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Delivering the Songs of the Sibyls in Michèle Roberts's *The Book of Mrs Noah*

Sarah Falcus

Michèle Roberts's *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987) is a text that explores alternative voices and realities, rewriting myth and history, and creating a complex and multilayered examination of women's creativity.¹ Using utopian and dystopian elements, this novel links writing and motherhood as forms of creativity, refusing the separation of these roles. On board Mrs Noah's communal Ark, women revise mythical and religious tales, and analyze their own lives as mothers, daughters, and writers. Therefore, the potentially utopian space of the Ark gives voice to the maternal, but in contradictory, multiplicitous, and open-ended ways.

Mrs Noah, the protagonist of *The Book of Mrs Noah*, dives into a Venice canal to reach the Ark, a *Salon des Refusées*. This idea of an alternative, marginal space is something integral to the speculative and utopian project, as Lucie Armitt recognizes:

Women are not located at the centre of contemporary culture and society, but are almost entirely defined from the aforementioned negative perspective of "otherness" or "difference." As such, the need to *escape from* a society with regard to which they already hold an ex-centric position is clearly an irrelevant

one. More appropriate perhaps is the need to *escape into*—that is, to depict—an alternative reality within which centrality is possible.²

In this “alternative reality,” Mrs Noah’s companions on the Ark, the sibyls and the Gaffer, each tell a story; these tales take the reader from pre-flood Atlantis through to a dystopian, technological future. En route, the text re-visits Noah and the Ark, the medieval church, working-class infanticide, and Hansel and Gretel. So the Ark allows these women, and the Gaffer, to explore and refashion shared narratives, providing a link between the Ark’s utopian possibility and the traditions that bind them. Interspersed with these tales are Mrs Noah’s visits to various islands and conversations the voyagers hold each evening on board, despite the supposed time span of one night. This novel is therefore a palimpsest of tales that calls into question the very boundaries of the real and the fantastic. This uncertainty of vision is something identified by Angelika Bammer in her discussion of 1970s feminism and utopianism. She argues that, at this time, there was a move away from prescriptive socialist future possibilities to an insistence upon the open and undecidable nature of any utopian vision:

Against the spectre of utopia as a goal that justified all means a concept of the utopian as process evolved as a necessary antithesis. Experimental rather than prescriptive, speculative rather than predictive, this new utopianism proposed a politics of change cast in the subjunctive instead of the imperative mode. It was a politics that dared to leave questions open, a politics of the “what if. . . .”³

Bammer suggests that the act of writing itself became inherently utopian in this period, something that can be clearly seen in the work of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. And the work of these theorists, particularly on women’s creativity, informs this reading of *The Book of Mrs Noah*. This novel uses utopian and dystopian spaces to explore the “what if,” relating narratives of creativity and birth, and linking the roles of writer and mother, insisting on both as creativities for women.

Mrs Noah is the Arkivist of the Ark library. Throwing herself from her frustrated marriage and thwarted desire for a child into a Venice canal, she finds herself, by way of her grandmothers, on board an Arkive of women’s stories. Venice is the appropriate starting point for such a journey, a “city that floats,” with its “kaleidoscope” streets and watery (semiotic?) canals (10–11). Inviting five other women to join her, Mrs Noah goes on to create a par-

allel community of women (preferably), on board an Ark designed by her imagination and steered by desire. The women joining Mrs Noah, the sibyls, are archetypes of 1980s womanhood, from the lesbian single mother to the overworked wife and mother struggling to find time in her life to express her own needs. They also represent the diversity of writing by women, from the Deftly Sibyl's "elegant avant-garde novels" to the Re-Vision Sibyl's tales for women's magazines. And the sibyls hold very different political and social values and express these vehemently, situating the textual and literary experimentation of the novel within a political and theoretical metanarrative. Displacing the traditional hierarchies of the canon, these women represent many facets of writing and politics, but all are linked by their need to juggle the demands of everyday life and the desire to find time and space to compose. Locating its alternative space outside of time and geographical, material location, this is a journey into the gaps and fissures of the symbolic and language; yet, it is a place which maintains a link with the real of women's lives through the memories and needs of its passengers.

Despite Mrs Noah's initial dreams of a utopian, separatist world without men, discord is quickly introduced into this community as the sibyls argue over the admission of a man, the Gaffer, to the ship's select party:

Here I am, returning to a nice warm womb full of the nourishment and sweetness of women, a fine safe place in which to grow and change, and what do I find? Not only disagreement and conflict (women's groups? give me a coffee morning any day) but also untruths. (57)

This text's ability to satirize some feminist concerns destabilizes what might otherwise have been a feminist polemic. The inclusion of the Gaffer in this text also prevents the Ark from becoming a community that is static and unable to admit the concept of difference. And of course, the Gaffer is vital in this text on another level as the author of the Bible, head of the very tradition that these women are seeking to rewrite.

Despite the unpromising first meeting of this community, the Ark does become a place of communal living. Cooking, writing, and telling stories are all valued and interwoven in a way that prevents the abstraction of artistic process from the reality of everyday life and the inhabiting of a physical body. All of Roberts's texts stress the centrality of corporeal needs, from an emphasis on food to descriptions of bodily functions. In *The Book of Mrs Noah*, this can be seen on a practical level in the communal ideal of food preparation and consumption practiced on the Ark, and also in a more imag-

inative conceptualization as the Re-Vision Sibyl prepares a meal to be shared with friends, and food, body, and sexuality are linked in the image of breaking eggs:

She breaks egg yolks into a bowl, whips them with sugar and flour, boils them with milk . . . Lumpy female bodies. Lumpy bellies and breasts. Eggs breaking and splattering, warm mess of sweetness on the sheets, warm flow of sweat and blood. (26–27)⁴

In accordance with the emphasis on communality in this text, central to the ethos of the Ark is the ideal of woman-to-woman relationships, which are stressed in many of the Ark's narratives and explored in various ways in the lives of the sibyls outside of the Ark. The importance of these bonds is expressed fervently by the Babble-On Sibyl: "I mourn for the fact I can't marry all my women friends. No public ceremonies to celebrate the passionate love between friends" (104). The continual valorization of woman-to-woman relationships includes all levels of intimacy and commitment, in line with Adrienne Rich's *lesbian continuum*. This term encapsulates the notion of lesbian sexual experience as simply one form of a range of "woman-identified experience . . . including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support."⁵ Despite the disagreements of the sibyls and their very different political and personal beliefs, the text overwhelmingly argues for the strength of many kinds of "woman-identified experience."

However, the Ark is not simply a rest home for over-stressed women writers. It is also a library for women, where they can form their own genealogy of writers. These women need to find a language to express their needs; this is a desire perhaps for a form of *écriture féminine*, something Hélène Cixous advocates:

There has to be somewhere else, I tell myself. And everyone knows that to go somewhere else there are routes, signs, "maps"—for an exploration, a trip.
—That's what books are. Everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where *it* writes itself, where *it* dreams, where *it* invents new worlds.⁶

This is the Ark, the library that swims, the place away from Cixous's "colonial space," where "she" writes herself (in) a new world. Yet the Ark maintains links with the world it leaves through its voyagers, all of whom are formed by the memories and experiences they revisit whilst on board the Ark. And the stories told on the Ark also bridge this gap between past and future, existing language and the fleeting possibility of something that can exceed this symbolic, as they revisit traditional biblical tales, revitalize long-standing mythology, and look forward to the creation of new worlds.

The "utopian" space of the Ark is drawing on a religious tradition that has long excluded women and denied them full subjectivity. Before the sibyls arrive and the narrative journey begins, Mrs Noah designs the chapel for the Ark, bringing in elements of many world religions, but she finds herself in a love-hate relationship with the Catholic Church. Reinventing the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a song of praise to the great Mother, bitterness taints Mrs Noah's eulogy as she finds herself at odds with the myth of the Virgin:

despiser of women
 breast of marble
 lover of patriarchs
 blocked ears
 blocked mouth
 blocked shout
 jailer of daughters. (44)

A similar mixture of comfort and fear can be seen as Mrs Noah finds refuge within the walls of the church when confronted by the destruction and degradation of the polluted dystopian islands she visits. Looking to the church and its mother for aid and reassurance, Mrs Noah finds only death in the form of the broken Jesus suspended on his cross and a church that is merely an echo of the world outside, with "Relics . . . like deformed babies, pathological specimens, swimming in stoppered glass jars" (187). The mother of the church appears to offer a maternal hope, surrounded by cherubs as a rope of color, a rainbow (seen throughout this text as a symbol of new life, linked to birth and water, renewal and regeneration), but Mary's birth is hemmed in by church lore and dogma and, as such, cannot offer the constant regeneration that Mrs Noah desires, where "renewal has to be achieved repeatedly, by each of us, by each community. The divine child has to be born . . . in each of us" (101). Childbirth, nature, and culture are intertwined in a vision of hope for the future here, as in many of Roberts's other novels. Any society in

these terms must admit the voice and the body of the mother, and, in doing so, respect the natural cycle of which human birth is part. This insistence on both the voice and the body of the mother is at the heart of this text's project, as it attempts to explore women as both mothers and writers, and negotiate the discourses that trap women into maternal silence.

The difficulty of confronting God as a literary tradition is acted out in *The Book of Mrs Noah* in its personification of the Bible's author as the Gaffer. His misogynist opinions encourage debate among the sibyls and add a comic note to the text, in his description of Mary for example: "She was this terrific incubator of my ideas. She gave them a nice warm place in which to grow. But she was empty to start with" (55). And against the Gaffer's patriarchy and refusal to acknowledge his own authorial fallibility, another version of the Noah story is told. The vision of hope as a combination of nature and culture, mother and body, seen above, is further illustrated in this revision of the original Noah's Ark story. As Rosemary White points out in her discussion of this tale, it is based not just upon the biblical version of Noah, but also upon other rewritings: "The weight this revised tale bears is consequently manifold; not only the biblical and mythological status of the 'original version,' but also the references that 'original version' makes to earlier stories, all the way back to the beginning of Genesis."⁷ This makes the tale part of a *process* of mythology and also illustrates the way in which religious tradition is itself a mythology, with implications far beyond its influence on the practicing faithful.

The woman protagonist of this version of Noah and the Ark imagines an immanent God of nature, rebirth, and positive love, opposed to Jack/Noah's all-powerful God, who insists on blood sacrifice and domination. The earth becomes the mother's body, and the flood, the waters of the womb: "Her waters breaking are a great flood. For nine months she has carried the seed of new life safely inside her, letting it float on her waters. Now it rushes out on a flood-tide of water and blood, while she heaves and shouts" (74). Despite her desire to sail off on her own, circumstance forces this "Mrs Noah" to enter the Ark with her husband and suffer a nine-month gestation period aboard as the flood destroys the earth. During this time, she finds herself distanced from her husband and relying upon the strength and need of her daughter-in-law for comfort and communication.

As in many of Roberts's novels, it is the strength of women-amongst-women that enables survival. In a utopian vision, this protagonist imagines a world of choice for women, where separation from the mother is not a requirement and a fluid vista of possibility is opened: "Water is my mother,

my lover, my bed. My element, which gives me the freedom to swim off wherever I want to go. Water is my food and drink. Water is my god” (83). This vision is reminiscent of the dependency of the child upon the amniotic fluid of the mother during gestation, where “water” is indeed the mother, lover, food, and God. Yet this ideal of escape into a semiotic world cannot last, and the inhabitants of the Ark are rudely thrust upon the peak of Ararat as the flood waters subside and the earth rears its head from its watery grave. The rainbow as link/umbilical cord is again visible, as in the Genesis tale, connecting the boat to the heavens and, for “Mrs Noah,” to the mother God and the earth.

It is the rainbow that initiates the birth into language for this “Mrs Noah.” As night cuts the cord, she is born to create a link between signifier and signified, scratching the names of the world around her into tablets of dust: “The names are a string with which I tie together my understanding of the God I know in this new creation, my way of connecting us all with each other and with God . . . Naming the names is a form of worship” (86). Reconfiguring the power of naming as interrelation, rather than domination, “Mrs Noah” passes her new-found skill onto her pregnant daughter-in-law, sending the word through a genealogy of women: “This is my gift to you, daughter, and to your children and to their children” (87). The text does make clear the limitations of such a linguistic strategy—simultaneously undermining possible criticisms of this “Mrs Noah” as an essentialist earth mother—in this woman’s recognition that “I wanted to save and change the world, yet all I’ve been able to do is make up a new kind of toy” (87). Any such criticism can be further mitigated by the point that the mother here is indeed the mother of the human race in a very real way, providing the daughters and sons from her own body, rather than fashioning them from dust as does the father God. In this way, this text brings together language and women, giving women the power of words and speech and linking this through the female line, through the mother. Yet, in the end, this “Mrs Noah” dies, and all that is left is a chance of life in language: “I’m the ghost in the library, cackling, unseen, from between the pages of the sacred texts. . . . I’m what’s missing. I’m the wanderer” (89). This is the chance that this text explores, letting the wanderer have her say.

This story brings together the main themes of this text: creation, genesis, and the divine; language (writing) and the mother. The whole premise of the Ark itself is the link it makes between motherhood and creativity. Cixous links her theory/ideal of *écriture féminine* closely with the maternal body, drawing upon the pre-Oedipal phase of oneness between child and mother.

This is a contentious area within feminism, inviting accusations of essentialism and the reburial of women into maternal silence. Yet, as Morag Shiach points out in her discussion of Cixous's controversial use of the maternal and physical, "At a fairly trite level, it is clear there is no escape. Yet this should not surprise us: one cannot simply walk out of patriarchy and shake off its effects."⁸ Cixous exploits the maternal image in a move akin to Irigaray's concept of mimesis.⁹ Her exhortations to write in white ink and speak the rhythms of the association with the maternal body express a relationship that is denied and underrepresented in the symbolic. This text also exploits this relationship in a variety of ways, refusing to settle for one easy definition of mother or the maternal body and voice.

One of the major themes of *The Book of Mrs Noah* is personal experience of motherhood. Three of the sibyls called to the Ark are mothers and a fourth has recently lost her baby girl. Children are seen as time consuming and demanding, stifling the mother's own desires. The Deftly Sibyl wrestles with her own writing in the short time when the children are at school and she has peace in the house; the Correct Sibyl must balance taking the children to school and caring for them with her fiction writing. However, children are also seen as a source of joy and fulfillment. The Re-Vision Sibyl is pictured sharing her bed with her daughter Kitty; the Babble-on Sibyl mourns her dead baby, Fanny. It is pertinent that motherhood is seen here in experiential terms, to counterbalance the metaphors of motherhood used throughout the text. And it is also significant that mothers are given voices here, to offset the predominance of daughters' tales.¹⁰

Mrs Noah herself is crucial to any discussion of the maternal in this text, since *The Book of Mrs Noah* begins with her desire for a child. Throughout the text, Noah's objections to his wife's wish for a baby are explored, as Mrs Noah relives these and begins to formulate both her longing for motherhood and her misgivings about the wisdom of bringing a child into this world. The dystopian islands visited by Mrs Noah during the course of the voyage crystallize her fears into concrete representations of decay and nuclear contamination, drawing an implicit parallel between the maternal body and the creation of the child, and the natural world and the destruction of this creation. Many of Mrs Noah's dilemmas on board the Ark take the form of sphinx-like plays on the meanings of words, enhancing the Derridean approach to language as contingent, with meaning in endless deferral: "Life. Sentence. Life-sentence?" (132) and "Can he *come to terms* with my *coming to term*?" (244). This links the desire for motherhood and the new subject this brings into the world very firmly with language; it is language that formulates the discourse

of motherhood, and it is language that, in both a metaphorical and experiential sense, will form the child as a subject. But it is a language that is itself unstable, based upon a concept of a self that can never be: the unified and self-aware subject. This is all enhanced on the Ark in the actual movement it represents, between different worlds and times, and the strong parallels it draws between psychic and physical space.¹¹ Linking language and subject identity, this novel attempts to interrogate the fantasy of the mother, placing her at the heart of the text, both in experiential and metaphorical terms.

One of Mrs Noah's earliest explorations of the world outside the Ark takes her below the water to a pre-Genesis fantasy, an Atlantis. Passing through rooms and corridors of lush vegetation, satyrs, nymphs and goddesses, she arrives at a miniature palace within the larger one, "A pregnancy flowering in the stone" (67). Here she finds a naked goddess whose arms and eyes follow her, desire her, no matter how she turns. In this space, which Mahoney describes as both physical and psychic, Mrs Noah journeys into herself and finds the mother she is both afraid of and afraid to be: "Is this the mother, then, this horror? This hold? . . . How could I ever become a mother, let myself become that embodiment of possessive power?" (68).¹² There is no suitable representation of the mother available in the present symbolic, and Mrs Noah finds herself fleeing from her nightmarish vision. The absence of the mother is something that founds the Judeo-Christian tradition, since the mother can only ever be virgin or subordinated to the father and the child within its boundaries. This is further illustrated in a later tale of the Ark, set in the medieval church, where the law of the father so dominates that the protagonist finds herself unable to communicate with the mother and forced to deny the mother in herself.

The final tale told on board the Ark moves beyond the present to future possibilities, in a dystopian, futuristic cityscape. Mahoney argues that this use of a dystopic tale near the conclusion of the novel is an extension of the subversion of narrative and form that can be seen throughout *The Book of Mrs Noah*. In an already marginal narrative, a pastiche of utopian, fantastic, and political elements, the dystopian story is further marginal in its lack of reference to any "real" world.¹³ Emphasizing the fantastic and unstable structure of the text as a whole, this dystopic story also echoes many of the thematic concerns that preoccupy this novel. In this future space, women suffer a system of biological stratification, not dissimilar to the classification of women in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: "Women of Class D are subdivided into *breeders*, *feeders* and *tarts*. If they are *bleeders*. *Non-bleeders*, depending on age, are classified as *holes* (pre-pubescent) or *sacks* (post-meno-

pausal)" (253).¹⁴ The tarts provide the men with their first sexual experience at maturity, a system ordained by the ruler of this society, the "Big Mummy." Like the Virgin Mary, with her blue robe, slim body, and halo of stars, the Big Mummy is a legendary figure whose actual existence does not matter, for her role is ideological. And the title "cunt" is reserved solely for her since she alone represents the ideal of womanhood, which is rooted in sexuality (260). This system of stratification is enshrined in a linguistic code ordained by the state dictionary, a text that controls knowledge and dictates meaning. Mothering, also, must be strictly controlled by the state since it is a threatening force, something which brings together nature and culture in its paradoxical production of identity and threat to identity.

When the two young boys of this story find an abandoned baby, they take it upon themselves to play mother, though they cannot utter that culturally loaded word. Against the proliferation of biological mother/daughter relationships in this novel, Roberts juxtaposes a final male mother/surrogate daughter bond, providing a sharp reminder of the necessity not to define the maternal only in terms of biological capability. When eventually captured by the state and catalogued, the baby, Mouse, is forced to become a prostitute in a state brothel. Her "mother," the boy who rescued and nurtured her, finds himself reunited with his child on his initiation into adulthood at the brothel. This reunion is played out first for the benefit of the guards' camera in the brothel and later in a passionate scene beyond the eyes of the camera on the wasteland. Here, Mouse and Dog rewrite the state dictionary in their own form, once again making strong links between language and desire, motherhood and creativity. The futuristic setting of this story also serves as a reminder that myth and mythical rewriting are social and temporal projects and do not exist before or outside of these systems. The control of meaning—the meaning of motherhood, womanhood, sex—in this society is linked to the wider project of the re-definition of meaning and myth throughout this text. As a text that rewrites traditional stories and images, *The Book of Mrs Noah* is attempting the same project as Mouse and Dog, to go beyond accepted and ordained meaning and to rewrite the state dictionary/the Bible/God?

Throughout this text, all paths lead to the mother and are, paradoxically, trodden by the mothers of the novel. *The Book of Mrs Noah* offers alternative and often contradictory images of motherhood, suggesting the mother within all women, yet providing images of motherhood as metaphor as well as biological capacity. The most explicit metaphor for the maternal body in this text is the Ark itself. This is intimated by a twin girl, in one of the stories

told by the voyagers, as she struggles to develop her self as separate from her mother and sister: “My first Ark is our mother’s body, the womb I shared with Margaret. Now I’ve jumped ship. I’m in the water . . . afraid of drowning” (155). The Ark is an Arkive, a place of stories, built by language. It is also a maternal body, but one that teaches and creates voice rather than silence, gives birth to its children, who are also mothers, and to stories. The Ark is a reappropriation for women of the role of artist/creator, and this role is not taken at the expense of the maternal but alongside and in association with this: “Writer. Mother. Two words I have linked through this voyage on the Ark, this arc of stories, a distance of so many nights, such longing” (275). This is reminiscent of Irigaray’s insistence in *Sexes and Genealogies* that women must give birth both to children and to art and language: “the question of having or not having children should always be raised in the context of another birthing, a creation of images and symbols.”¹⁵

The journey aboard the Ark concludes with an exotic and extravagant party in the hold of the ship. This area of the Ark has been ignored and refused by Mrs Noah and, as Mahoney makes clear, in its position of lower marginality clearly represents an area of repression, an unconscious that is a “dark windowless place ribbed like an upturned church, where those who have upturned reason and sanity disport themselves” (267).¹⁶ In the depths of the hold, Mrs Noah is forced to confront this chaos that she does not want to admit; all that is repressed and secret is brought to the fore, and all that is excluded from traditional narrative is celebrated. This chaos brings together Snow White and third world war, grandmothers and aborted babies, acrobats and fairies. Mrs Noah finds herself in pointe shoes; the ballet slippers are filled with blood, but like the protagonist of *Red Shoes*, she cannot stop dancing. Snow White offers to cut off Mrs Noah’s feet so that she can stop dancing, so she “won’t feel a thing,” perhaps suggesting that this inability to feel is the result of cutting off the possibility of creativity for women (270). The conflict between creativity and traditional female roles is the struggle that preoccupies this whole text. It is a struggle played out in various ways: in literary terms in the rewriting of the Bible and the challenge to the Gaffer’s authority; in linguistic terms in Mrs Noah’s riddles on the meaning of motherhood; and in experiential terms as the sibyls try to balance the demands of family, lovers, and writing. The novel’s mix of the fantastic and the experiential and political finds its ultimate expression in this carnivalesque tea party, which constructs a *herstory* of women’s literary lineage, where Charlotte Brontë, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf eat and argue with the Nubian Sibyl, Hildegard of Bingen, and Simone de Beauvoir. It is in

this space that Mrs Noah finally makes the connection between mother and writer, language and the maternal body. However, in a final gesture of deconstruction, this link is associated closely with the death drive and not idealized as maternal omnipotence:

A home at last: one that dissolves, is incomplete, and vanishes.
As my child, in her time, will die. As my book, in its time, will
rot. Shaped against death, in the teeth of death, out of death,
returning to death when the time comes. A pause between
deaths, fought for by my hands. (274–75)

Mrs Noah must leave the Ark, having come to the end of her Advent, but it is this maternal space that has given her the voice she has been searching for and, alongside this, the child she desires. Her maternity is one not of silence, but of speech. This is the voice that Cixous sees coming from the mother: “Voice: milk that could go on forever.”¹⁷ And Mrs Noah’s own story, like her motherhood, is neither infinite nor eternal. This story provides the conclusion for the text, but also echoes the beginning of chapter two: “*My story, I write: begins in Venice*” (288). This is an alternative vision of art and writing, one that does not “contain eternal meanings that transcend history,” but that is “as daily as dusting, or dreaming” (288). In this way, *The Book of Mrs Noah* refuses to situate itself as a defining and authoritative discourse, but, rather, as the starting point for another story. Just as this novel re-tells biblical narratives and re-replaces women in a literary and religious tradition, it leaves open the possibility of further stories, a wider genealogy. This is a project outlined by Barbara O’Daly and Maureen Reddy in *Narrating Mothers* in terms of redefining motherhood:

In the process of redefining mothering it is also necessary to
redefine genres and their conventions. Since Oedipal narra-
tives silence the voices of mothers, we must listen for maternal
stories in postmodern plots where selfhood is constructed, or
reconstructed, in more complex patterns.¹⁸

This is a concept similar to that of Irigaray’s desire to interrupt “the theoretical machinery itself” and speak through the gaps and contradictions of existing discourse, “repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency” and illustrating the way in which “a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side.”¹⁹ This is the possibility this text explores: to redefine textual form, to rewrite myth, and so to disrupt traditional narratives and suggest other meanings and other inter-

pretations. However, at the same time, the novel insists on the possibility of further interpretation and recognizes the social and temporal conditions that bind all such projects. Through its anti-authoritarian and contradictory narrative, its utopian and dystopian elements, *The Book of Mrs Noah* attempts a redefining of genre and form, by which the silent and the unspoken can be voiced and the dominant narrative upturned.

Notes

1. Michèle Roberts, *The Book of Mrs Noah* (London: Vintage, 1999). First published 1987. All references in the essay are to this edition.

2. Lucie Armitt, *Where No Man has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 9.

3. Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 51.

4. Sarah Sceats examines the significance of food in Roberts's writing in *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 127–28. In particular, she argues that the cooking and eating of eggs is a noteworthy feature of Roberts' fiction, since these are symbolically linked to sexuality, new birth, and fertility.

5. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *The Vintage Book of Feminism*, ed. Miriam Schneir (London: Vintage, 1995), 317. Elisabeth Mahoney mentions this term in a brief footnote in her discussion of *The Book of Mrs Noah*, but does not expand this reference. See "Writing So To Speak: The Feminist Dystopia" (PhD dissertation, University of Glasgow, 1995), 7.

6. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 72.

7. Rosemary White, "Stories of Home: History, Spirituality and Identity in the Novels of Michèle Roberts" (PhD dissertation, University of Lancaster, 1995), 279.

8. Cixous and Clément, *Newly Born*, 94. Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 20.

9. This is a form of subversive mimicry that involves the deliberate assumption of the feminine role. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76. Margaret Whitford suggests that it is useful to see this as a form of "deliberate hysteria." See *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), 71.

10. See the following on the silence of the mother: Brenda O'Daly and Maureen T. Reddy, eds., *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991); Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot:*

Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

11. See Mahoney, "Writing So To Speak," 31.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 48–49.
14. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Virago, 1987).
15. Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 18.
16. Mahoney, 40.
17. Cixous and Clément, *Newly Born*, 93.
18. O'Daly and Reddy, *Narrating Mothers*, 12.
19. Irigaray, *This Sex*, 78.