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## Michèle Roberts's *Mud* and the Practice of Feminist "Re-Vision"

### Abstract

In Michèle Roberts's *Mud* (2010), writing emerges as an act of creative recycling, allowing pre-existing texts to be moulded into new forms and infused with new meanings. In the opening, title story, the idea is expressed through the image of mud, whose curly brown flakes falling off shoe-soles are seen as "bits of writing" – fragments of letters, commas and full stops – to be pieced together into "something new". This process of literary replenishment is repeatedly witnessed by the readers of *Mud* as they come across characters, scenes and motifs borrowed from such well-known literary texts as *Beowulf*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *Jane Eyre*, *Madame Bovary* and *Nana* or encounter a host of actual historical figures, including George Sand, Alfred de Musset, Claude Monet, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and Colette, in stories that set out to retell incidents from their biographies. Offering new versions of these literary and historical texts, Roberts engages in an act of feminist revision as outlined in Adrienne Rich's seminal 1979 essay, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*. Rich describes the practice of feminist rewriting as "an act of survival", whose essence is "not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us". Indeed, in story after story in the collection, this is precisely what Roberts seems determined to do.

Keywords: rewriting, retelling, feminist rewriting, Michèle Roberts, *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*.

Whether we think of her novels, short stories or poems, Michèle Roberts emerges as an author who has remained stubbornly faithful to the idea of writing as a form of creative retelling, repeatedly using pre-existing literary, biographical and/or historical material and reworking it into new stories. This tendency to infuse old texts with new, usually feminist, meanings has been noted by a number of her critics. In a discussion of Roberts's early 1980s fiction, for instance, Joseph Brooker recognises "the revision of the past" as "a persistent force" in her work.<sup>1</sup> Similar remarks have also been made by Sarah Falcus, whose 2007 monograph

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<sup>1</sup> J. Brooker, *Literature of the 1980s: After the Watershed*, Edinburgh 2010, p. 198.

devoted to the author's *oeuvre* draws attention to her "re-vision of myth, scripture and history" as a way of subverting the "patriarchal tradition" and "writing a kind of herstory that reinvents, undermines and parodies".<sup>2</sup> Finally, in a book-length study which discusses Roberts's fiction alongside that of Angela Carter, Susanne Gruss emphasises "the scope of intertextual sources" that underpin the fiction of both authors,<sup>3</sup> showing that Carter's conception of her own work as encapsulated in the oft-quoted bottle metaphor has been eagerly embraced by Roberts.<sup>4</sup>

Unsurprisingly, then, Roberts's propensity to conceive of writing as a form of rewriting is also in evidence in her latest volume of short fiction, *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love* (2010). In numerous pieces of the collection, literary practice emerges as an art of creative recycling, which allows old texts to be moulded into new shapes and to acquire fresh meanings. In the opening title story, this idea is expressed through the image of mud, whose curly brown flakes falling off the soles of shoes are seen as "bits of writing" – old texts that have broken into fragments of letters and punctuation marks but can still be reassembled and reused:

Loops and half-circles of mud. Mud words. Mud commas and full stops. Bits of writing, broken apart, like the pieces of an old pot you dig up when going over your allotment. I'd piece them back together again, make something new with them.<sup>5</sup>

What in *Mud* remains a hypothetical proposition is put in practice in subsequent stories of the collection, many of which are built from bits and pieces borrowed from existing literary and biographical sources. Engaging in a process of creative replenishment, *Mud* is filled with characters, scenes and motifs borrowed from canonical literary texts that range from *Beowulf* and *Tristan and Isolde* to Emily Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Émile Zola's *Nana* (1880). A cast of actual historical figures, most of them artists, also parade through the pages of the collection. *Remembering George Sand* narrates the unravelling of the passion between the eponymous French writer and the poet Alfred de Musset as their romantic Italian escapade goes awry in Venice. *On the Beach at Trouville* stages a fictional encounter between Claude and Camille Monet on the one hand and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux on the other. In *Colette Looks Back*, the French novelist is depicted as reminiscing about her childhood, her complex relationship with her mother and her sexual awakening at the precocious age of ten.

Offering new versions of familiar literary and historical texts, Roberts engages in an act of feminist revision as outlined in Adrienne Rich's seminal 1972 essay, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, where Rich famously defined "re-

<sup>2</sup> S. Falcus, *Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories*, Oxford 2007, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> S. Gruss, *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text: Reading Michèle Roberts and Angela Carter*, Amsterdam 2009, p. 297.

<sup>4</sup> In *Notes from the Front Line*, Carter described her writing in terms of "new readings of old texts" and commented on it using the famous, gleeful metaphor: "I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" (A. Carter, *Notes from the Front Line* [in:] *On Gender and Writing*, ed. M. Wandor, London 1983, p. 69). Cf. S. Gruss, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> M. Roberts, *Mud* [in:] M. Roberts, *Mud*, London 2010, p. 7.

vision" as an "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction".<sup>6</sup> Arguing that revisionary writing constitutes a vital act of survival for women, she claimed:

Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves [. . .] We need to know the writing of the past [. . .] not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.<sup>7</sup>

As I intend to show in the present essay, this is precisely the task that Roberts seems to have set for herself in many of the pieces collected in *Mud*. Story after story, she returns to well-known, culturally central texts, revealing their implicit patriarchal assumptions and turning them to subversive ends. In the process, she follows in the footsteps of other practitioners of literary rewriting, whose task – as Steven Connor perceptively observes – is often to foreground "the three-way relations" between original texts, their retellings and "the history that connects and divides them", all in the attempt to "engage with the history of beliefs and attitudes to which these originals have belonged and which they have helped to shape".<sup>8</sup> Offering new versions of old texts, Roberts brings to the surface their ideological underpinnings and reveals them as instances of what Bakhtin would call monological discourse, where the vociferous claims of dominant patriarchal ideology drown the voices of marginalised women. In an attempt to salvage these previously unheard voices, the stories enter into a dialogical relationship with their sources and open them to new readings.

One of the most interesting retellings collected in *Mud* is *The Lay of Bee Wolf*, a story which offers a new take on the Old English heroic epic *Beowulf*. Told in the voice of Bee Wolf's teenage daughter, it reprises many of the central events of the original story, spicing it up with new details and deflating much of the bombast implicit in the Germanic masculine code of honour through the use of colloquial, adolescent language in which the girl narrates the events. Rather than praising the masculine values of loyalty, bravery and courage, the girl lays bare the realities behind these lofty ideals: "You had to be in a gang to be safe",<sup>9</sup> she declares. She also emphasises the patriarchal character of Germanic societies and makes explicit the link between masculinity, warfare and violence:

Men fought men. Much death. Wounds and blood. Much gold, too. That was the point of all those wars: if you won them you could grab the gold. [...] Then your lord would be king of a new land and he would get a lot of new slave girls to fuck.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A. Rich, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, "College English: Women, Writing, and Teaching" 1972, vol. 34, no. 1, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18–19.

<sup>8</sup> S. Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950–1995*, London–New York 1996, p. 167.

<sup>9</sup> M. Roberts, *The Lay of Bee Wolf* [in:] M. Roberts, *Mud*, London 2010, p. 183.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Refocalising the story through the eyes of a female character, Roberts evokes a set of values that is totally alien to those depicted in the original story as well as offering an implicit criticism of Germanic warrior culture as based on the principles of masculine power, aggression and objectification of women. The warriors appearing in the story are described in an anachronistically modern language that foregrounds their affinity with members of today's street gangs. In consequence, they are portrayed as immature individuals fascinated with an aggressive, hegemonic vision of boisterous military masculinity:

Each lord chose his squad of men. Great love each felt for each: hey, bro, let me take care of you. If you met a strange squad, a strange gang, on your own turf, then you felt rage: how dare they come into my space? What cheek! So then the lords of the gangs would shout: war! So they would go to war.<sup>11</sup>

Without ever openly criticising this worldview, the female protagonist is shown as representing very different values, capable of reacting to manifestations of otherness in a manner that is grounded in sympathy and understanding. This is visible when she depicts Gren Del as a child, lost in the dark, desperately attempting to find his way home and pleading in an unfamiliar language with the guards of Heorot to help him out in his predicament. She is also capable of perceiving the second beast that appears in the hall as “Mrs Dell, the mum of Gren [who] came to look for her son”.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean, however, that the narrator is naively idealistic or sentimental about the world that surrounds her. When her father dies, for instance, she realises that her own life and safety (just like the life and safety of her mother and sisters) are now in danger: she knows that the men who have so far fought as Bee Wolf's companions will now pose a threat:

those men had all run off, to find a new gang, a strong new leader. So that he would trust them they would tell him where he could find gold, a fine hall full of furs and harps, and girls to fuck. Then, the fuck done, the new lord might just kill them.<sup>13</sup>

In offering this brutally honest and unashamedly realistic assessment of her own situation, the teenage narrator reveals the world of Germanic warriors enshrined in the original *Beowulf* as an embodiment of a patriarchal culture that objectifies women by seeing them as war trophies, commodities not much different from any other booty that can be seized in war: gold, furs or harps. Rather than singing the praise of this world, she presents it as a place hostile to women, setting off – in the closing paragraph of the story – on a quest, ready to confront an uncertain future.

A portrait of women as commodified in a patriarchal culture is also drawn in *Easy as ABC*, whose opening line – “Nana, let me tell you a story”<sup>14</sup> – is haunted, in Monika Szuba's words, by “the ghost of Émile Zola”.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, like Zola's

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>14</sup> M. Roberts, *Easy as ABC* [in:] M. Roberts, *Mud*, London 2010, p. 129.

<sup>15</sup> M. Szuba, *Playing with Mud: Literary Ghosts in Michèle Roberts' Prose Writing* [in:] “Curators of Memory”: *Women's Voices in Literature in English*, eds. L. Sikorska, K. Bronk, M. Frątczak, J. Jarząb, Poznań 2015, p. 78.

1880 novel, *Easy as ABC* is set in a seedy urban underworld and focuses on the experiences of a young prostitute. There are crucial differences between the texts, however. In *Nana*, the central character is depicted as an embodiment of greed, ruthlessness and corruption. She is – in Terry Castle's words – "devious and manipulative, physically [and] morally corrupt".<sup>16</sup> In Roberts's rewriting, on the other hand, the prostitute – renamed Eva and doubling as the story's protagonist and narrator – is unmistakably presented as a victim. An immigrant who arrives in Britain in search of work, she falls prey to human trafficking and is kept against her will in what she describes as a "London sex-house".<sup>17</sup> Unaware of her precise whereabouts and controlled by anonymous pimps, she dreams of making her escape, a task made all the more difficult by her social isolation and forced drug addiction.

Shifting the events of the story from nineteenth-century Paris to contemporary London, *Easy as ABC* reworks some of the motifs that can be found in its precursor text. Commenting on Zola's novel through the prism of its 1925 cinematic adaptation, Heather Howard observes:

Whether as actress or courtesan, Nana's existence is a constant staging, a game of illusion. For both Zola and Renoir [the director of the adaptation], prostitute and actress are inseparable, since they are constantly involved in role-playing.<sup>18</sup>

What Howard describes as a "focus on the performative side of prostitution"<sup>19</sup> is also a motif present in Roberts's story where Eva reminisces about a Russian doll she received in her childhood from her "nana" and uses the memory to protect herself from the seedy reality that surrounds her, imagining herself as the tiny doll hidden "many layers inside the biggest doll".<sup>20</sup> It is this biggest doll whom Eva imagines as wearing "a fake name, a fake identity [and] a fake mouth",<sup>21</sup> as she engages in mechanical sex with her clients, lying "docile and still",<sup>22</sup> "dazed by the drugs".<sup>23</sup> The image of Eva as a doll is particularly troubling in the story. While it is clearly used to signal the girl's youth and beauty as well as her attempts to distance herself from the degrading realities of her profession, it also points to her dehumanisation, foregrounding her status as a puppet, a disposable commodity, a "sex toy".<sup>24</sup>

If Zola's anti-heroine is from the start pursued by "a herd of men, with parched lips and ardent eyes",<sup>25</sup> a herd later seen as "galloping through Nana's bedroom",<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> T. Castle, *Women and Literary Criticism* [in:] *Boss Ladies, Watch Out!: Essays on Women, Sex, and Writing*, T. Castle, New York–London 2002, p.17.

<sup>17</sup> M. Roberts, *Easy as ABC*..., p. 137.

<sup>18</sup> H. Howard, *Staging the Courtesan: Taking Zola's Nana to the Movies* [in:] *Zola and Film: Essays in the Art of Adaptation*, eds. A. Gural-Migdal, R. Singer, Jefferson 2005, p. 58.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> M. Roberts, *Easy as ABC*..., p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>25</sup> É. Zola, *Nana*, transl. G. Holden, London 1972, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

Roberts also describes a steady flow of customers that visit Eva in her grubby room. She does so by inserting short paragraphs that, on five occasions, interrupt the progress of the story only to list, in alphabetical order, the names of her clients:

Adam, Abel, Adrian, Alexei, Angelo, Apollo, Arthur, Aziz, Ben, Benoit, Bill, Brian, Bruno, Cain, Cal, Carl, Charles, Clarence, Clive, Christopher, Dan, David, Dinos, Edward, Eugene<sup>27</sup>

Including between 10 and 25 items each, and invariably ending with a comma (even in the very final paragraph of the story), the lists draw a particularly bleak portrait of the sex industry where intercourse is reduced to a mechanical, repetitive process, further emphasising Eva's status as a "blow-up sex toy", not so much a real woman as a "replica" of one.<sup>28</sup> Suggestive of different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds, and associated with different time frames, the names also reveal the ubiquity of prostitution across cultures and historical epochs. When read together with Eva's description of herself as "an item on a shopping list", a "designer doll" that can be purchased alongside "designer shirts" and "designer gadgets",<sup>29</sup> however, the lists also suggest a link between prostitution and patriarchal capitalism. As Susan Easton explains,

A market will develop wherever there is a demand, and as sexual desire is a constant feature of human behaviour, inevitably the provision of sexual services will flourish [. . .] although consumption will be greater in market economies.<sup>30</sup>

In retelling Zola's story of voluntary prostitution as a tragic tale of a young woman coerced into selling her body, Roberts reveals the limitations of Hippolyte Taine's naturalistic theory which ascribed both individual human behaviour and larger social and cultural phenomena to the impact of "race, milieu and moment", a view eagerly accepted by Zola and promoted in his novels.

Literary rewriting, as argued by a number of commentators, is a political act. Since most of its instances can be described as "refocalisations" – texts that retell the events of their originals from a new perspective, most typically that of a hitherto absent or minor character – its aim is often to give voice to the disempowered, the marginalised and the disenfranchised and thus to undermine the ideological assumptions implicit in the precursor text. This explains both why retellings typically target well-known, culturally central texts and why the practice has gained particular prominence among women writers on the one hand and postcolonial authors on the other. Responding to the revisionary potential that the strategy offers, feminist and post-colonial rewritings attempt to subvert the myths, remedy the silences and expose the ideological biases of their source texts. Their energy comes from what has variously been described as a "correcting vision",<sup>31</sup> "coun-

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<sup>27</sup> M. Roberts, *Easy as ABC...*, p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>30</sup> S. Easton, *The Problem of Pornography: Regulation and the Right to Free Speech*, London–New York 1994, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> A.S. Byatt, *Forefathers* [in:] A.S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, London 2000, p. 58.

ter-discursive strategies"<sup>32</sup> or "reparative intent".<sup>33</sup> Lending themselves to representing the interests of historically disadvantaged social groups, they serve as "a powerful political and ideological tool in the reshaping of cultural memory".<sup>34</sup>

Entering into a dialogical relationship with canonical texts and opening them up to new readings, rewritings included in *Mud* also serve a political purpose, confirming Roberts's status as a representative of "second-wave feminism".<sup>35</sup> Revising old stories and retelling them from a new perspective, they prove that feminist re-vision is indeed, in Adrienne Rich's words, "an act of survival", a battle waged on the canon over how it represents femininity. By attempting to insert female characters into texts from which they were conspicuously absent, or by re-imagining, on her own terms, those female characters who have been subjected to crude misogynist stereotyping, Roberts uses her stories as a vehicle for Rich's idea that the task of feminist re-vision is "not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us".<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> H. Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse* [in:] *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, London–New York 1995, p. 96.

<sup>33</sup> S. Connor, op. cit., p. 198.

<sup>34</sup> L. Plate, *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting*, Houndmills–New York 2011, p. 33.

<sup>35</sup> S. Falcus, op. cit., p. 13.

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