



Roberts, Michèle: *The Mistress Class*

(2001)

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

Genre: Novel. Country: England.

The Mistressclass again demonstrates Roberts's interest in complex and multilayered narratives, with an epistolary thread combined with a third-person narrative using multiple points of view. The letters are imaginative reconstructions of those sent by Charlotte Brontë to her teacher and mentor, M. Heger, in Brussels, linking this text to the rewriting of literary figures already seen in *Fair Exchange* (1999) and *The Looking Glass* (2000). As in several of her other works, Roberts does not insist upon a historically accurate rendering of events, but creates a fictional narrative saturated with grief and longing. Further intertextuality is also apparent in the novel, with references to fairytales, to *Jane Eyre* and, in the party, flower buying and the primacy of London itself, to Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. The contemporary narrative details the twisted relationships between two sisters, a man and his father. Catherine and Vinny hark back to Thérèse and Léonie in *Daughters of the House* (1992), as well as echoing Charlotte and her sister Emily. As orphans, the women struggle to define themselves, often against each other, forming an uncomfortable diptych. This pairing is complicated by the fact that Catherine is married to Vinny's former lover, Adam, whom Vinny still loves although all three are now middle-aged and years have passed since their youthful affairs. This narrative incorporates memories of the summer of Vinny's relationship with Adam, and their time at his father's house in France, where they were joined by Catherine. The return to the seventies links this text to Roberts's earliest work, particularly *A Piece of the Night* (1978). Both texts situate their women in the context of second-wave feminism and socialism. Here, however, the distance offered by the dual timescale and retrospective consideration does make *The Mistressclass* more nuanced and less strident than this early novel.

As the flashbacks make clear, Vinny was the first to become involved with Adam, in a youthful relationship. This bond was broken, however, during a summer spent at Adam's father's house in France. Feeling responsible for her sister after the death of their parents, Vinny invited Catherine to join them in Sainte-Madeleine, not anticipating that Adam would be attracted to the order and domesticity Catherine brought, something at odds with Vinny's intensity and passion. Adam eventually marries Catherine and they have two sons, whilst Vinny remains single. Now in their fifties, the sisters find themselves living close to each other in London, after Catherine and Adam move into his father's house after Robert's death. The novel explores the difficult relationship between the women, who both love the same man. However, Roberts widens the scope of the novel here to also present relationships between men, in this case, Adam and his father. This is a text of doublings and hauntings, emphasising the complex relationships between the characters, with Robert haunting his son, Catherine and Vinny shadowing each other, and Vinny even seeing a vision of Adam whilst in France on her own.

The links between the epistolary and contemporary narratives in this text serve to illuminate aspects of the two, further emphasising the doubleness found throughout the novel. These connections range from the basic, like Vinny's interest in Brontë's life and her love of *Jane Eyre*, to more complex echoes in characterisation and theme. So Charlotte and Catherine are closely linked, with both women living dutiful lives, ministering to the needs of the men around them, and keeping hidden their secret desires. So, too, are Emily and Vinny. Vinny is the freethinking and more expressive sister, not sacrificing her writing to the constraints of an ordered life, or to the needs of others. She is able to both write and live with a degree of freedom, just as Charlotte suggests that Emily could. The two pairs of sisters here are linked in other ways too, with the grief Charlotte feels in the absence of Emily echoed in the sense of loss in Catherine and Vinny's relationship after Catherine becomes involved with Adam. It is, however, too easy to polarise the sisters, something the text warns against. Vinny imagines Robert separating her and Catherine into fairytale sisters, "one good and one bad. One feminine and one not." (139) And the pictures he painted, found after his death, suggest that he did just that, painting Catherine as "a goddess, a Madonna, a bride" and Vinny with a "carapace of muscles and makeup" (288). And it is clear that Adam views the sisters in this way at times, as he turns from one to the other according to his own needs. But the situation is far more complicated than this, as the different perspectives make clear, with Catherine imagining that Vinny is "pure", though Vinny sees herself as "a slut" (68), and Catherine secretly writing erotic novels while Vinny ends up taking on a domestic role when she returns to the house in France and cleans it. Catherine and Vinny are more alike than others realise, as their red dresses and dyed red hair symbolise at the party at the beginning of the text. This multifaceted sisterhood is also emphasised in the epistolary narrative in the relationship between Emily and Charlotte. Emily may argue intelligently with M. Hegel at night, but Charlotte's letters show her more than capable of passionate debate, as she demonstrates during her time with Mme. Sand. And the sisters haunt each other, too, with Catherine hearing Vinny's voice in her head and Charlotte finding it more and more difficult to separate dreams of her sister and the past from reality. The dichotomy of "good" and "bad" girls is something Roberts's work always refutes, with her "slipshod sibyls" being multifaceted women, who love, hate and desire other women.

But it is not just women who haunt each other in this novel; Adam, too, is haunted, by the ghost of his recently dead father. Robert was a traditional patriarch in many ways; Vinny sees him as "king of his castle" during their time at his home in France, "God up on a cloud surveying his creation" (128 and 132). With an appetite for wine and women, Robert dominates and bullies his son, making Adam seem "diminished, thin, next to his big, curly-haired father" (129). Adam is obviously damaged by his upbringing and cannot escape his father's influence, even in death. Here, Roberts explores more fully the father/son relationship, something neglected in much of her writing. Just as daughters are haunted by their mothers in many of Roberts's texts, experiencing extremes of emotion as they try to become independent (and often also mothers themselves) so here Adam is both father and son, struggling to separate from his father. Adam hears Robert in the house and sees him in the garden, in the cupboard. His father has "come back for something he'd forgotten" and this has sinister implications considering the doubling of the two figures in the text. Catherine, Adam's wife, was once Robert's model, something Adam feels as a betrayal when he finds out years later, and Adam now lives in his father's London house, a writer, just as his father was an artist. Adam's precarious mental state eventually leads him to fall drunkenly from Southwark bridge, as he tries to come to terms with Robert's death and what he sees as his wife's infidelity: "Everything he'd ever been: offered up to Robert; oh please love me. If Robert was gone then Adam was gone too. But he was cunning. He could get Adam back. You just had to read what the river said." (254) Robert also haunts the text through the memories of Catherine and Vinny, who remember Robert as both a younger man in France and as a frail, dying figure in a London hospice, and through the archive of pictures and tapes that he has left to Catherine, which supposedly contain his life story. However, in this text the voice of the dead patriarch is denied as the tapes are found to be blank: Catherine does not hear Robert's final confession. Robert's art does live on after him, suggesting a kind of immortality, but even this is undercut when initial excitement about the pictures proves unfounded when they're judged "not exactly cutting edge" (288). The pictures will be sold and scattered, just as the detritus of Robert's life in France is burned by Vinny, "cremat[ing him] anew" (288).

Despite the dominance of the father, the mother figure is not ignored in this text; she is prominent in her absence in the lives of these characters. Adam's mother sent him away to school and then divorced his father. This is "a wound too deep to be forgivable" and so Adam "built walls around himself to keep the hatred out" (217) and married Catherine to create order in his life, as she did in the French house during their summer there together. Adam's writing actually keeps his memories, and therefore his mother, at bay, whereas the opposite is true for Charlotte, who uses reading and writing as a way to access her "child-self" and her dead mother (77). Vinny and Catherine, too, dream about their mothers, with Vinny rejecting the maternal image of the stern virgin in the French church in favour of a sensuous, jouissant dream of childhood. This dream is one of fullness and satisfaction: "She wanted never to stop but to go on for ever, part of this flow of goodness and sweetness and bliss." (126) The maternal is associated with love and plenitude in this text, but at the same time actual motherhood is absent; Catherine the only mother present in the text – and her children are on another continent. Access to the maternal is made possible only through acceptance and openness in the novel. So Charlotte is able to remember childhood and Emily – her surrogate mother in a sense – when she is able to freely express her desires in the letters she writes but knows will never be sent. Vinny and Catherine find the maternal in the borderland of dreams and in states of extreme emotion.

As well as parental relationships, Roberts returns to the nature of art and the artist in this text, with all of the main characters writers, except for Robert, who is a visual artist. Adam sees art as "safely impersonal; held away from himself; separate" (214), using his writing to hold back painful memories and keep his life securely contained. Art is something he creates only when he is calm and alone; he is only able to write on a Sunday morning if Catherine is absent and he is emotionally stable. There is a sense that art is gendered in the novel, and this is apparent in the different spaces in which art is created by different characters. Adam writes in a study, a room apart from the rest of the house, whereas Catherine writes her erotic novels in secret at the kitchen table, a domestic space. Catherine edits Adam's work, but keeps her own secret, hiding her writing when Adam enters the kitchen. In the epistolary strand, Charlotte writes *Jane Eyre* while her father is recovering from an eye operation and so is literally blind; she escapes to Mme Sand's house "in order not to blind [him] a second time" (266), making clear the constraints of patriarchy and the difficulty she finds in negotiating the roles of writer and housewife/daughter. In this narrative, too, women have to create space within their lives to write, whereas men have space dedicated to writing, as M. Hegel does in his book-lined study, a very masculine, cigar-scented space. However, this text does insist upon the link between body and mind, rejecting the asceticism of Adam's approach to art. The dangers of the suppression of the body, memory and emotion are clearly expressed in this text, and not only in the mental illness experienced by Charlotte. Adam's containment is seen as damaging, particularly towards the end of the text when his boundaries begin to dissolve and he finds himself drawn to violence as a result of his suppression of emotion and memory. Catherine also finds that secrets are harmful; once she has made the decision to tell Adam the details of her relationship with his father, she finds that the sorrow of the loss of love in her marriage is a kind of "knowledge" and she feels her parents "walking along with her" in her grief, linking openness and the acceptance of the past to the resurrection of parental love. The mature Vinny similarly finds a form of contentment after her distress when she betrays Catherine's secret to Adam. Her initial grief gives way to a peace during her time in France clearing the old house, when she comes to terms with the tumultuous emotions of that eventful summer and wants to tell her younger self to "Lark about a bit. Have some fun." (283)

The connections between writing and the body are also posited in more positive forms in the novel. Writing is linked to emotional expression and fulfilment, particularly for women. Catherine uses her erotic novels as "a container for her secret feelings" (249) and Vinny gains pleasure from both writing and reading, finding when reading that the body "shudder[s] all over at the pleasure given by the prose" (50). The same sense of writing as emotionally fulfilling is found in Charlotte's letters, which she describes as "a secret poetry" and "a living cord" that links her to M. Hegel (3). Her letters allow her to express feelings that ultimately lead to her recuperation from a mental illness, something helped by a relationship with another woman, Mme. Sand, who offers similar comfort to that of Emily. The duality of Charlotte's life as writer and as wife and daughter is resolved, at least

to some extent, in her final letter, where she describes her new study, a space that brings together domesticity and art, nature and language, as she pins sheets up to create a white-walled study in the garden of the parsonage. Significantly, these are the sheets from her childhood, from the bed she shared with Emily, suggesting the interrelation of past and present; these sheets are “like very old paper, almost transparent, and the waving shadows of the ferns dance over them like writing” (295). This final image of the book creates a literary domesticity, uniting language and expression with the past and the home.

The contemporary narrative ends with Vinny’s cremation of Robert’s belongings in France, suggesting an escape from the influence of this patriarch and his stereotyping of the sisters. Just prior to this, Catherine asks Vinny to join her on a trip to India. Catherine wants time away from Adam and, with the death of Robert, the sisters are free to build a relationship independent of men. This text does not, however, offer an unambiguously happy ending, with the sisters still carrying their versions of the past and Charlotte’s story shadowed by the premature death of Charlotte Brontë, but it does suggest the openness of communication and the possibility of negotiating the difficulties of love, memory, language and domesticity.

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