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Patricia Bastida Rodríguez 2006: *Saint or Heretic: The Other Teresa of Avila in Michèle Roberts's Impossible Saints*.

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Michèle Roberts enjoys a recognized status within British letters. In the last two years, the first book-length studies on her production have begun to appear. Patricia Bastida Rodríguez's book was followed, in 2007, by Sarah Falcus's *Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories* and Valentina Castagna's *Corpi a pezzi. Eretiche e sante secondo Michèle Roberts*. A new book on Roberts is also in preparation by Emma Parker, to be published by Manchester University Press. Roberts's interest in the question of female identity, her critique of patriarchy, her postmodern scepticism about historiographic discourse and the heterodox approach to Christian mythology are the main themes that have attracted critics to her fiction. The forceful denunciation of the oppression of women by Catholicism has featured prominently in her works from *A Piece of the Night* (1978), her first novel, to *Impossible Saints* (1997), which, according to Patricia Bastida Rodríguez, culminates a phase in Roberts's production characterized by the presence of religious themes. Included within this phase are such novels as *The Wild Girl* (1984), *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987) and the highly acclaimed *Daughters of the House* (1992), which won the WH Smith Literary Award and was short-listed for the Booker Prize.

Many of Roberts's novels dig into the past in order to reconstruct the lives of women, both their public and private experiences. *The Wild Girl* deals with Mary Magdalene and her relationship with Christ, while *Daughters of the House* finds its inspiration in the autobiography of the humble and pious Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. In an interview conducted by Fernando Galván, Roberts said that she had read, beneath the surface of Thérèse's account, a story of "repression and desire", "anxiety", "anger, loss, terrific suffering, doubt, [and] sex" (1998: 369). *Fair Exchange* (1999) is partly based on Mary Wollstonecraft's life, while *The Looking Glass* (2000) restores "women to history by rewriting the lives of Flaubert and Mallarmé from a woman-centered perspective" (Parker 2006: 341). Finally, Roberts imaginatively explores some episodes in the life of Charlotte Brontë in *The Mistressclass* (2003). Sarah Falcus's assertion that *The Looking Glass* "concentrates upon [women's] stories which have been suppressed or lost" (2002: 4) holds true for the novels mentioned so far as well as for *Impossible Saints*. The need to revise the religious past and "reconstruct the history of women . . . as a challenge to historical-religious patriarchy" (Fiorenza 1993: xx) underlies this novel, which retells the life of Saint Teresa of Avila and eleven other saints. Patricia Bastida makes a comparative analysis of Saint Teresa and her fictional alter ego: a nun called Josephine. The parallelisms between both women are many, but so are the

differences, as Roberts warns in the Author's Note that precedes the novel. Bastida perceptively uncovers the differences and similitudes that shape the character of Josephine and sheds light on Roberts's deconstruction of hagiographical discourse and, particularly, of the *myth* of the saint, as Bastida appropriately calls it (187).

The bibliography dealing with the feminist revision of Christian myths in contemporary literature is not abundant. Some of the most informative books are Patricia Duncker's *Sisters and Strangers. An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (1992), Amy Benson Brown's *Rewriting the Word: American Women Writers and the Bible* (1999) and Jeannette King's *Women and the Word. Contemporary Women Novelists and the Bible* (2000). King concentrates on the fiction of Michèle Roberts (*The Book of Mrs Noah, The Wild Girl and Daughters of the House*), Emma Tennant, Sara Maitland, Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. In Spain, there are some studies that focus on the rewriting of religious myths by contemporary British women writers (see Pérez Gil 1996, 2000: 56-62, and Villegas López 2005: 76-91, for a general overview; González Arias 1997 analyses the Eve myth in the work of Irish poets). Patricia Bastida Rodríguez's earlier book —*Santas improbables: re/visiones de mitología cristiana en autoras contemporáneas* (1999)— addresses the figure of the saint in the short stories of Sara Maitland, Marina Warner and the Spanish writer Ana Rossetti.

Impossible Saints evinces a profound disbelief in the conventional, idealised notion of female sanctity. This novel stands out as one of the most iconoclastic revisions of hagiographies. Its richness and complexity have been explored in several journal articles and book chapters, authored by Susan Sellers, Sarah Falcus, Valentina Castagna and, in Spain, by Sonia Villegas López, María del Carmen Rodríguez Fernández and Patricia Bastida. The treatment of sexuality and spirituality; the fictional nature of History, biography and autobiography; the metaphor of fragmentation; the formal structure of the novel or its interpretation in the light of Irigaray's theories are among the themes discussed. The most important contribution that Bastida's book makes to the critical debate on *Impossible Saints* lies in the analysis of the intertextual presence of Saint Teresa in the narrative, an aspect that is only briefly alluded to in previous studies (see, for example, Rodríguez Fernández 2000: 84, and Villegas López 2001: 179-80). In Bastida's opinion, *Impossible Saints* constitutes the "most subversive" version (194) of Teresa of Avila's life and autobiography. Not only does Roberts show in her novel the distortion and dogmatic instrumentalisation of the lives of female saints by a patriarchal Church, but also suggests that Josephine-Teresa's official autobiography is an unreliable text, a mutilated narrative from which the protagonist has omitted her most intimate thoughts in order to escape punishment from a panoptical Inquisition.

Santa o hereje is divided into six chapters and an introduction. The first chapter, 'El discurso cristiano desde la perspectiva de género', aims to situate Roberts's religious revisionism within a wider historical context. Several pages of this chapter repeat to the letter many of the ideas and quotations that Bastida already included in parts of chapter two and other sections (III.2) of her earlier book *Santas improbables*. Bastida studies the misogynous legacy of patriarchal Christianity, its traditional association of sex with sin and the powerful influence that this religion has exerted on the cultural institutionalisation of women's self-sacrificing and submissive role, particularly

through the figure of the Virgin Mary. The first three sections are concerned with the feminist backlash against patriarchal religion. Bastida begins her historical overview with *The Woman's Bible* (1895-98), the project championed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and goes on to explain Simone de Beauvoir's critique of the Marian ideal in *The Second Sex* (1949). The next section summarises the role of feminist theology in the 1970s and 1980s and examines the contribution of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Daly. Finally, the third section gathers the opinions of anthropologists, historians and feminist theorists who have studied the influence exerted by Christianity on the configuration of female identity.

The question of sanctity is introduced in this chapter, though very briefly, in my opinion. In only two paragraphs, Bastida talks about such problematical aspects as anorexia, mortifications and transvestism (46), or refers to the authority that some women mystics gained. Since the myth of female sanctity is central to the book, I think the author should have developed these and other aspects at greater length. For example, the conscientious analysis she makes (in chapter three) of the revisionary critical work published on Saint Teresa is not accompanied by any reference to the existence of similar studies with a feminist basis that have sought to change the traditional perspective about other women mystics and visionaries (such as Hildegard of Bingen, Marguerite Porete, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Julian of Norwich or Margery Kempe). Additionally, the final section of chapter one which introduces the revision of Christian myths in literature hardly makes reference to the rewritings of the figure of the saint in contemporary women's fiction. The 1990s were particularly prolific in this respect. *Daughters of the House* and *Impossible Saints* appeared in that decade. Barbara Lachman and Joan Ohanneson revised the story of Hildegard of Bingen in the novels *The Journal of Hildegard of Bingen* (1993) and *Scarlet Music: Hildegard of Bingen* (1997), respectively. Mary Lee Wile's novel *Ancient Rage*, featuring Saint Elizabeth as one of the protagonists, came out in 1995. Sue Reidy targets the Christian ideal of chastity, martyrdom and mortification in *The Visitation* (1996). The novel opens with quotations from Hildegard of Bingen, Saint Teresa's *Life* and Karl Marx, while chapter 23 contains some reflections on the Spanish mystic. One of the most interesting texts that has been published of late is Mary O'Connell's *Living with Saints* (2001), which includes retellings of the life of Saint Ursula, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and Saint Anne, among others. It seems to me that a general overview addressing the revisions of female sainthood both in academic circles and by women writers would have enabled a better contextualisation of Roberts's novel and might have given more unity and freshness to this part of the book.

The second chapter makes a comprehensive introduction of Michèle Roberts's biography and *oeuvre*. Her Catholic education and her university years, during which she came into contact with feminist groups and began to question her faith, had a great influence on her. Bastida sees an evolution in Roberts's bold approach to religious themes. Her first two novels show the burdensome influence of a Catholic upbringing on the protagonists' lives. In the 1980s, she is more interested in Biblical revisionism. The communities of religious women, the convent and the nun as "agents of rebellion" (86) are the themes that attract Roberts's attention in the 1990s. The last part of this chapter provides a detailed study of *Daughters of the House*.

'Teresa de Ávila en su tiempo y en la historia' is the title of the third chapter. With the clarity and readability that characterises her whole book, Bastida first examines Saint Teresa's life and thirst for reform. This section is followed by the analysis of her autobiography and a final and very useful survey that considers the reception of Saint Teresa's works and persona. As Bastida argues, the ideological trends dominant at each historical moment have also made the critical focus on Saint Teresa shift (112). While the early studies concentrated on religious issues, in the second half of the 20th century more original approaches were published that engaged with the historical context and stylistic elements. Bastida highlights the contribution of Efrén de la Madre de Dios and Otger Steggink, in 1968, and of Víctor García de la Concha a decade later. García de la Concha reinterprets Saint Teresa's so-called stylistic "defects" as part of her groundbreaking, personal poetics (115). In recent years, the gender-based perspective has shed new light on Teresa of Ávila. For Teófanos Egido, the Spanish mystic claimed the right of women to the spiritual life, "la igualdad más deseada en la sociedad religiosa de entonces" (119). For Alison Weber and Juan Antonio Marcos, Teresa's frequent references to her "sinful, weak and ignorant nature" (120) simply constitute rhetorical strategies that she employed, as did other writers at the time, to gain the reader's benevolence. Other essays centre on Teresa the woman or show the manipulation and distortion of her figure through time, as Gillian T.W. Ahlgren does in *Teresa of Ávila and the Politics of Sanctity* (1992). This engaging survey concludes with some recent representations of Saint Teresa in the work of Spanish and English-speaking writers. Bastida mentions here a novel by Carmel Bird, *The White Garden* (1995), and *Impossible Saints*. A more flexible time span would have allowed for the inclusion of a novel as important as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72), whose prelude invites the comparison of the protagonist, Dorothea Brooke, with a "later-born Theresa" (3).

Chapters four and five are the core of Bastida's book. Both of them explore Roberts's radical break from traditional hagiographies. Her impossible saints do not fit into the Christian model of femininity. On the contrary, these women are in search of their identity and fight a patriarchal religion that limits them physically as well as psychologically (129-30). The metaphor of fragmentation dominates the novel and its structure: the story of Josephine alternates with other chapters that recount the lives of eleven saints. This structure creates a broken, discontinuous and fragmentary narrative that functions as a formal simile of female identity and of women's long history of exclusion from social and religious power. The description of the thousands of bones of other anonymous saints carelessly mixed with Josephine's remains shows how History and hagiography have robbed these women of their names and personal identities, creating a deceptive universal model. Aesthetic and subjective criteria have determined the ultimate shape given to the mosaic of bones that adorns the golden chapel in which the novel begins and ends. This image is suggestive of the similar criteria that the Church may have used in reconstructing the lives of saints. Bastida offers new interpretations of the image of the bones and draws attention to the symbolic potential of this element.

Chapter four exhaustively demonstrates the many biographical parallelisms that exist between Josephine and Saint Teresa, while chapter five concentrates on the differences. The latter are more openly manifest after Josephine's religious crisis and her

decision to leave the convent. Josephine starts a new heretical life full of sensual and intellectual pleasures, in which she rediscovers her body and her sexuality. The convent that she wishes to found tries to unite the physical and the spiritual in complete harmony. Josephine imagines two houses joined together, "back to back; two bodies joined by a single skin" (Roberts 1998: 192), whose singular architecture would be kept secret to everybody else but the women. In this place, spirituality and sensuality are not in conflict. Chapter five is also concerned with the rewriting of the lives of eleven saints. Roberts confronts religious authority by comparing the public hagiographies of these women to "fairy stories" (in Bastida 2003: 105). According to Bastida, the alternative stories that Roberts creates share two themes in common with Josephine's story: the challenge to patriarchy and sexual transgression (172). Each story, except the last, examines different forms of paternal oppression and/or filial rebellion (183), which reflect, on a wide scale, woman's conflict with the patriarchal norms. In Bastida's opinion, Roberts's rewriting of Saint Mary of Egypt's life ends the sequence on an optimistic note, as this story presents a non-authoritarian fatherly figure and celebrates the final harmony (also sexual) between the man and the woman.

The Church's textual reconstruction of the lives of Josephine and the other saints connects with the failure of historical discourse to convey the truth, the third aspect discussed in chapter five. Josephine's niece Isabel writes her aunt's biography. Near the end of the novel, Isabel admits that she has falsified and invented some episodes. Her unexpected revelation shows "the biased nature of historical narration", tainted inevitably with the narrator's viewpoint and subject to falsification (164-65). Bastida relates this aspect (already explored by Villegas López) to the lack of complete reliability of Josephine's (Saint Teresa's) 'official autobiography', in which the fear of inquisitional punishment conditions free expression. This circumstance makes the protagonist compose a second, more truthful, autobiography, which she keeps hidden and which Isabel tries to reconstruct. As Bastida argues in the epilogue to her book, the patriarchal hagiographies ultimately succeed in replacing the rebelliousness of Josephine and the other eleven women with the Christian virtues of "humility, obedience and self-denial" (193). Paradoxically, according to many scholars, Saint Teresa did not embody these "virtues" herself either (193). This raises questions about the "possible manipulation" of the lives of the saints by the Church, "capaz de borrar o silenciar todo recuerdo de [la] verdadera trayectoria y personalidad" of these women (193).

Bastida's book will appeal to all those interested in the revision of Christian myths and, especially, in the reception of the figure of Saint Teresa in contemporary literature. The detailed comparative analysis between Josephine and Teresa helps to illuminate the interpretation of *Impossible Saints*. Additionally, Bastida argues that the ideal of immaculate virtue and exemplary submission that many saints conventionally represent may be a construct, a fabricated ideal made to suit a patriarchal religion and Church. Roberts's defiantly sceptical approach to hagiographies desacralises these narratives to reveal them as texts, like any other, subject to manipulation and deceit.

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