



## Roberts, Michèle: Impossible Saints

(1997)

- [Sarah Falcus \(Huddersfield University\)](#)

Genre: Novel. Country: England.

*Impossible Saints* was published five years after *Daughters of the House* and is a return to Roberts's earlier preoccupation with the rewriting of Judaeo-Christian myths and traditions, which is largely absent from the intervening *In the Red Kitchen* (1990). *Impossible Saints* builds upon the fragmentary structure of *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), combining a number of narrative threads, set in different times and places. What holds these tales together is not an Ark, or a writers' group, however, but the issue of sainthood in the Christian tradition. Stretching the boundaries of the novel, Roberts combines rewritings of tales of the saints, based upon Jacobus de Voragine's fifteenth-century *The Golden Legend*, secular myth and fairytales, with the story of her own impossible saint, Josephine. Often humorous, frequently parodic and sometimes grotesque, these rewritings highlight what remains untold or repressed in the original versions. This may be a matter of drawing attention to the misogyny inherent in the tales and their patriarchal bias, or going further to introduce the experiences of the saints as women: desiring, thinking, expressive women. In her rewritings of the stories of the saints, Roberts is exploiting what Elizabeth Petroff, in *Body and Soul* (Oxford, 1994, 161), calls the transgressive element of sainthood, where women saints "were doubly transgressors – first, by their nature as saints and, second, by their nature as women". Roberts explores the position of the saint as a marginal figure who crosses boundaries, of gender, desire, sexuality and "reality". Josephine's story, which is based to some extent upon the life of St Teresa of Avila, is fragmented and woven around the tales of the other saints, providing a commentary upon the power and influence at the heart of sainthood. The nuns of Josephine's tale even read de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, offering an illustration of the influence of these tales, even as they are being rewritten. This text is therefore a dual approach to undermining the traditional place of women in the Christian church: rewriting the models of virtue from which women are expected to learn, and analysing the production of these models in the narrative of Josephine.

The original tales of *The Golden Legend* strive to represent women as dangerous and tempting flesh, a "dark continent" that is a threat to male spirituality. What these rewritings emphasise is the use made of the female body as repository of sin in order to promote the male as dominant subject, who can ostensibly separate body and mind. So in Marin's tale, the monks follow a strict Rule of self-denial, rejecting the natural world, the body and any form of pleasure, particularly that associated with the "beauty of this world, which was, like the beauty of women, a lure and a snare, designed by the devil as a trap to catch sinners" (244). Marin's own transvestitism allows her to remain in this monastery with her beloved father, but also means a denial of her female form. The misogyny of this position is underlined after Marin's death, when her body is revealed: it is only in death that her woman's body can be accepted and revered. The denial of the body seen in Marin's story is given a more disturbing and grotesque twist in the tale of Paula, where Paula's daughter, Blesilla, comes under the malign

and zealous influence of Jerome after the death of her beloved husband. The dogma espoused by Jerome to Blesilla and her family places the female body in the position of the unclean, with the non-virgin (including the mother) placed on the lowest rung of the ladder of virtue. Blesilla, therefore, undertakes ever-greater feats of self-mortification, primarily through fasting, which culminate in death. Her primary motivation is to become virgin again, like her sister Julia. It is poignant that, after her death, Blesilla's body is described as childlike, exactly the state to which she was trying to regress.

The extremity of self-mortification found in the tale of Blesilla and the ultimate denial of womanhood in Marin are edged with the possibility of women's desire, seen in Marin's reaction to the statue of the virgin and in the masochistic satisfaction Blesilla gains from fasting. In an insistence on the inclusion of the body, sexual desire is explored in many of the tales in this collection, from the desire of Thecla, found frightening by Paul, to the pragmatic and enjoyable prostitution of Mary of Egypt. But the text also explores darker aspects of sexuality in the many tales that contain incest. This novel is the first in which Roberts consistently foregrounds the relationship between fathers and daughters. In the tale of Thais, Roberts rewrites not only de Voragine's Thais, a sexual transgressor, but also psychoanalytic theories of separation from the mother and the prohibition of incest. The silence of Thais's mother, who keeps locked "the doors of the house" and "the doors of the heart, the lips and the tongue", forces Thais to turn to her father for affirmation and love, seeing herself only in the mirror of his eyes. Without a mother to hold onto, Thais seduces her father, drowning in her own sexuality. A less willing participant in the incestuous scene is Dympna, in a tale based upon the thirteenth-century *Vita* of Saint Dympna and the legend of "Donkeyskin". After the death of her mother, Dympna finds herself the object of her father's desire. She, too, frames her identity in her father's eyes, rejecting the advice of her faithful nanny, and only realising too late the nature of her father's love.

But Roberts does not demand martyrdom of all of her heroines. In the rather parodic tale of Agnes, the daughter finds a job as a hairdresser after being thrown out of her home when her budding sensuality fires her father's desire. The symbol of Agnes's hair, traditionally associated with innocence and virginity, is subverted here, after her father cuts her locks and Agnes begins the trend for cropped hair in the town, to be worn with the red petticoats traditionally marking out the whores from the wives and virgins. This means that it is no longer possible to tell "whether the group of women hanging around the butcher's shop [...] laughing and gossiping, was a bunch of virtuous wives or a bunch of tarts." (148) Similarly, the symbolism of Agnes's pet lamb is revised when its coat is compared to Agnes's pubic hair. The text also valorises nakedness, with Agnes preferring to work naked in her job in the hairdressing salon, refusing the association of the female body with sexual danger and temptation. This Agnes is a positive and self-determining figure, who refuses to abide by systems of gender classification.

It is not only father/daughter relationships which are explored in these stories; relationships with other women are seen as a source of strength and sustenance, as they are in many of Roberts's works. Roberts's Petronilla finds a woman-centred life after her bullying father, Peter, forces her to marry Flaccus; she eventually leaves her husband when he attempts to rid his house of this community of women. The story of Christine sees the saint finding a similar comfort in the company of the "mad" girls she is locked into a tower with by her father. This is a community of twelve, the number of the apostles, all defined as mad by the society in which they live. The friends even escape together after cutting off their manacled hands, and eventually Christine is buried by both them and the snakes she has made her pets. In both stories, the saints are buried by other women, refusing the offices of the male church and its representatives.

All of these tales echo the events and sentiments found in the main narrative of Josephine. She too exists in a world controlled by men, in which she is little more than a chattel, first of her father and then of the church itself as one of its religious. Josephine enters the convent after a playful incident in her youth, when she was discovered by her father "wearing one of his wife's nightgowns and rolling her hips like a whore" (51). Again, the issue of the father's inappropriate desire for the motherless daughter is introduced here, though not

explicitly stated. During her twenty years in the convent, Josephine feels stifled by the enforced infantilism of the nuns and loses her faith. Like Teresa of Avila, Josephine experiences visions of Christ and writes an appropriately humble *Life*, in order to escape the torments of the Inspectors. But these sensual visions disappear after she tries to put them into words for her confessor, underlining the way in which the church stifles her self-expression. As she shouts to Lucian in the confessional: “my words always vanish when I’m in here, this set-up always makes me feel so small and so silly.” (133)

After leaving the convent, Josephine joins her cousin, Magdalena, a courtesan, and discovers a world of pleasure and sensuality. Here, she seems to devise her own version of faith, based upon a link between mind and body, and earth. This rewrites the traditional associations between women and nature already seen in their denigrating form in Marin’s tale. Having rejected the stern and forbidding God of the church, she experiences in the cathedral an immanent God, part of herself, both comforting and fierce: “this was what God was, this profound understanding, in this untranslatable speech, that we were all made the same, part of each other, rocks and stones and trees and people.” (190) This description is echoed in a broadcast given by Roberts for Radio Three (27 July, 1997), in which she describes God as “what links us all altogether, animals and humans and rocks and plants”. It also draws upon the writings of St Teresa, many of which are concerned with the location of the inner life and the “mystic way” to God.

Josephine’s beliefs are also expressed in her practical desire to found a dual house of women, incorporating aspects of her life and that of her cousin, Magdalena: the nun and the courtesan. Josephine pictures a community of women living in a two-sided house, with a convent and a salon, echoing the lack of distinction between women found in Agnes’s tale. This “sensual convent, where God manifested in sensual joy” (194) insists upon the expression of desire, choice and the strength of women together as integral to a utopian environment.

In this setting, Josephine writes a second version of her life and, appropriately, leaves this woven in the fabric of her everyday existence, written on paper used as bottle stoppers, petticoat linings, oil lamp spills and jam lids, for her niece, Isabel, to find. These words do not bend in submission like her first *Life*, but “clicked about in the cell as though they wore tap shoes” (235). Despite losing these scraps of paper, Isabel uses this tale as a way to express and continue her motherlove for Josephine: “I reassemble her from jigsaw bits and pieces of writing; from scattered parts. I make her up.” (290) Significantly, Josephine’s tale is scattered, as her body will be, and then reformed by another voice, that of her niece, destabilising the authority of the narrator. And the narrative is further undermined when Isabel admits to her own revisions: “Josephine did not die in my arms, as I put. That was a lie, to make myself feel better.” (285)

Despite the visionary nature of Josephine’s house of women, it does not come to fruition in this text, as Josephine dies before building the second part of her house, and it is this failure that is perhaps the strength of this novel in terms of feminist revision, preventing it from becoming a prescription for a feminist utopia. And the eventual fate of all of Roberts’s saints, as in *The Golden Legend*, is death, be it particularly gruesome or peacefully loving. Roberts draws heavily upon the life and death of St Teresa in her portrayal of the fate of Josephine’s remains, as Josephine is exhumed, found to be uncorrupt and then has parts of her body bitten off in a horrific eucharist by worshippers of the corpse. The “cult of relics” led to pieces of St Teresa being distributed from Rome to Paris and Josephine’s body, too, is dismembered and scattered, as part of a battle for possession and power. But in the end, all of the impossible saints’ bodies are disposed of, rather than preserved as symbols, with even Josephine’s cleaned bones eventually lost in the mass of remains found at the riverbend. This is a denial of the eternal and transcendent aspect of sainthood, a rejection of the revering of the body in death and the issues of power that this raises.

This novel blends the gothic and the feminist, the fantastic and the violent, to produce an unstable and disturbing narrative that combines myth, history and fiction. At its heart are issues of power and control: of

language, of belief and of history.

- [Sarah Falcus \(Huddersfield University\)](#)

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