

M. Soraya García-Sánchez

Travelling in Women's History with Michèle Roberts's Novels

Literature, Language and Culture



Peter Lang

Travelling in Women's History with Michèle Roberts's Novels: Literature, Language and Culture is a journey to discover Roberts's work as a feminist writer, novelist and memoirist. An overall analysis and detailed overview of Michèle Roberts's novels first provide the reader with a study of Roberts's rewriting of stories that have been inspired by historical, mythological and religious women who gain a voice in her fiction. Not only will the content of Roberts's novels be explored but also its connection to form, as this feminist writer has always linked body to language. Second, the book analyses personal and public discoveries in Roberts's memoir, *Paper Houses: A Memoir of the '70s and Beyond* (2007). The personal, professional and political journeys the writer-protagonist strolls in London will be part of a feminist culture and language that the memoirist preserves in her autobiography. Finally, two conversations with Michèle Roberts from 2003 and 2010 are presented in a last chapter in order to illustrate Roberts's arguments when writing as a woman.

M. Soraya García-Sánchez is a lecturer at the Faculty of English Studies at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria where she has taught language, culture and literature courses. She has published articles in *Feminist Theology* and *Sincronía*. Her research areas are focused on gender, women's writing, literature, culture and language in contemporary contexts.



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info@peterlang.com, www.peterlang.com, www.peterlang.net

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Foreword by María del Carmen Martín Santana

Hoy llega a mis manos el libro de M. Soraya García-Sánchez *Travelling in Women's History with Michèle Roberts's Novels: Literature, Language and Culture*, y este hecho me alegra por varias razones. La primera, porque Soraya es una persona a la que estimo sobremanera. La segunda, porque se trata de un volumen de contenido novedoso y fruto de un trabajo arduo. Y, la tercera, porque el documento es un regalo para la comunidad universitaria y para el público en general.

He conocido a Soraya a través de los años, ella haciéndose mayor y yo madura, y sólo tengo palabras de admiración por el esfuerzo que ha llevado a cabo. Como estudiante de Filología Inglesa se le veían tesón y entusiasmo a raudales, cualidades que promovieron que deseara continuar con su carrera investigadora. Así se acercó a mí, hace ya algunos años, y las dos nos dispusimos a navegar esas aguas. La travesía no siempre ha sido fácil, pero la firme disposición de aquella un día mi doctoranda logró salvar todos los escollos que aparecieron en el horizonte. Ella es hoy no sólo una gran amiga, sino también una compañera de profesión eficiente y querida por sus estudiantes y colegas, entre los cuales me cuento.

El libro, ya desde su título mismo, habla de variadas parcelas de la vida. Viajar, literatura, lengua, cultura... Y todas ellas sugieren riqueza de contenidos y crecimiento personal. Eso es lo que puede sustraerse de su lectura. No sólo nos encontramos ante una biografía, hacemos asimismo frente a un manifiesto de energía vibrante y amor por la existencia, la de la autora y, por ende, por la de todas las mujeres, que nos vemos reflejadas en los personajes y las disecciones que de ellos hace la Dra. García-Sánchez. La primera parte nos acerca a esta narradora de sueños que es Michèle Roberts. La segunda ahonda en su obra autobiográfica con todo lujo de detalles. Y todo ello se ve enriquecido, en la tercera parte, con las entrevistas que la Dra.

García-Sánchez ha podido realizarle a través de los años, un tiempo del que se ha valido para conocer a la novelista a fondo. Las conclusiones no dejan sombra de duda del exhaustivo trabajo realizado, y la bibliografía da fe de la búsqueda incesante de material con el cual tejer la urdimbre de este vasto documento que, por suerte para los lectores, hoy ve la luz.

Por todo lo anteriormente expuesto, puedo afirmar que me visto deleitada por la lectura que hoy llega a mis manos, fruto de una semilla que yo misma planté con la autora y que he visto crecer con y junto a ella. Se trata de un tomo valioso para todos los que tenemos que ver con la Universidad y, cómo no, para los que disfrutan con lecturas enriquecedoras e interesantes. Sólo me resta felicitar a la Dra. García-Sánchez por un trabajo impecable, y desear que las personas que se acerquen a este ejemplar puedan disfrutar de él tanto o más que yo. Mi más sincera enhorabuena, Soraya.

M^a del Carmen Martín Santana,
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

24 de enero de 2011

Introduction

I have had the extraordinary experience and pleasure of having met Michèle Roberts on different occasions in Maldon, London and Bath. Yet, when I first read some of her novels, *The Wild Girl*, *The Book of Mrs Noah* and *In the Red Kitchen* in one of the courses I was attending as part of my PhD studies, I felt haunted by her writing. Roberts is such a brilliant personality and a noteworthy influence on my professional career. With Roberts, I have learnt not only about women's studies and feminism but also about language and culture as well. Being an outsider and a foreign language speaker, I have been able to understand and share what this other world is about with *Paper Houses: A Memoir of the '70s and Beyond* (2007). Roberts's memoir intertwines with Roberts's novels as in both written forms there is a protagonist who finally tells her story for the very first time. The first person narrator in this true account is real but is also rescued from her past and reshaped at the time of writing this memoir.

I have also lived and strolled in London as a woman *flâneur*. The perspective of the 1970s depicted in Roberts's account, however, is that of an independent and feminist revolution for women. Today's London is not the same that London during the 1970s. Following Roberts's physical and literary steps has given me language. I have enjoyed analysing her fictional work and looking into her autobiography. Topics such as feminism, language, metaphor, action, body, Catholicism and sex, for instance, comprise Roberts's work. The world of feminism, together with the idea of western women writing their own texts are focal points while reading and studying Roberts's novels and *Paper Houses*.

Michèle Roberts is an Anglo-French woman, brought up Catholic and Protestant with two languages and cultures merging at the same time. Her work and her persona deal with the combination of opposites, replacing the correlative conjunction *or* with the coordinating

conjunction *and*. Moreover, Roberts is a contemporary and feminist author who has published critical essays, twelve novels, poetry, a play and a variety of short stories. Her next novel will be published in 2011. By means of Roberts's work, and especially of her novels, I have been able to learn about historical women who have become new characters in her works of fiction. Mary Magdalene, Saint Teresa of Ávila. Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Brontë are examples of real women who become heroines in Roberts's works of fiction. The practical novel has provided me with knowledge about women's writing, women's voices, femininity, masculinity, feminism, gender, society, Catholicism and theory, among others.

As a lecturer in English studies, I have always had passion for English speaking cultures, histories and traditions choosing what I enjoyed most and rejecting what I did not. Even when my much-loved husband goes to the bookshelves at libraries and bookshops, he checks on Michèle Roberts's work, just in case there is a new publication that I may not be aware of. 'She is always next to Nora Roberts,' he once said. I have become a woman with two parts of me, looking at the English and the Spanish worlds. In fact, both languages and cultural traditions differ but they also share essential human features dealing with men and women in history and society. I share with Roberts the influence of the Catholic religion and the impositions of the patriarchal society. Although we have both experienced different historical times and countries, I have discovered the feminist world by means of Roberts's novels and, consequently, by researching theoretical texts. That is the reason why I want to start this book in the first person narration. I want to participate in a woman's writing that connects body and language, as presented in Roberts's work. I feel that I need to state the connection between the identities of Roberts and mine because this book is the result of that bond. The combination of both voices, my own and more significantly Roberts's, forms this new book dedicated to Michèle Roberts's work of fiction, in the first section, and to her memoir, in the second section.

Travelling in Women's History with Michèle Roberts's Novels: Literature, Language and Culture is about Michèle Roberts's prolific

production. She is an example of a woman's writing different to the traditional writing of men. I will be dealing with Roberts in order to explore that her novels offer a subversive revision of history and a recreation of women's writing. Roberts has been inspired by historical, mythological, religious and everyday women who have given form to her novels. In *Impossible Saints* Josephine, for instance, is inspired by Saint Teresa of Ávila. Roberts's Mary Magdalene plays the role of the controversial, historical Mary Magdalene in *The Wild Girl*. I will also analyse Roberts's most recent text, her autobiography, *Paper Houses: A Memoir of the '70s and Beyond*, which is a combination of past and present, individual and collective, man and woman, heterosexual and homosexual, private and public in search for Roberts's identity as a woman and as a writer in London. By means of her memory, her collection of handwritten diaries and some photos, Roberts tells us what she remembers of herself and of her previous years in London when the women's revolution was also taking place. However, it is important to highlight that this process of remembering is creative as it imagines a new identity based on memories and diaries. Roberts revisits her past by re-reading her notebooks and diaries and by remembering her experiences as a young rambler from London. Roberts is both writer and protagonist of her memoir which is real and fictional at the same time.

Even though this book is presented as academic research that must be *serious* and formal, this writing does not separate feelings from theory. Although this text aims to be objective rather than subjective, I do not intend to hide my voice. My perceptions will connect with the theoretical part that comprises this project. It is by means of the analysis of Roberts's writing that I get to understand my passion for researching this contemporary feminist writer. Her essays, her poetry and more significantly, her novels have given me knowledge and the ability to reread her texts and to finally participate in her written explorations. Because Roberts deals with both body and language at the same time, and because it is only by means of continuity that this union can be asserted, I will not separate body and language in my writing either. Therefore I aim to explore Roberts's

memoirs from a fictocritic perspective, as some Australian women writers have suggested. Criticism will occur from a story bound perspective. Moreover, I will look into the French phrase, *l'écriture féminine*, that has a fresh meaning every time a woman writes about her body and her language. The meaning of *woman* is portrayed in the text with a language that corresponds to the body. This is the only way I can be honest to my academic, political, social and feminist criticism. I will, accordingly, engage in a dialogical text with Roberts's writing by combining my reading analysis with my critical perspective and, by considering freedom, rules, theory and practice.

What I aim to explore in this book is the approach of women's writing in relation to Michèle Roberts's novels and memoir. It is also my purpose to look into the following terms as part of an identity that is being formed: travelling, *flâneur*, body, language, culture, feminism, autobiography and creative writing. I will particularly consider Roberts's novels and *Paper Houses* in order to examine her past and present inspirations, and her forms of writing. It will be paramount to study the importance of Roberts's heroines who are usually inspired by historical and religious women, as I mentioned before. In a way, I mean to travel with Roberts in order to discover her daily, social, political, personal, historical, fictional journeys in London. I aim to demonstrate that her personal story becomes a contribution to the general history.

As Jane Spencer has argued, 'If women's writing is important to the history of the novel, the novel is no less important to the history of women's search for a public voice' (viii). *Paper Houses* deals with a specific protagonist, Michèle Roberts, but at the same time, it is a personal contribution to history and to the history of women's writing in the 1970s and 1980s in London. Travelling is a vehicle of discovering not only the urban city but herself. Strolling in Roberts's mind will imply the union between present reconsiderations and past memories. Roberts revisited her past in order to meet her other identity: young Roberts. With Roberts's words, I will discover and will invite readers to see a different perspective: this contemporary woman's side and Michèle Roberts's perception. As readers, we are

witnesses of her experiences and of her writing style. We participate in Roberts's personal story and, at the same time, we are able to remember historical events that the protagonist interprets and adapts to her own personal revolution. Language, literature and culture plus personal and historical situations construct this individual memoir of the 1970s and beyond. However, the function of words and the techniques depicted by this contemporary writer are focal points of this analysis in which the inside becomes predominant and, at the same time, equal to the outside. As the author stated, language came from deep inside her and as such she maintained it through her writing. Her inner voice corresponded to her outer tone:

I trusted abstract reasoning less than thoughts that came out of my own experience in the world and from my own inner life. Poetry and novels arose from very deep down inside. They struggled up out of darkness and broke into the light. I trusted this process. I knew that language existed 'outside' in the world. (*Paper Houses*: 278)

This book is divided into three main chapters. Part A is dedicated to Michèle Roberts's life and works of fiction. The second chapter is devoted to the analysis of Michèle Roberts's memoir. Finally, the last section presents the two conversations I had with Michèle Roberts in London, the former about her novels and her writing in 2003 and the latter about her memoir and her writing in 2010.

Part A will look into the work of the feminist writer and the similarities and differences between her novels. I will observe how writing is a means of expression that allows Roberts's heroines to reflect upon their bodies which become free of restrictions in this writer's accounts. In this regard, I will focus on Roberts's rewriting of historical and biblical texts in her novels to provide her protagonists, who are usually historical and mythological women, with a voice and language. Interpretation is thus an important tool in this writer's work. Intertextuality and writing will be a subtopic devoted to Roberts's religion and inspiration at the time of shaping her novels. Roberts, who actively belongs to the feminist movement by revising stories of women in different historical contexts, rewrites stories in order to

deconstruct and demystify women. Once Roberts's heroines are deconstructed, they are created as protagonists of new stories that are portrayed in her books. These narrative accounts do not have to be always true but they must portray the imagination and perception of the protagonists and their connection with life writing. Truth is so to Roberts's mind. Roberts's heroines will explore their inner and outer standpoints by writing their selves in the text.

Part B is especially dedicated to Michèle Roberts's memoir, *Paper Houses: A Memoir of the '70s and Beyond*. I will be exploring the writing of a personal account from the female *flâneur*'s perspective. This section will be devoted to the analysis of this fictional memoir. I will look at the similarities and differences between Roberts's novels and her memoir at the time of shaping the text. The protagonist of this personal and historical account will be both writer and heroine. Equally, I aim to analyse the notion of the female *flâneur* who strolls about the city of London to observe its streets by herself. This journey will transform Roberts's identity, expressed usually in personal and public terms. Michèle Roberts will construct her own personality by dealing with both personal and political issues. In this sense, a brief analysis of the structure of the memoir will be developed by looking at its content and form as two characteristics that grow together in Roberts's work. A study devoted to Roberts's history and culture during the 1970s and 1980s in London will conclude this second part.

Part C will conclude this analysis by presenting two conversations I had with Michèle Roberts first, in 2003 and recently, in August 2010. The first interview focused on Michèle Roberts's novels while the second conversation addressed the connection between fiction and autobiography, especially with regard to *Paper Houses*.

Travelling in Women's History with Michèle Roberts: Literature, Language and Culture is therefore a journey through the fictional and autobiographical work of Michèle Roberts. This manuscript travels through Roberts's literary production as a woman writer who explores different writing techniques. Not only literature, language and culture are considered in this expedition but also feminism, history and storytelling. Fictional and historical heroines are depicted in different