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**SARA MAITLAND AND MICHÈLE ROBERTS:**

**RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH WOMEN'S  
FICTION**

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**SARA MAITLAND AND MICHÈLE ROBERTS:  
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FICTION**

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis argues that the fiction of Sara Maitland and Michèle Roberts makes a major contribution to contemporary British women's writing, a contribution which has until now been largely under-estimated by its critical audience. It demonstrates this through an exploration of the interconnections between literature, religion, psychoanalysis and feminism in their work, focusing primarily on Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem* (1978) and *Virgin Territory* (1984), and Roberts' *The Visitation* (1983), *The Wild Girl* (1984) and *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987). Chapter One outlines the cultural and literary traditions from which Maitland and Roberts emerge, with special attention paid to their better-known contemporaries, Edna O'Brien and Margaret Drabble, and to Jane Gardam's work which is situated in bordering terrain. Chapter Two examines *The Wild Girl* in relation to discussions of dualism and binarism in feminist theology and French feminist theory. Chapter Three compares representations of Christ in *The Wild Girl* and *Virgin Territory* with those found in Julia O'Faolain's *Women in the Wall* and Iris Murdoch's *Nuns and Soldiers* to indicate Maitland's and Roberts' contributions to the project of refiguring Christ in ways that make him more relevant to today's Christian women. Chapter Four focuses on *Virgin Territory* which invokes a Lacanian/Kristevan framework in its depiction of the autonomous virgin. Chapter Five explores the implications of the biblical Visitation for contemporary women and notions of sisterhood as they are represented in Maitland's and Roberts' long fiction, especially *The Visitation*. Chapter Six examines the religious and spiritual dimensions of motherhood in relation to *Daughter of Jerusalem*. Chapter Seven analyses Roberts' study of motherhood which uses the ark as a symbol of feminine creativity in *The Book of Mrs Noah*. Chapter One provides a context for Maitland's and Roberts' work; Chapters Two and Three take up some general issues about the relationship between Christianity, Christ, sexuality and women; Chapters Four and Five focus on women's roles as daughters and sisters; and Chapters Six and Seven centre on the theme of motherhood.