. I think what I've done as a novelist is to experiment with ways that you can combine the short story and the novel and that's perhaps my contribution to the form. I think I've liked them both equally. There's something I've seen very satisfying about the big shape which is the novel. There's no doubt about it, there's a real pleasure in making something big that takes two years and it's eighteen thousand words, and you've made it integrated, a whole. But there's an equal delight in writing short things, the delight I think I used to find in poetry, in making something small but complete.

So I think, because I like big and I like small, I've ended up more and more putting them together and seeing what they can do. Because, you know, when I was young I posed everything in questions of "either/or"; now I'm older, I think I'll just say "and." Maybe this is a very stupid, arrogant, posh way of putting it, but I think it goes back to certain kinds of questions in philosophy (Aristotle): *a* is not *b*, so it's either *a* or it's *b*; when you're a poet, you say it's *a* and it's *b*, end of problem. So you can say, "I love short stories and I love novels; okay, I'll write something that's both." I've now begun writing short stories that are called novels just for fun. I've written two short stories in this new collection that are short, but they're novels: they're miniature novels.² And I really like that now, writing miniature novels inside a short story.

Your fiction has been connected in criticism to that of other contemporary women writers like Toni Morrison, in her exploration of the mother figure, or Angela Carter in her interest in

2. These stories are "Blathering Frights" and "A Bodice Rips," both included in *Playing Sardines*.

story-telling and her mixing of sexuality and violence. Do you feel your art linked to theirs in some way or do you see it only as a very general connection?

Well, I think I specifically learned from Toni Morrison and I actually say that under one of my short stories, you know, “This is a homage to Toni Morrison.”³ I learned from her this thing about myth-making, that at the heart of harmless life or what can look like the most ordinary life, there’s poetry, beauty, mystery and myth. It completely knocked me over that she does that and I suppose it was *Beloved* that had a major impact. But I’ve read all her novels and I think I’ve learned from her what I call the unconscious. She may call it myth perhaps, but it’s there, and all you have to do is see it and invent it.

From Angela Carter, I don’t like many of her novels, they seem to me too cold and clever and intellectual. What I like is her short stories, in particular the fairy stories. I think that’s where, as you say, she combines story-telling with sex and violence and, I suppose, it’s this thing of taking the old form of the fairy story, from Calvino perhaps, I think she learned a lot from Calvino, and saying, “I can retell them, I can play with them.” I think her short stories are her most beautiful, powerful work, and I think I was definitely inspired by her. Yes, to take all the stories and rewrite them, and also yes, to say that sex and violence are connected. But I don’t think I’d go as far as she does in, for example, her love of the Marquis de Sade. I’ve written about it more critically. I don’t feel that it’s liberating in the same way as she does. I made a little joke for Angela Carter, in a sense, in *Flesh and Blood*. I’ve got a story there, with Eugénie de Franval, which is an actual name which crops up in a short story by the Marquis de Sade and I had my fun with de Sade there. So I don’t agree with Carter in any way at all, but I admire her.

In your writing you’ve often reflected motifs and images from fairy stories, for example, in Flesh and Blood or Impossible Saints. In your latest novel, The Looking Glass, you seem to bring in again the subject of fairy tales and story-telling. Can you comment on this?

I think it goes back to even before I was interested in Angela Carter or before I read Marina Warner’s wonderful book *From the Beast to the Blonde*. I think, actually, I grew up with fairy stories. It was part of what I read. I can remember as a child going to the public library and getting out collections of fairy stories all around the world. I remember reading Celtic, Indian, European fairy stories and loving them, because they took you into that other world far away and, of course, it’s a world inside yourself that, when you’re a child, is somewhere else. I think at some deep unconscious level, I’ve always thought of the transforming power of fairy stories and that therefore this could be good for women. I think now that it reached its climax perhaps with *Impossible Saints*, when I realised that saints’ stories were fairy stories. That was very exciting, because I thought I worked that out all by myself. Obviously other women had been working out exactly the same thing, you’re never alone with an idea, but I felt I’d worked something out for myself.

I think now I’m sort of ebbing away a bit; the phase is ending. In *The Looking Glass*, there’s a fairy story about a mermaid which is referred to all through the book and the heroine has to work out really, “Is she a mermaid or is she a human being?” That’s in a

3. She refers here to “Anger,” the opening story in her collection *During Mother’s Absence*.

sense what the book is about and she ends up deciding “she’s a human being.” What does that mean? The end of the book. I don’t know if my next novel is going to have fairy stories in it, so I think that phase is sort of ending, but I never know.

Are you still interested in exploring Catholic symbols and myths, Christianity and its patriarchal meaning?

Less so. I think it will always be there, because of that history I told you. I come from that cultural background. But I think with *Impossible Saints* I really grabbed something. I sorted out some big conflict in myself about sexuality and spirituality, religion, fathers and, in a sense, I think that I’ve done with the religious issue in a way. There are less nuns in my books now. I would need always some mythical note. I’ve realised that’s the way I write: I write about the unconscious, there always have to be mythical figures. But maybe they aren’t always going to be religious ones or fairy story ones, maybe they’ll come from different backgrounds. I mean, I’ve become very interested in Greek myths again recently, so maybe I’m going to use them again.

Do you mean you want to open up to new concerns?

Yes, I think there’s this image I’ve got of novels as being ways of working out problems, and there are problems on the level of literature, problems on the level of form—in a way they’re experiments in form—and then also, at another level, experiments about content, about this problem I’ve got in my life, you know. At the moment I want to think about cities, and I know that’s going to be the issue next: life in the city. You could feel when you’re fifty-one that you’re sort of finished, I don’t want to feel that. British culture is very cruel in that way, I think in the literary world there’s this sense that male writers go on, but women writers, they just want them to be young and beautiful. It is harder when you’re in your fifties in some ways, but I think it’s actually when many women do their best work, so I’ve decided my fifties are going to be my decade, for my best work. But I have to struggle with something in my head, you know, about being fifty and what to do next, who I am ... Middle-life crisis.

*One last question: you’ve recently published a new novel, *The Looking Glass*, and you’ve already told us bits and pieces about your projects for the future. Could you tell us more about them? Have you got any plans for another novel, maybe?*

Well, I’m definitely experimenting with short stories, because the next book I will publish, which will come out next year, will be a collection of short stories. They’re very different: some of them I’ve written for radio or magazines, so they’re very narrative, they had to be, and some are more experimental. I’ve written some soft pornography, which is a lot of fun; I’ve got very interested in pornography and wanted to make jokes about it, and this felt like a breakthrough in a way, to write something which was very silly actually, very light-hearted, to do with pornography. I really enjoyed it. Then in the next novel, which I’m beginning to just feel churning around, I want to write about cities, about sex and violence again, but in a new way.

What I'm noticing in myself is that, because I'm older, I'm not writing as the angry daughter all the time any more. I'm writing about young women, sometimes from their point of view, but sometimes from the point of view of an older woman, and I'm finding it very interesting to explore a maternal voice, or the voice of an older woman, and to hear what she has to say. And, therefore, I can now really write about the dialogue between mother and daughter in a new way, because I've been a daughter, I've been a young woman ... Now I'm a middle-aged woman, I can write from that point of view as well and I find that quite stimulating and exciting. So that's my future project.

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