sciendo

Prague Journal of English Studies
Volume 10, No. 1, 2021
ISSN: 1804-8722 (print)
ISSN: 2336-2685 (online)

DOI: 10.2478/pjes-2021-0002

"Passing a looped and knotted string between their hands". The Bible, the Women's Liberation Movement and Women's Bonds in Michèle Roberts's *The Wild Girl*

Ewa Rychter
The Angelus Silesius University of Applied Sciences, Walbrzych, Poland

This paper claims that through a feminist rewriting of the Bible, Michèle Roberts's novel The Wild Girl *(1984) articulates the ambivalences and insecurities that emerged in the British Women's Liberation movement after its initial period of great energy, hopefulness and enthusiasm of the 1970s. By rewriting the biblical insistence on female rivalry and competition, and revising biblical "gynotypes" and "fragmented women", the novel not only exposes the patriarchal discourses of the Bible, but also critically revisits the WLM's utopian visions of unity, and re-imagines the ways in which women can cooperate while preserving their differences. When juxtaposed with more recent women's rewritings, often driven by (and catering to) market economy and consumer culture, Roberts's novel is a useful remainder of the still consequential need to "look back in order to move forward" (Plate 406). The novel's small-scale, grass-roots level sisterhood, never altogether free from tensions, is a quietly optimistic vision of women's bonds, a "secret gospel" proclaiming the good news about the precarious and changeable relationship among women, and about the need of its incessant reworking.*

Keywords
Women's Liberation Movement; feminism; biblical rewriting; Michèle Roberts; feminist utopia; consciousness-raising groups; gynotype

In her 2006 study of adaptation, Linda Hutcheon lists a number of possible motivations for rewriting chronologically-prior texts: cashing in on a previous success; benefitting from the hypotext's cultural cachet or "aura" (4); paying tribute to an important text; trying to supplant canonical authority;

harbouring some "deeply personal" (95) reasons; and finally, engaging in a larger social, cultural or political critique. This last motivation is specially vital as "political and historical intentionality is now of great interest in academic circles, despite a half-century of critical dismissal of the relevance of artistic intention" (Hutcheon 94). Rewritings are not only symptoms of the contemporary interest in the past and a means of maintaining a dialogue with historical ideas, but also instruments for asking important questions about now. The rewritten texts (hypotexts) "have already bodied forth, narrativised and decisively structured core ideas, identities and existential rites" (Moraru 8). Rewriting them means, on the one hand, questioning and criticising the way hypotexts have shaped present day thinking, and on the other hand, creatively exploring alternative ideas and conceptualisations about ourselves and our futures.

By rewriting parts of the New Testament, Michèle Roberts's novel *The Wild Girl* (1984) capitalises on many transformative functions of rewriting. First, it draws on the rationale of revisionism, famously described by Adrienne Rich as crucial for women's writing. At the hands of women writers, the revisionary impulse is linked with the feminist project of reworking the ideological structures that define women's lives, and with providing means for building new scenarios in the future. Roberts's novel criticises biblical ideas that contributed to the patriarchal and divisive attitude to women, and reimagines relationships among women, developing and problematising the idea of female bonding and rivalry-free relationships. Significantly, Roberts's novel does not rewrite the Bible to replace its stereotypes of female competition with visions of untainted women's harmony. Rather, it nuances its representation of women's relationships, avoiding both the patriarchal and gynocentric bias. Second, by making some of the rewritten biblical passages echo the events and ideas characteristic of the women's movement of the 1970s, the novel uses the Bible to explore the problems of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). Insofar as *The Wild Girl* points towards complications in founding community on the sense of common oppression and in linking it with the elimination of difference, the novel foregrounds the problems of the WLM in the late 1970s. Roberts's biblical novel articulates the founding ambivalences and insecurities that emerged in the British WLM after its initial period of great energy, hopefulness and enthusiasm of the 1970s. And third, *The Wild Girl* tries to build a credible and inspiring vision of the unavoidably difficult, tangled bonds between contemporary women, captured by the image of "a looped and knotted string" passed between women's hands. The complex

and changeable relationship between Roberts's women characters can be treated as an alternative both to the shattered dream of women's harmony and to the latent threat of female monolithism.

This reading of Roberts's novel – a reading which focuses on the interlocking between the novel's de-patriarchalised revision of the Bible, and its nuanced story of feminine friendship-cum-friction – is quite pertinent today. It reiterates the somewhat forgotten rationale of revisionist literature, rooted in a critical reconsideration of culturally transmitted ideas and beliefs. Moreover, it helps to reassess the imaginative potential of utopian visions, which, once approached critically and reflexively, can become inspirational for contemporary feminism. As Ledeke Plate explains, contemporary re-visions are shaped by two related trends, which annul (or at least marginalise) the earlier emphasis on "looking back in order to move forward" (406). Instead of the re-vision as a liberation from the incapacitating narratives consolidated and perpetuated in canonical texts, we have re-visions which operate in accordance with either the market economy (they are easier to sell as they capitalise on the prestige of the hypotext), or with consumer culture (they cater for the insatiable desire of "imagining how we would have related, intellectually and with our bodies, to certain objects [...] if we had encountered them in their own historical everyday worlds" (Plate 400–401)). In the face of such landmark change in literary adaptations, re-reading *The Wild Girl* with a view to its focus on women's bonds may be a useful reminder that although re-vision "fail[s] to formulate enabling fictions for a better future for all [...], it can still draw [... individuals] into visions of community and collectivity" (Plate 408). It is through its mythical yet non-idealised images of women's relationships that Roberts's novel urges readers to envisage better cooperation among women. As Sanders observes about the pertinence of utopianism to feminism, an "expanded conception of utopian thinking would allow for the productive expression and negotiation of conflict, and would clarify utopia's potential as a mode of envisioning social change that emphasises the transformative over the perfected vision" (12). Conceived as a thought-dynamising, aspiration-bolstering device, utopia is a framework within which one can consider the current feminist problem of the possibility of alliances forged irrespective of generational conflicts and differences between various strands of feminism (third wave, postfeminism). If "[w]hat animates feminism *is* the productive potential of utopic vision, even when some accounts of feminism disavow this connection" (Sanders 6, original emphasis), Roberts's critical utopian image of women's commonality is an imaginative reinvigoration of the feminist project.

The Wild Girl as a biblical rewriting

Although there is no agreement as to the extent and comprehensiveness of patriarchal ideology in the Bible, most feminist biblical scholars agree that the Bible contains many misogynistic and androcentric passages (Bal 1988; Fuchs, 2003; Pardes, 1993; Schüssler Fiorenza, 2001). Two important, concatenating narrative strategies which underlie those passages are gynotypes-based representations of women and incomplete, fragmented images of women. Esther Fuchs uses the concept of "gynotype" (a female figure) to capture the idea that women in biblical narratives are "men-related ciphers who appear as secondary characters in a male drama" (11). In their standard roles of mothers, brides, wives, daughters and sisters, biblical women are defined by their relationships with males. All gynotypes are restricted in their possibilities of delivering speeches or narrating events. Biblical women characters most often function as objects (or even male property) rather than subjects of actions. Their reactions, thoughts and feelings are rarely mentioned – a phenomenon noticeable even in the context of the famous biblical reticence about human motivations or internal struggles. As Fuchs sums up, "in its final representation the biblical text reduces women to auxiliary roles, suppresses their voices and minimizes their national and religious significance" (11). Used in various "type-scenes" (i.e., variations of annunciation, seduction, betrothal, adultery or contest), gynotypes not only expound the (subservient) function of the woman in relation to males, but also pit women against one another, assigning them mutually exclusive features and representing them as rivals. Women do not cooperate or make friends with one another, Fuchs observes; "neither is there a story depicting a reconciliation of female rivals" (159). Female division and rivalry serve patriarchy because it allows men to control women (the *divide and impera* rule) and subordinate their ambitions to aims essential for the patriarchal investment in patrilinear continuity (production of offspring).

The second narrative structure which contributes to the patriarchal character of biblical texts is the incompleteness of women characters, resulting in what Cheryl Exum labels images of "fragmented women" (67). "Fragmented" biblical women are not full characters; we do not know details about their background, their personality or motivations. The suppression of information encourages readers to fill in the blanks and gaps with gender stereotypes and conventions. Biblical fragmented women often depend on (and further strengthen) the binary-oppositions-based structuring of reality, in which women are contrasted with one another and evaluated as either good or bad.

Significantly, Exum's approach to fragmented women in the Bible is based on counter-reading them, i.e., on "piecing together some of the Bible's fragmented women's stories to create feminist (sub)versions of them" (14). As a variant of Roberts's metaphor of an inspiring female relationship (a looped and knotted string passed between women hands), "piecing together" is neither complacently geared to the reconstruction of some ultimate "truth" beyond differences nor dedicated to sustaining differences which feed rivalry.

In *The Wild Girl*, Michèle Roberts rewrites biblical representations of women, transforming conventional images of rivalry among women and competition established by the techniques of gynotypes and fragmentation. Relying on different re-visionary strategies (demystifying patriarchal assumptions, bringing together fragments of different texts and establishing a "countercoherence" (Bal 5), using imagination to reconstruct heroines), Roberts builds her biblical women as complex characters aware of both their powers and weaknesses, torn by conflicting emotions and concerned with their (often difficult) relationships with men and women around them. Her central character Mary Magdalene is pieced together from textual odds and ends scattered over canonical and gnostic gospels, the Book of Revelation, medieval hagiography and legends. It is through this "composite character", as the "Author's Note" describes Mary Magdalene, that Roberts examines the problem of difference-respecting bonds among women. Roberts explores it as pertaining both to an individual and a group, both to a group in ancient times and to WLM in the late twentieth century. Constructed as a patchwork of conventions and borrowed fragments (or as a pastiche, which Roberts considers "potentially subversive" (Sanchez 139), Magdalene is allowed to function in the novel (as she herself puts it), as "a mass of loose threads dangling, no longer belonging to the pattern [...she] formerly knew and was part of" (WG 120). By making Magdalene a composite character (and thus, by reproducing the popular image of "a conflated Mary" (Ehrman 191)), Roberts additionally explores at the level of form her central issue of unity and disharmony, of integration and division. It seems that unity is as precarious and as difficult to achieve for a character as it is for whole groups.

The Wild Girl tackles the problem of competition, division and bonding among women by rewriting Mary Magdalene, the biblical figure whose popular image of a reformed and repentant prostitute is the product of male imagination uncomfortable with the idea of women's sexuality and body (Ehrman 191–2). Counterbalancing this tradition, Roberts re-visions Magdalene in a feminist way, consciously using gender issues to de- and re-mythologise the character.

Like other conglomerated Magdalenes, hers is the woman anointing Jesus in Mark 14:3-9, the sister of Mary of Bethany and Lazarus, the siblings whose story is told in John 11:1-14, and the sister of Martha from Luke 10:38-42. The latter story is often interpreted as a positive text about women. As Shüssler Fiorenza argues, however, the latter text is usually employed to pit one group of women against another, or to foster rivalry between one type of life-model chosen by women and another. In the narrative, Mary prefers to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to him, rather than help Martha with the cooking and serving. When Martha loudly complains to Jesus, he replies that Martha frets about many things while one thing is needful, and he adds, "Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). Standard interpretations polarise the two women, first by making Martha stand for housewives who serve men, and Mary for contemplative women who serve God, and second, by making Mary's choice better than Martha's. Moreover, some interpreters read Jesus' response to Martha's plight as an unprecedented vindication of the right of women to abandon housework and to dedicate their lives to study. They do not notice, however, that Mary's "good portion" is only passive listening to a male authority rather than active proclamation of the good news. "In the course of the narrative, Martha, the independent and outspoken woman, is rebuffed in favour of the dependent Mary, who chooses the posture of a subordinate student. [...] Mary, who receives positive approval is the *silent* woman, whereas Martha, who argues in her own interest, is *silenced*" (Shüssler Fiorenza, *But* 62, emphasis in original). Also, though Luke 10:38-42 acknowledges women's membership in the Jesus movement and their support through their house-churches (like the sisters' place), it downplays women's apostolic leadership, showing their different "portions" as the only ones available. Thus, the text "reinforces the societal and ecclesiastical polarisation of women. Its proclamation denigrates women's work while insisting at the same time that housework and hospitality are women's proper roles" (Shüssler Fiorenza, *But* 69).

Lucan portrayal of the two sisters – so different from the depiction in John 11 and 12, where Martha and Mary are neither in competition with each other nor played against each other – chimes in with how Peter in *The Wild Girl* tries to antagonise the women. He emphasises differences between the sisters, indicating that Martha is "a woman of virtuous reputation" (WG 51) while Magdalene is a reformed prostitute, a worse sort of person. When after the "miracle" of the loaves and fishes Mary is jealous of Martha's success, Peter whispers in her ear, "The kingdom of heaven [...] is like a hearty curse,

rolled about on the tongue and savoured there before being spat out on the ground where it will take root and grow into a tree that two sisters may rest under" (WG 77). His tease has the opposite effect as Mary instantly forgets about the competition with her sister, and that night works in the kitchen while Martha rests near Jesus. By giving Peter the role of somebody who wants to exacerbate the difference between Mary and Martha, Roberts accentuates the role of patriarchy in undoing or impeding good relationships among women. By negatively valorising one group of women over another and sustaining such hierarchic discourse in public use, men managed to antagonise women both long ago in the Jesus movement, and quite recently at the beginning of the WLM.

Roberts re-writes the Lucan story of Jesus' visit to the sister's house in such a way as to attenuate its patriarchal shape. In the novel, it is not to Jesus, but to her brother Lazarus that Martha complains about being left alone in the kitchen. Jesus responds because he misunderstands Martha and later laughs at himself. Also, Jesus does not evaluate each woman's choice but merely tells Martha not to mind the clearing up. When Martha snaps back that she will have to wash all the dishes herself, "the men lumber to their feet and clumsily clear the table and pile the dishes, all the while looking to her for approval" (WG 35). Moreover, Martha turns to Lazarus with her request because she fears Mary will reveal to the men things they discuss when they are alone. So, in the novel, Martha is protecting the special relationship with her sister – their "times of intimacy" (WG 32) – rather than exposing some rift between them. Besides, Martha always declines Mary's offers of help, and Mary, who respects her sister's desire to be the queen in her kitchen kingdom, does not compete with her (WG 31).

Though in Roberts's re-writing of Luke 10:38-42 the dualism between the sisters is largely eliminated, it does not disappear from the Martha-Mary relationship altogether. Roberts repeatedly brings forth the problem of the rivalry between the sisters, emphasising that it is possible – though very hard – to build (if only precariously) the sense of sisterhood among women. In Bethany, both Martha and Mary think their way the superior one. Mary understands that their antagonism is something encoded in and validated by culture, and their roles of the housewife and the whore pitted one against the other. Consequently, at home, Martha and Mary, "as though by consent [...,] enact a dialogue of two sisters, the one anxious and emotional, the other uncaring and cold" (WG 31). When they join Jesus and start travelling, their roles are cancelled as neither prostitutes nor housewives are needed in

a community that shares both love and everyday chores. Though liberated from their roles, however, they sometimes still think about themselves in the old way. Martha glories in her housewifery-based success after the multiplication of bread (the loaves) and taunts Mary, saying her sister probably thinks "the housewife has not chosen the better part" (WG 76). Mary is jealous of Martha's success and feels "in competition with her, suddenly" (WG 76). It is as if only one of them could be the good sister, the other always having to be relegated to the lower position. But Martha is also very loyal, especially when she defends Mary against Peter's attacks after Jesus' death. She watches over Mary when she lies for three days in delirium. Unlike their brother Lazarus, who loosens the family ties and "puts [...his sisters] gently from him" (WG 127), Martha and Mary continue together through good and bad. Always conscious of their differences (one having dreams and visions, the other being the wise woman), they learn to cooperate and supplement each other. Mary reluctantly admits that if she is "to become good bread that might rise, [...] certainly she [i.e., Martha] was the yeast and salt in [...her]" (WG 77). Martha, in turn, follows Mary's vision rather than the one accepted by the rest of the community. There is no unanimity between them; instead, they learn to correct and support each other, allowing themselves to change places and "develop each other's strengths and pleasures" (WG 159). Later, Mary is the anxious housewife, while Martha sits still.

This changeable relationship, never altogether free from tensions, is best captured by an image of the sisters playing cat's cradle. On the ship, Mary "remembered the games that Martha and [...she] played when [...they] were children, passing a looped and knotted string between [...their] hands and constantly inventing fresh patterns with it" (WG 146–7). The image of the sisters taking it in turns to rearrange the string pattern created and spread on the partner's fingers, represents the model of women bonding which Roberts considers possible and desirable. It does not consist in acting in unison, but in modifying and developing the partner's vision – in twisting, dropping or grabbing the string held by the other woman, in making nooses where there were none before and undoing knots already tied. It is not based on rivalry because each woman needs the other's invention, patience and cooperation. The bond among women – symbolised by the string with which Martha and Mary play – is depicted by Roberts as repeatedly reworked, reimagined and readjusted. Insofar as the string they play with is a piece of Peter's fishnet, given to Mary as a farewell keepsake, their use of it to create and refashion patterns also represents women's reworking of the patriarchal tradition, their

playful engagement with what that tradition offers – the women's re-vision and rewriting of the biblical text.

The Wild Girl as an exploration of the WLM's problem of unity

As a metaphor of non-competitive relationship among women, the image of Martha and Mary playing cat's cradle is an answer/alternative to other images of female bonds, images which, on close scrutiny, turn out to be commentaries on ideals and problems of the WLM in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1970s – the decade associated with the outburst of the WLM in Britain – was a period of both great energy, hopefulness and enthusiasm, fuelled by the utopian belief in the possibility of deep-going social and cultural change, and of great turmoil, contention and internal friction, caused by the realisation of the many differences and splits among women. On the one hand, women saw themselves as strong together, as empowered by collaboration and agreement about the fundamental issues; on the other hand, they realised that coherence is not easy to achieve or maintain. Once the women's movement proclaimed its "defiant certainties [...], for a brief but formative time before acrimonious divisions hardened or broke hearts, the rebellious thrill of being in a new movement engendered both comfort and a dizzy excitement [...] for those involved" (O'Sullivan 97). Women agreed on basic common demands and organised common campaigns and actions, e.g., the first national WLM Conference in 1970; the London demonstration against the 1970 Miss World competition; the First International Women's Day March in 1971; the Ford sewing machinists' strike for equal pay in Dagenham in 1968; the Greenham Common protest against the UK's growing nuclear arsenal in the 1980s. They shared their experience in consciousness-raising groups and discovered a common pattern of discrimination (Gamble 174). Many years after the first national conference, which brought together more than five hundred participants, Juliet Mitchell observed that, despite the different strands making up the movement, "[i]n 1970, at Ruskin, we felt we had one goal, we were unified.... [We] could have one feminism. One women's liberation" (qtd. Thornham, 27). On the other hand, however, "[t]here was precious little unity. [...] The tribes spent more energy attacking one another than the enemy. All the leaders of feminist thought were subjected to unremitting shrewish vituperation from their 'sisters'. All of them were, truth to tell, essentially individualist thinkers and

writers, not mass-movement joiners" (Toynbee 2002). There was a growing recognition that some women are victims of white women's ethnocentric prejudices, and – as lesbians and working-class women started to perceive their differences from the feminist mainstream – that there are sex- and class-based differences between.

In *The Wild Girl*, Roberts rewrites passages from the Bible in such a way as to both inscribe them with utopian ideas of 1970s feminism and to scrutinise the complications and problems that those ideas engendered. By emphasising the complexity of female relationships, Roberts does not allow her representation of female bonding to be co-opted by the simplistic readings of the 1970s WLM, which describe feminism at that time as unitary, pure and uniquely vibrant, and which suggest that in later decades feminism was declining, falling apart or dying (cf. Dean 2010). Her Bible-mediated picture of women captures both the exhilaration of being and acting together, and the rifts that inevitably opened between individuals and sub-groups. In an iconic moment after the crucifixion, Roberts's female members of the Jesus movement (the movement depicted, *nota bene*, as a countercultural group, practising free homosexual and heterosexual love, using contraception, living in harmony with nature and rejecting violence), are not followed by other "sisters" (WG 134), who feel antagonised by Mary's behaviour and words. The novel does not overestimate the unity and coherence of feminist politics, as many melancholic narratives of feminism in the 1970s tend to do, but simultaneously lauds *and* problematises consensus. *The Wild Girl* re-visions and expands fragments from the Book of Revelation, into powerful, utopian images of female bonding, unity and of a historically grounded common action. What Roberts celebrates in this part of her rewriting, however, is critically dissected in other parts of the novel where she portrays the more dangerous, peremptory, indignant side of unity and where she problematises the essentialisation of the shared experience of discrimination. Through her apocalyptic dream-visions, Roberts brings together a reflection on events related to the 1970s women's movement and an articulation of the fears, anxieties and hopes that the decade produced and that still matter today.

One of Mary's visions is a very intricate combination of different parts of the Book of Revelation: there is an image of the Heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21-22:5; 17:18), whose harmony and perfection is lost; an image of the Great Babylon (Rev. 18), whose hypotextual gender symbolism is reversed, now signifying "the dark city" (WG 175) of male oppression and ignorant rejection of everything female; the image of the Beast (Rev. 17:8-18), explained as the

suppressed and powerful feminine part of the world; the image of prophetic calling (Rev.10:9-11) addressed to a woman. The gender-reversals of all those images culminate in an image of a multitude of women encircling the dark city and hoping to make it fall, Jericho-like, under the pressure of their cries of love. While the hypotext described the satanic mobilisation against the "beloved city" (Rev. 20:9), in Roberts's rewriting the image is that of women's admirable (albeit failed) attempt at reconciliation with men ("Do not envy us. Join with us" (WG 177)). Though their challenge to patriarchy is inefficient, in linking their hands and "lassooing the city with love" (WG 177), women display an admirable unanimity and perseverance in their common endeavour. In their sisterly feelings and unity, they resemble the Greenham Common women (a resemblance acknowledged by Roberts in the opening of *The Wild Girl*), who in their iconic action of encircling the air base demonstrated both their disagreement with Britain's growing nuclear arsenal and their power as a unified group.

By infusing the biblical narrative with the utopian elements of female unity and cooperation, Roberts corrects the text's customary polarisation of women and its stereotypical denigration of female sexuality. Simultaneously, however, by making women's common action contribute to the release of the Beast (a symbol of the destructive power of women), Roberts reminds readers of the dual potential of the indignation-based unity, and calls for a critical view of the feminist utopia. "We are not just a force for life [...]: we can also be a force of death" (WG 177), cry the women around the city. The re-visioned Beast is an imaginative way of posing a question about confronting and managing women's anger, about its constructive and destructive aspects, a question also asked in the 1970s. Rich ascertained that anger must be gone through, rather than suppressed or bypassed, as Virginia Woolf advised. Yet, anger must be also experienced wisely, Roberts seems to suggest, so that it does not consume us, "weakening the force of love [...] by [...its] hunger and rage" (WG 178). On the one hand, anger is a negative emotion, whose "against-ness" can entangle one completely with what one is angry about. On the other hand, anger motivates one to look for new solutions and re-visions of the past for the sake of the future. "Being against something is also being for something but something that has yet to be articulated or is not yet" (Ahmed 247).

The creative-destructive aspects of utopian unity are explored through other rewritten passages from the Bible. In the Book of Revelation, "a woman clothed with the sun" (Rev. 12:1), representing Mary or the Christian community, is opposed to "the great harlot" (Rev. 17:1), representing Babylon, Rome or other

persecutors of the faithful. As elsewhere in the Bible, in the Book of Revelation female sexuality becomes a vehicle of faithfulness – or lack thereof – to God. All that is sensual and tempting is projected onto the bodies of women, which comes to epitomise filth, whoredom and corruption; all that is desirable is symbolised through "the stereotyped purity of good femininity" (Keller 74). Roberts re-writes biblical passages about the sun-clad woman and the great harlot in ways that undo the earlier contrast and establish a bond between the saint and the sinner: as King explains, Roberts cancels here the opposition between sexuality and spirituality, thanks to which, in the absence of the contrast between the two, a virgin and a whore are united (112). In one of Mary's visions, which – like in the Book of Revelation – closes off the whole book, "a woman arrayed with the sun" (WG 178) takes her son, Jesus, and goes to meet the scarlet woman, who cries in her misery, fasting and praying in the wilderness. As Mary tells us, on finding "the mother of harlots", the sun-clad woman "held on to her with a strong grip, and did not let go. [...] Both of them looked steadily at each other, and at the child they held between them, and, opening their mouths, they spoke to each other of many things, and called each other sister" (WG 179). Roberts's re-writing emphasises the bonding of women across the divisions imposed on them by patriarchy and by its Bible-based gynotypical distinctions/evaluations of women, and indicates that the initiative necessary for building rivalry-free relations among women belongs to women themselves. The sun-clad, privileged woman "finds" (WG 179) the stigmatised, vilified woman, and shares with her the most precious part of herself and her life – her son, Jesus. The misery of another woman, "who had been signed as Babylon the Great" (WG 179), i.e., who was *designated* as evil, is alleviated by a compassionate, stereotype-defying "sister", who accepts her for what she is.

As a commentary on the feminist politics of the 1970s, this passage foregrounds the period's inspirational, sisterly dimension, developed through meetings, sharing experiences and giving accounts of one's life, i.e., by "speaking to each other of many things", characteristic of consciousness-raising (CR) groups. The novel's central device – having Mary tell her story in the first-person – capitalises on CR group meetings, namely on the device of private confession. Used by many "CR novels" of the 1970s, such a device of a retrospective narrative, a diary or memoir, in which the female character focuses on her own shortcomings and coming to self-realisation, is a fictionalised version of the CR philosophy (Pilcher and Whelehan 19). If CR was meant to collectivise women's experience, to establish rapport among

women, the passage – which resonates with such ideals – makes this bonding strikingly powerful because it operates on a deep, personal and spiritual level. Significantly, Roberts's rewriting also emphasises the fact that female bonding should happen despite women's different backgrounds (symbolised by the saint/sinner labels), not – as it was often the case in CR groups – because of their shared backgrounds. It is through stepping out of one's own social, class-based bubble that women can really see their problems as related to the structural problems of women in a society. This realisation may be especially pertinent today, in the highly individualised society of the twenty-first century, dominated by what Roberts calls "shoulderpads feminism" (the type of feminism which triumphed after Thatcher, "all about being an individual in a capitalist society. Put on your suit, go to the City, make a lot of money: it's all me, me, me" (Miller 2007)).

A community established on shared experience can be quite brittle, however, which is shown in the metaphor of a necklace of pearls strung by all women followers of Jesus. Different from the flexible cat's-cradle-string, the string of pearls represents stabilised (if not essentialised) "strong links" (WG 59) that women forge while travelling with Jesus. As a rewriting of the parable of the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:45-46), Roberts's pearls signify things that hurt; things that all women carry inside them and surround with songs or prayers, "just as an oyster surrounds the painful grit forced between its lips with layers of mother-of-pearl" (WG 59). Like members of the WLM, each of whom realises that they are not the only ones carrying the pearl of pain inside, but that there are many other similar women with whom they can bond, women in the Jesus movement first establish a sense of community on the basis of shared articulation of similar oppression. The pearl necklace symbolises a female community of hidden pain, a bond between cores of each woman's identity. When Peter says that "women are not worthy of life" (the infamous Saying 114 in the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*), he denies them the right to articulate the pain and breaks "the thread of the necklace, grinding the fragile, gleaming pearls into the dust at his feet" (WG 59). The patriarchal prejudice will repeatedly undo women's self-esteem and sense of community. While one can try to reconstruct the moment of unity, this would mean equating feminism with victimisation, a mistake often pointed out by postfeminists like Natasha Walter. This is where the image of the cat's cradle, of the repeated and ongoing reworking of women's relationships, comes in handy. Women could focus on *doing* their feminist work, calibrating it to their current situation. Like Mary and Martha concentrating on the current setting of strings on

their sister's hands, members of the women's movement start to focus on the current problems, questions and uncertainties. The point of the cat's cradle (and, analogically, of feminism as described by Roberts) is not to establish the *perfect pattern* that would be an icon of true unity, but to continue the activity to the mutual and shared satisfaction of the parties involved in the play.

Yet, the same unity and rivalry-free attitude characterises the behaviour of another group of women from Mary Magdalene's dream visions – women in the judgment hall, who read charges against a single man representing the whole of men in the world, and who unanimously pass judgment on him. The passage re-visions a part of the Book of Revelation in which the enthroned deity, equipped with books, is about to pass judgment on the dead (Rev. 20:11-20). In *The Wild Girl*, there is one man standing accused and a multitude of women judges, using books to pass judgment. The man is accused of various crimes against women: raping them, imprisoning them inside homes and traditions, enslaving them (literally and figuratively), denying them souls, independence and education, mutilating them to fit male patterns, etc. The women judges and prosecutors are united in their hatred and desire for retribution; like Mary, who remarks about herself that "[i]t was impossible for [...her] to remain apart" (WG 172), all the women join in the "mass cry" (WG 173) and demand the burning of men's books and destruction of their lies. With their "collective scarlet mouth" (WG 172), they want to "begin to tell [...their] own truth" (WG 173), which should replace the patriarchal lie. In the unanimity and clarity of their goal, they resemble feminists of the 1970s, who also had – if only for a brief moment – "a clear object (women), a clear goal (to change the fact of women's subordination), and even a clear definition (political struggle against the patriarchal oppression" (Kavka ix). The women in the judgment hall define themselves as a unified group, through sharing common experiences of oppression, marginalisation and humiliation. In that respect they mirror the utopian sense of sisterhood worked out by the women's movement of the 1970s, motivated by "a recognition that all women were to varying degrees the victims of oppression and a determination to remedy this", and which was also "sufficiently exciting and engaging [...] to mask any disagreement over how and why such oppression occurred" (Byrne 112). But there is something terrifying, menacing, even destructive, about their unity, something that – as Mary finds out – does not leave place for a different opinion. When Mary sees her own book being burnt together with men's books, and recognises the accused man as Jesus, she protests, but the women do not hear her. The situation from Mary's dream shows that staying tuned

to the subtle differences in the world as well as in one's group is necessary for women (also, *per analogiam*, for post-1970s feminists) unless they want to repeat the errors of patriarchy, whose monolithic character is achieved via the elimination of difference.

Significantly, those different visions of female bonding are followed by Mary's painful realisation that it was a dream. "There was no unity. The dream of harmony shattered into pieces like an earthenware jar thrown across the floor of my room. [...] And no healing unguent inside to flow out and heal me" (WG 179). Both the dreams of many women linking their hands and minds around a common idea (either love- or hate-based), and the utopian vision of two, long-antagonised women developing intimate relationships, seem now unreal and close to what Kavka calls "a fantasy of commonality" (x). Like feminists of the 1970s, Mary dreams of unity rather than lives it. By making both the destructive and constructive aspects of unity part of a *dream*, Roberts strengthens the sense of unity's ambivalence. Unity is a utopian dream insofar as it is not quite real – an articulation of a deeply lodged desire. It is a dream in the sense of being an enabling fiction which allows the building of a sense of commonality but which sometimes obscures material differences and problems. It is a dream in that it may contain troubling, totalising elements which must be carefully examined. Roberts's dream of unity – a complex idea, with hopes both entertained and imploded – seems an apt form for the exploration of the problem of women's communality.

Playing cat's cradle then and now

Unity may become "a normatizing concept that performs a range of exclusions at the levels of class, race, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality" (Kavka x). The act of shattering such unity is often a moment of sobering up and of search for another understanding of female relationships. In *The Wild Girl*, such new understanding is gestured towards when some of the female followers of Jesus part company with the rest of the group and travel to Europe. During the voyage, the four "sisters" (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, Martha and Salome) establish "a community of silence", which helps them to "return to inner peace and strength" (WG 145). The new sense of community and togetherness requires that the women abandon desire, pride, guilt, self-reproach and the sense of election. They work in a smaller, grass-root level community, focusing on local concerns, unperturbed by grand

projects on a Greenham-Common-like scale. As a moment of reproduction, reconsideration and re-vision of women collectivity, the post-crucifixion part of *The Wild Girl* invites linking it with the "abeyance" in feminism – a period of reduced visibility and mobilisation, a stage in which a social movement operates in an unobtrusive, unspectacular way, geared towards sustaining its basic ideas and networks (Bagguley 2002; Mackay 2008; Taylor 1989). As an imaginative exploration of an abeyance-like moment in feminism, the novel portrays this period as a salutary phase of rethinking one's past and opening towards the future. This is when Mary writes her gospel, a text in which she demythologises both patriarchal ideas about God or women, and women's ideas about themselves and their bonds. And this is when she pulls the many loose threads together – God, sexuality, creativity, emancipation – and plays cat's cradle with them.

In this part of the novel, women's bonds are dynamic as the sisters "change places" and "develop each other's strengths and pleasures" (WG 159). The dynamism is additionally symbolised by the relationship between Mary and her daughter Deborah, and between the oldest woman–the mother of Jesus–and the rest of them. Deborah wants both independence and affinity with her mother: "the invisible cord between us is still there" (WG 158) although it will be cut one day. As Mary metaphorically puts it, they "dance together, often awkwardly, and fumbling, and missing each other, and sometimes with a rhythm of understanding" (WG 158). Being with the ageing mother of Jesus "is both exhausting and invigorating" (WG 161), as the old woman pours out "sermons and curses and jokes in a spicy stream" (WG 161). All in all, both the redefined character of Magdalene's life and the shape of their community (its mothers-daughters relationships, which can be read as an optimistic image of the complex relations between different feminist generations), do not lie in "a clear unwavering outline" but in "a multitude of questions and uncertainties" (WG 162).

The novel itself is an exercise of cat's cradle play, which brings and loops together the Bible, feminism and their respective discontents. By couching Mary's proto-feminist visions in biblical images, Roberts ascribes to these visions a status and shaping power comparable to the power wielded by the Bible. Mary's *dreams* of women's unity and solidarity – her utopian "fantasy of commonality" (Kavka x) fashioned into a gospel – claim a stature similar to the prestige of biblical visions, which influenced generations of Christians and structured their thinking and imagination. To use the Bible in order to articulate the idea of women's bonding is to rely on a discourse that has already

given shape to religious and national communities: it is to rely on a book crucial for (re-)defining communities, a book evoked by many communities to authorise themselves. Insofar as the Bible is writing proclaimed and legitimised as authoritative by a community – a text which not only *makes* communities but also *is made by* communities, the scripture-like *The Wild Girl* can be construed as a novel which rewrites its hypotext's community-making potential in order to articulate a new sense of women's commonality. It is a feminist rewriting whose daring, critically utopian visions may still energise today's feminist projects and play the role of what Ricoeur calls the social imagination or myth (Coupe 87). The social imagination is based on the dialectic between "ideology" (understood as consolidation of ideas, as order, identity or tradition) and "utopia" (the urge to break through, to challenge or disrupt the current order). Myth feeds on "a tension between the way things seem to have always been and the way things might be" (Coupe 87). Mary's complex vision of female bonding presents the way things usually are for women and points towards some utopian, hope-full alternatives for them. In that respect, *The Wild Girl* is misconstrued when read as merely a titillating account of Jesus' romance, or as an enjoyable there-is-another-side-to-every-story narrative. As today rewritings (especially those by women) are likely to be perceived as celebrations of creativity, multiplicity and pluralism for their own sake (Plate 406), it is useful to return to Roberts's novel as to a text intent on pluralising the past in order to better describe the present and to re-imagine important coordinates of the future, and to see it as a novel set on re-visioning and keeping open the utopian idea of commonality. Roberts's novel subscribes to the idea that "utopia is only viable if it is left permanently open, contested, in contradiction with itself, if it is never put into practice as a static, codified entity, but remains a shifting landscape of possibility" (Sanders 4).

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. "Feminist Futures." *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*, edited by Mary Eagleton, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, pp. 236–254.

Bagguley, Paul. "Contemporary British Feminism: A Social Movement in Abeyance?" *Social Movement Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2002, pp. 169–185.

Bal, Mieke. *Death and Dissymmetry. The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Byrne, Paul. *Social Movements in Britain*. London & New York: Routledge, 1997.

Caine, Barbara. *English Feminism, 1780–1980*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Coupe, Laurence. *Myth*. London, New York: Routledge, 2009.

Dean, Jonathan. *Rethinking Contemporary Feminist Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Ehrman, Bart. *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legends*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Exum, Cheryl. *Fragmented Women. Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narrative*. Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 1993.

Fuchs, Esther. *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003.

Gamble, Sarah. "Postfeminism." *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, edited by Sarah Gamble, London & New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 36–45.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Kavka, Misha. "Introduction." *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, edited by Elisabeth Bronfen, Misha Kavka, New York: Columbia UP, 2001, pp. ix-xxvi.

Keller, Catherine. *Apocalypse Now and Then. A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

King, Jeanette. *Women and the Word. Contemporary Women Novelists and the Bible*. London: Macmillan, 2000.

Mackay, Fiona. "The State of Women's Movement/s in Britain. Ambiguity, Complexity and Challenges From the Periphery." *Women's Movements. Flourishing or in Abeyance?* edited by Sandra Grey and Marian Sawer, New York: Routledge, 2008, pp.17–32

Miller, Lucasta. "Take Risks-Interview." *The Guardian*, 14 July 2007. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jul/14/fiction.women.

Moraru, Christian. *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001.

O'Sullivan, Sue. "What a Difference a Decade Makes: *Coming to Power* and *The Second Coming*." *Feminist Review*, vol. 61, 1999, pp. 97–126.

Pardes, Ilana. *Countertraditions in the Bible. A Feminist Approach*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Pilcher, Jane and Imelda Whelehan. *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. London, Thousand Oakes, New Delhi: Sage, 2004.

Plate, Liedeke. "Remembering the Future; or, Whatever Happened to Re-Vision?" *Signs*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2008, pp. 389–411.

Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *College English*, vol. 34, no.1, 1972, pp.18–30.

Roberts, Michèle. *The Wild Girl*. 1984. London: Minerva, 1991.

Sanders, Lise. "Feminists Love a Utopia: Collaboration, Conflict and the Futures of Feminism." *Third Wave Feminism A Critical Exploration*, edited by Stacy Gillis and Gillian Howie, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 3–15.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth. *But She Said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

---. "Introduction: Transforming the Legacy of *The Woman's Bible*." *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction,* edited by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001, pp. 1–24.

Taylor, Verta. "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance." *American Sociological Review,* vol. 54, no. 5, 1989, pp. 761–775.

Thornham, Sue. "Second-Wave Feminism." *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, edited by Sarah Gamble, London & New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 25–35.

Toynbee, Polly. "The Myth of Women's Lib." *The Guardian*, 6 June 2002. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jun/06/gender.pollytoynbee.

EWA RYCHTER holds a doctorate degree in literary theory and a post-diploma degree in Biblical Studies. She is the author of two monographs – *The Echoing Myth. British Biblical Rewritings in Context, 1980s–2010s* (forthcoming), and *(Un)Saying the Other* (Frankfurt 2004), editor of a volume of essays on post-theory (in Polish) *Po[granicza] teorii* (Walbrzych 2010), editor of *Beyond 2000: The Recent Novel in English* (Walbrzych 2011), and co-editor of a scholarly journal *Orbis Linguarum*. She is also the author of more than thirty articles on literary theory, contemporary philosophy, the Bible in contemporary culture, as well as on contemporary British fiction.
erychter@pwsz.com.pl

Rychter, Ewa, 2021. "Passing a looped and knotted string between their hands". The Bible, the Women's Liberation Movement and Women's Bonds in Michèle Roberts's *The Wild Girl*. *Prague Journal of English Studies*, Volume 10, Number 1, pages 23-41. doi: 10.2478/pjes-2021-0002

In the published version of this article, an in-text reference to my then forthcoming book has been mistakenly omitted. Such reference should be included on p. 25, and contain the information that a much extended version of the argument about the way in which Roberts's novel represents the WLM can be found in my monograph *The Echoing Myth. British Biblical Rewritings in Context, 1980s–2010s*. When the article was submitted, the monograph was at the early stages of the publication process. Ultimately, the book was published by Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego (Katowice, Poland) at the end of 2021.

DOI: 10.2478/pjes-2021-0008