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► To cite this version:

Claire Sorin Delpuech, Laurence Lux-Sterritt. Women and Spirituality in 20th-Century Writing: an Exploration into the Fiction of Virginia Woolf, Michèle Roberts, Sara Maitland, Gail Godwin and Toni Morrison. *E-rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone*, 2011, 8.2, 10.4000/erea.1732 . hal-01687693

HAL Id: hal-01687693

<https://hal.science/hal-01687693>

Submitted on 18 Jan 2018

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/1732>

DOI: 10.4000/erea.1732

ISSN: 1638-1718

Publisher

Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone

Brought to you by Aix-Marseille Université (AMU)



Electronic reference

Claire SORIN and Laurence LUX-STERRITT, « Women and Spirituality in 20th-Century Writing: an Exploration into the Fiction of Virginia Woolf, Michèle Roberts, Sara Maitland, Gail Godwin and Toni Morrison », *E-rea* [Online], 8.2 | 2011, Online since 28 March 2011, connection on 18 January 2018.

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/1732> ; DOI : 10.4000/erea.1732

This text was automatically generated on 18 January 2018.



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Women and Spirituality in 20th-Century Writing: an Exploration into the Fiction of Virginia Woolf, Michèle Roberts, Sara Maitland, Gail Godwin and Toni Morrison

Foreword

Claire SORIN and Laurence LUX-STERRITT

- 1 The following essays were initially presented at the international conference on Women and Spirituality, which was organized by Laurence Lux-Sterritt and Claire Sorin (Université de Provence, LERMA) in June 2009. In the context of this event, spirituality was to be understood as a broad notion encompassing personal and/or institutionalized relations to the divine, a notion that at once included and transcended religion. The purpose of the conference was to explore the diversity and specificity of female spirituality in the English-speaking world as well as focus on some of the complex positions that women have occupied in religious institutions since the 17th century. This interdisciplinary conference, which welcomed specialists in religion, history and literature as well as members of religious communities, allowed fruitful exchanges and provoked many fascinating and sometimes emotional discussions. The conclusions were that in terms of freedom and equality within the religious structures, 21st-century women still have a long way to go because of lingering and deeply rooted prejudices; at the same time, it was made clear that women's relations to spiritual and church authority had to be closely examined in each historical context in order to avoid sweeping and false generalizations. For example, the fact that women systematically occupy inferior positions in male-dominated institutions needs qualifying and the commonly-held belief that modern feminism and religion are antithetical is simply not true, as is demonstrated in the following articles. This selection of essays focuses on three British and two

American 20th-century women writers whose fictional works explore the interconnections between women and spirituality from different angles, and yet with striking underlying similarities.

- 2 The questioning of an immutable, omniscient and omnipotent God, the loss of a sense of coherence, unity and meaning, which modernism and postmodernism reflect, profoundly altered the conceptions of the self, the divine and the sacred in the course of the 20th-century. The post World War II period in particular represents a distinctive landmark in this global context of transformation. For sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who analysed the evolution of religiosity in America since the 1950s, the counterculture of the 1960s and the evolving social infrastructure of the decade entailed “a profound change in [...] spiritual practices” (3). Wuthnow contends that the 1950s were characterized by regular attendance at worship and a “traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred spaces” (3) which reflected the period’s quest for stability and which he identifies as a *spirituality of dwelling*. In contrast, there emerged in the subsequent decades a new understanding of community and of the sacred which produced what he calls a *spirituality of seeking*. Involving negotiation rather than habitation, the individual rather than the congregation, the spirituality of seeking rejects fixed and hierarchical forms of worshipping and is practiced by people who “explore new spiritual vistas,” and seek “sacred moments that reinforce their conviction that the divine exists” (4). To some extent, we can say that the present collection of essays (including that on Virginia Woolf) illustrates this individual-oriented, fluid and unclassifiable way of practising or relating to religion and spirituality.
- 3 In the social and cultural turmoil of the 1960s, it could be argued that the second wave of the feminist movement forcefully contributed to the shift from a spirituality of dwelling to a spirituality of seeking. On both sides of the Atlantic, a number of women’s rights advocates and religious scholars tried to figure out how feminist issues could relate to religion and spirituality. This gave rise to a powerful (although not entirely new) feminist critique of established religion as a sexist system denigrating women. While many activists came to the conclusion that they simply could not reconcile their faith to their feminism, others managed to renegotiate their relations to religion and /or spirituality, either within or beyond the frame of Christianity. Michèle Roberts and Sara Maitland, whose fiction Arina Lungu examines in this issue, are living and complex examples of how differently individual activists managed to articulate feminism and faith. Actually, it seems that at some point and in their own ways, all the writers considered here had to confront the positioning of their own spirituality in a male-defined society.
- 4 While feminists criticized and rejected the historical and established form of religion, many envisioned feminism *itself* as a kind of religion and developed a feminist spirituality which was both personal and community oriented. As American scholar Gayle Graham Yates noted back in 1983:

Feminist spirituality [...] parallels the many other facets of feminism now active in America and has (1) far-reaching implications for personal awareness and behaviour of women; (2) expressions in individual and corporate actions that bear ethical significance; (3) institutional forms and effects on institutions; (4) symbolic, mythic, ritual, literary, and aesthetic meaning; and (5) cognitive import and expressions. If one believes, as I do, that feminism is a new world view, then the spiritual aspect of it has ramifications in every aspect of life. (60-61)
- 5 Through the work of influential scholars such as Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether or Carol P. Christ, a feminist rewriting of women’s religious history took place and

theological alternatives developed. Women-centred theology grounding spirituality in nature, the earth and the body, challenged a patriarchal God and culminated in neo-paganism and the Goddess movement which became widespread not only in North America but also in Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

- 6 The five authors studied here have a connexion to feminism; not all of them were actual activists but all of them definitely promote a feminist consciousness. This means that their fiction, to varying degrees, is shaped by the awareness that the western patriarchal and religious systems have consistently endeavoured to keep women silent, inferior and invisible. Thus, Virginia Woolf points to this invisibility through the spectre of Shakespeare's sister; Michèle Roberts and Sara Maitland's quests for space are reactions to male-defined religious landscapes; Gail Godwin's powerful spiritual heroine, Margaret, rehabilitates the strength of women within the Church; and Toni Morrison's revision of the Biblical script is inscribed in a feminist, or rather womanist, logic.
- 7 Yet, although the fictional works under study evidence a feminist consciousness, they do not systematically extol feminist, non-Christian or neo-pagan forms of spirituality. In "Reincarnating Shakespeare's sister: Virginia Woolf and the 'uncircumscribed' spirit of fiction," Naomi Toth's insightful analysis of Woolf's definition of spirit, fiction and femininity does not simply posit the female body as a privileged vector of spirituality. Woolf's ambiguous discourse on gender, it seems, ultimately seeks to transcend this category. Elaine Lux and Arina Lungu show that, in spite of different perspectives, the fiction of Gail Godwin, Michèle Roberts and Sara Maitland is primarily shaped by Christian spirituality. Finally, Claude le Fustec, in her exploration of Toni Morrison's novels (from *The Bluest Eye* to *Paradise*), notices a movement away from "the disabling function of the myth of the fall [...] to the enabling power of the Christian teaching of love [...]." The tendency to inscribe and explore women and spirituality issues within, rather than without, a Christian frame seems to confirm Heather Ingman's finding that many 20th-century women writers try to preserve a dialogue between traditional religious discourse and women's contemporary religious and spiritual experience.
- 8 Thus, it is with a literature of renegotiation rather than rejection that we ultimately seem to be dealing with. This renegotiation involves an imaginative rewriting of the traditional religious script, capable of accommodating and giving meaning to the female experiences of spirituality. The "restorying" process revisits and shapes myths, spaces, mystical heroines, and spiritual journeys through predominantly female characters. The quest for space is problematic in Michèle Roberts's fiction, which, in its denunciation of Christian space as enclosure, explores the ambivalent spaces of the House and the Wood without succeeding in locating an ideal place for female spirituality. Sara Maitland chooses to enlarge the space of the church by introducing a symbolic transgression liable to expand its boundaries and accommodate all the communities of the outcasts. Maitland's challenge to the exclusionary power of church space is echoed by Toni Morrison's denunciation of the exclusionary power of myth and of the myth of the fall, in particular, which works as a symbol of the African American community's alienation. In most of the novels examined, biblical stories, such those of Adam and Eve, Ruth, Hagar, or Jonah's journey, are the objects of a subtle yet thorough revision which sometimes generates empowered female characters. For example, Elaine Lux shows that Gail Godwin's characters, Margaret and Magda, may be interpreted as types of Christ. Through what Claude le Fustec calls a "womanist gospel of self knowledge," Toni Morrison's black

women characters in *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* embark on a quest for enlightenment and wholeness which culminates in the wisdom of the mystical heroine Consolata.

- 9 Yet a puzzling question to settle for all the articles is how to define a specifically *female* spirituality. Elaine Lux writes that “Godwin herself is not sure that women’s spirituality is different from that of men.” Naomi Toth underlines Virginia Woolf’s ambiguous discourse about gender and its relation to spirit and reality, noting that “at no point does Woolf attempt to determine what that authentically female relation to reality might be.” More generally, in the fiction under study, the specifically female experience of motherhood does not seem to be exploited as a privileged channel to the divine or the sacred. The capacity for mothering that some, such as Carol Ochs, have deemed central in a context of female spirituality (28) is not consistently presented here as a redeeming gift. Although they may be mothers, these heroines’ encounters with spirituality, such as they are presented in the following essays, rather seem to engage them as sisters, wives or daughters. Virginia Woolf does not conjure up the spectre of Shakespeare’s mother and yet urges the female writer to “think back through our mothers;” Arina Lungu, in her study of Roberts’s novel *Daughters of the House*, focuses on girls’ experiences; Elaine Lux deals with Margaret’s difficult childhood and Magda seems childless; Claude le Fustec’s essay comments on infanticide. The capacity for mothering is present, however, in a metaphorical way, through creative, imaginative and visionary powers which give birth to revelations, a sense of temporal and spatial immediacy (“here” and “now”) or “moments of vision.” Those imaginative and visionary powers also engage, of course, the very act of writing which becomes itself a form of prayer, of spiritual journey transcending gender and reaching out to a universal dimension which at once dissolves and reveals the gendered self.

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