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Motherhood in the Work of Marie NDiaye: Modernising the Madonna and Medea

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Abstract. Two outstanding exemplars of motherhood exist in Western literature: Medea, the epitome of the bad mother in that she murders her two sons as an act of revenge for her betrayal by her husband, and Virgin Mary, idealised not just as a good mother, but as a model of perfection in motherhood. Both Medea and the Madonna have been the subject of reinterpretation over the centuries, a process that continues today. The contemporary French novelist Marie NDiaye has referenced these two iconic figures in the three novels discussed in this essay: La *femme changée en bûche* (1989), *Rosie Carpe* (2001) and *La vengeance m'appartient* (2021). This paper builds on previous analyses of the first two novels by exploring the portrayal of the mother, Marlyne, who features in *La Vengeance m'appartient*. In this novel the archetypal figure of Medea makes an active re-appearance, twenty years after her presence first emerged into NDiaye's novelistic universe, and the reader is invited to consider the motivation of a mother who murders her three children and to ask where the blame for this act, to which the mother freely confesses, should lie. The aim of this paper is not to give an answer to that question (which would be contrary to the spirit of the novel) but to posit lines of interpretation which probe the literary representation of the mother.
Keywords: mothers, motherhood, Medea, Madonna, infanticide.

Motinystė Marie NDiaye prozoje: šiuolaikinė Medėja ir Mergelė Marija

Santrauka. Vakarų literatūroje vyrauja du motinystės vaizdiniai: Medėja, blogos motinos įkūnijimas, nes ji nužudo savo sūnus, keršydama už vyro išdavystę, ir Mergelė Marija, idealizuojama ne tik kaip gera motina, bet ir kaip motinystės tobulumo modelis. Tiek Medėjos, tiek Mergelės Marijos kultūriniai modeliai šimtmečius buvo ir tebėra interpretuojami iš naujo. Šiuolaikinė prancūzų rašytoja Marie NDiaye šias dvi ikonines figūras pasitelkia trijuose straipsnyje aptariamuose romanuose: „La femme changée en bûche" (1989), „Rosie Carpe" (2001) ir „La vengeance m'appartient" (2021). Romane „La Vengeance m'appartient" išskleidžiamas motinos Marlyne portretas nagrinėjamas remiantis pirmųjų dviejų romanų analize. Archetipinė Medėjos figūra romane aktyviai pasirodo praėjus dvidešimčiai metų po to, kai ji pirmą kartą iškilo NDiaye grožinėje visatoje, o skaitytojas kviečiamas susimąstyti apie motinos, nužudžiusios tris savo vaikus, motyvaciją ir klausti, kas kaltas dėl tokio poelgio. Analizės tikslas – ne atsakyti į šį klausimą (tai prieštarautų romano dvasiai), bet aptarti interpretacijos galimybes, kurios suproblemina literatūrinį motinos vaizdavimą.
Reikšminiai žodžiai: motinos, motinystė, Medėja, Mergelė Marija, vaikžudystė.

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Introduction

Two outstanding exemplars of motherhood exist in Western literature. The first in time is Medea, a mythological figure crystallised within the classical literary canon by the fifth-century-BCE Greek dramatist, Euripides. She is the epitome of the bad mother in that she murders her two sons as an act of revenge for her betrayal by her husband. Some five hundred years later, so the Christian tradition tells us, a young woman named Mary, a virgin, gave birth to a son, Jesus Christ, who was the Son of God. Mary is idealised not just as a good mother, but as a model of perfection in motherhood. Both Medea and Madonna have been the subject of reinterpretation over the centuries, a process that continues today. Both are essentially constructs of men. Euripides might be said to have been exploring issues of justice around the relationships between men and women; theological scholars within the Christian religion were using intelligence, logic and faith to create a human vision of the mother of God. Today, our attitudes to both these figures are mixed and constantly undergoing re-evaluation. If no modern mother would see herself in either of these archetypes it is none the less certain that what they stand for continues to lurk in the maternal consciousness, the eternal good mother and the eternal bad mother, the mother who gives birth to eternal life and the mother who deals out death to the fruits of her womb. It is against these ancient models that a contemporary young mother may, despite herself, see herself.

The contemporary French novelist Marie NDiaye has referenced these two iconic figures, not by name, but nonetheless specifically, in the first two novels which I discuss below. I see them as representative of the extremes of the continuum of mothering behaviour which runs from perfect maternal devotion to the horror which is the murder by a mother of her own children. They are a subtext to a novelistic œuvre which prominently features mothers whose behaviour has been subject to much critical commentary, which has often seen the author as focussed on abusive mothering. Previous research has shown NDiaye's treatment of mothers to be subtle and nuanced, and to incorporate the sort of uncertainty around the maternal identity to which everyday mothers may be subject but which they may be reluctant to admit or express. The purpose of this paper is to set out some of that earlier research and to then consider her latest novel (at the time of writing) in relation to it. The question is whether the latest novel, which, as I shall explain, takes one of its protagonist mothers into territory only previously tentatively explored, reinforces or contradicts the earlier work. There is however a word of warning for those new to the work of NDiaye. She will not herself provide answers to the questions raised by her work. She has stated that she does not 'tie up ends' since that is not what happens in life.[1] This means that research into her writing is an exploration not an explanation, and the sense that life is never quite explicable enables a richness of potential interpretation as commentaries to date have shown.

[1] 'Un livre ne doit pas forcément être bien bouclé. C'est un peu ça, la vraie vie'. (Jocksan, 2017, p. CXVII).

Background

Marie NDiaye was born in France in 1967 to a white French mother and a black Senegalese father, who left the family home when she was a small child. She is the mother of three children. Her output comprises novels, plays, books for children, screenplays and an operatic libretto. She is the recipient of the Femina and Goncourt literary prizes and was a nominee for the International Man Booker prize. Her work often explores the problems to which a mixed-race heritage gives rise and very many of her female protagonists are mothers. I have already explored the way in which the figures of Medea and the Madonna are reflected in her texts (2021). Their respective and intertwined auras of evil and goodness are echoed, more or less overtly, in the representation of the mothering behaviour of many of her characters. This paper discusses three works in which there are clear allusions to either Medea or Madonna, but it should be noted that these differently idealised women are echoed in her other texts.

The mothers discussed in this paper appear in three novels by Marie NDiaye, which are *La femme changée en bûche* (1989), *Rosie Carpe* (2001) and *La vengeance m'appartient* (2021). The first novel exposes us primarily and very clearly to the Medea reference and the second brings in, equally indisputably, the Madonna, the Virgin Mary. My earlier work on these two novels, which I summarise below, shows that each of these 'extreme mothers' is present within the other and how the devotion of the Madonna can be a route to disaster, while the monstrosity of Medea does not deny the existence of maternal love. Other critiques of NDiaye's work have naturally included discussion of the behaviour of the mothers who feature in these novels and, generally, their focus has been on the abusive, not to say monstrous, aspects of the behaviour of the maternal protagonists.[2] This paper builds on the analysis of the earlier two novels by exploring the portrayal of the mother, Marlyne, who features in the third, *La Vengeance m'appartient*. In this novel the archetypal figure of Medea makes, through the portrayal of Marlyne, an active re-appearance, twenty years after her presence first emerged into NDiaye's novelistic universe in *La femme changée en bûche,* and the reader is invited to consider the motivation of a mother who murders her three children and to ask where the blame for this act, to which the mother freely confesses, should lie. The aim of this paper is not to give an answer to that question (which would be contrary to the spirit of the novel) but to posit lines of interpretation which probe the literary representation of the mother.

Medea and *La femme changée en bûche*

La femme changée en bûche is NDiaye's third novel and the first to feature a mother, which all her later novels will do. As Andrew Asibong has remarked, the novel is "a bizarre mixture of styles, tones and genres" (Asibong, 2013, p.48). The story contains some biting, satirical representation of everyday life in the second half of the twentieth century and, at the same time, draws us into the fantastic, as its title, which translates into Eng-

[2] See for example Rabaté, 2008.

lish as *The Woman Who Changed into a Log*, suggests Its evocation of the mythological figure of Medea is crucial to the story's development, even though the relevant episode is concluded by the end of page 23.

The first-person narrator of the novel is not named, and I refer to her simply as F. She has a baby, from whom she is presented as inseparable. F.'s husband plans to leave her for another woman, and to take their offspring with him, paralleling the situation between Medea and Jason at the start of Euripides' play, from which later reworkings of the myth frequently derive. F. had earlier undertaken some unspeakable act with the Devil, in order to help her husband, and in return she had asked him to swear fidelity to her. Medea committed some dreadful acts to help Jason to steal the Golden Fleece. Like F. with her husband, Medea has bound Jason to her with oaths. He breaks these by arranging to marry the Princess of Corinth but wants custody of their two sons. Both Medea and F. want to punish their husbands for breaching their oaths and see the only punishment that will strike home as the killing of their children, whom both husbands love. That wrong has been done to these two women is verified by the chorus of women in the drama of Euripides and by F.'s friend Valérie in NDiaye's novel. The wrong done fully validates the anger and distress of the mothers, and their personal sense of having suffered an injustice.

The intertextual evocation of Medea as a mythological equivalent of F. is not explicit but is clearly signalled by the above parallels and by a specific link. The link is the use both women make of garments magically imbued with a deadly poison. F. dresses her baby in a pretty, delicate garment provided at her request by the Devil. Leaving the child, she briefly hears the crackle of the flames which immediately and painlessly consume it. Medea sends a poisoned robe to her husband's new fiancée. When she puts it on, it corrodes her flesh, and she dies in agony: Medea then kills her own sons with her own hands.

F.'s killing of her baby could not, of course, have taken place in the real world in which we have assumed her to be living. I read this event as taking place in fantasy, in F.'s mind, which becomes increasingly disturbed as her story develops. NDiaye's representation of F. shows her as closely bonded with her baby, who is always either in her arms or at her side. After the baby's death F. describes herself as feeling ''soulagée et extrêmement pitoyable'' [''relieved and extremely pitiable''][3], a combination of emotions indicating relief at no longer having to be a mother, and having carried out the required judicial act, following which ''toute chose avait repris son ordre'' [''everything was back as it should be''] (*Femme*, p. 23). She is deserving of pity, because the child for whom she felt tenderness is dead, but she is also relieved to have done what she sees as the right thing, and to be herself again, a single woman with freedom to live her own life.

Medea is a more powerful figure than F. and it is arguably easier for the reader to relate to her than to the "watered down" version that is F.. Euripides is at pains to emphasize not just the horror of the murder Medea commits but also her intense physical and sensuous love of her children. This passionate, eloquently expressed, love makes it more difficult for Medea to commit the murder than it appears to be for F. to carry out her own act of

[3] This, and all translations in this paper, are my own.

infanticide. NDiaye renders F.'s thoughts in flat language which almost denies her any true emotional involvement. Asibong sums F. up as ''the most psychotically affectless of all NDiaye's protagonists to date'' (Asibong, 2013, p. 47). Medea, a princess in her own country, is recognised and feared as a powerful sorceress, and is accustomed to turning events to her own ends. She is something of a celebrity, whereas F. is a social nonentity. There is a question here as to whether we read F. as truly lacking in emotion, or whether we accept her few words about her tenderness for the child and her constant care of it, as expressing real maternal love. There may be a certain snobbery in not doing so, especially given that her concern that justice, as she sees it, should be done fully matches that of Medea.

Medea's act is a monstrous one, but she does not repent and escapes any consequences. That, perhaps, is what has enshrined her in the public mind as a monster. F.s future after the killing entails the temporary loss of her humanity as she metamorphoses into a log. The seeming lack of depth in F.s emotions, when read against the intensity of Medea, prompts reflection on what might justify a woman in killing her child or at least might drive her to feel that she must do it. Arguably, for Medea and for F., the demands of justice are more powerful and a stronger moral imperative than their maternal love. I shall return to this question later, but I would like readers to bear in mind, when thinking of F., and when thinking about our next character, Rosie Carpe, that wishing that you had never had children, wishing your baby might simply vanish, as if it had never been, or wishing that you could be the woman that you were before you had children, is not the same as actively deciding to kill a child that you have borne. Significantly, too, the wish that you could be without your child, once it exists, is not readily or easily expressed by a mother.

The death, or disappearance, of their child is, I believe, a fantasy that, for diverse reasons, may lurk in the minds of many mothers, and NDiaye, in choosing to set this baby's death within a fantastic scenario can be seen as providing a symbolic image that crystallises the superstitious fears of mothers that they might occasion the death of their baby by visualising what their life might be without it.

The Madonna and *Rosie Carpe*

Rosie Carpe, the eponymous central character of NDiaye's 2001 novel *Rosie Carpe*, is represented overtly against the eternal model of the Madonna, the Virgin Mary. Rosie herself makes the identification, and the narration parallels their stories delicately but deliberately. Nonetheless, the apparently devoted mother, Rosie, almost causes the death of her baby son Titi, and this event, contrary to F.'s infanticidal act, occurs in recognisably realistic social circumstances.

Rosie is the single mother of a little boy called Titi. We learn about Titi's conception and his early life in a long flashback but framing that part of the text is Rosie's statement that she is pregnant but does not know who the father of the baby is. She explains that something she did not understand happened, after which she found herself to be pregnant. Inwardly, she believes this to be ''une conception immaculée, la grainé jetée par

un parfait esprit un soir ou un autre de décembre, mais avant Noël, un peu avant Noël. Celui-ci sera mon saint enfant" ["an immaculate conception, the seed sown by a perfect spirit, one evening or another in December, but before Christmas, a bit before Christmas. This one will be my holy child"] (*Rosie Carpe*, p. 23). The reference to the Virgin Mary, although confused, is obvious. When Titi was conceived, Rosie was being filmed having sex for the purposes of a pornographic film. She sees Titi's conception as tainted but as the conception of the child that she is now expecting (later miscarried) is free of this taint, it is, for Rosie, "immaculate".

Having been introduced to Rosie as a modern Virgin Mary we read the description of her early life with Titi, which follows, with that model in our minds. Rosie as the mother of Titi as a new baby behaves as an "ordinarily devoted mother", a phrase devised by the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott to describe a mother who does with love all that she needs to do to properly care for her baby (Winnicott, 1991, p.10). Things go wrong for Rosie and Titi when Rosie's breast milk suddenly dries up and the baby, until then breastfeeding on demand, refuses stubbornly and violently to take the bottle that Rosie repeatedly offers him.

Rosie becomes exhausted by her efforts to get the baby to feed and by his relentless crying. Sleep-deprived, she is relieved when Titi finally stops crying. 'Il était bon d'être soi-même de nouveau' ["It was good to be herself again"] (NDiaye, 2001, p.114). She ceases to resist the child's decline and, renouncing all responsibility for what is happening, exclaims to herself inwardly: "C'est un tel fardeau que de devoir faire ce que je dois faire! Si on pouvait m'en délivrer ne serait-ce qu'une journée !" ["It is such a burden to have to do what I have to do! If only someone would relieve me of it, if only for a day!"] (*ibid*., p. 119).

Rosie is not saying that she wants her baby to die. She is wishing that she could be briefly relieved of her sole responsibility for his care. We need to recognise, however, that there is a continuum of emotion leading from the desire to be relieved of one's baby to the extreme point of deciding to kill it and carrying out that act. Many new mothers, who do not kill their babies or allow them to die, would echo Rosie's unheard plea to be relieved of her burden and would understand that the plea goes unheard and no help comes. Most mothers would be at least reluctant to voice Rosie's thoughts out loud. Within the mother/baby dyad the responsibility for the baby's survival lies with its mother. This responsibility, which the mother cannot shed, may be accompanied, in the darker recesses of her mind, by the desire that the baby should no longer be there and that she should once again be free. F. is certainly not unusual in regretting her identity as a single woman and wanting it back. Rosie, who acknowledges the pleasure of suddenly being her own self again when Titi sleeps, asks in this episode, only temporary relief from her inescapable tie to her baby, not its permanent severance.[4] NDiaye's narrative stresses the exclusivity of the bond between this mother and her child, and it is arguably their emotional and to a degree physical isolation which are key drivers of Rosie's behaviour. The reader must

[4] A later episode in the narrative of *Rosie Carpe,* where Rosie deliberately abandons a sick Titi so that she can visit the cinema challengingly shows Rosie still confusedly but consciously linking herself to the Virgin Mary. For a discussion see Eaton, 2021, pp. 74-79.

consider whether it is not her apparent devotion that holds the seeds of the collapse of her maternal care. Medea appears to have a part in the Madonna. And Rosie has moved along the continuum of mothering behaviours from the Madonna towards Medea.

La Vengeance m'appartient

Until 2021 it was possible to state with some confidence that, despite the prevalence of uncomfortable and abusive mothers in NDiaye's novels, none of her maternal protagonists had killed their child. The infanticide committed by F. in *La femme changée en bûche* is so clearly set in fantasy that it can only be located, as such, in F.'s mind, and Titi, in *Rosie Carpe,* survives to adulthood and to have children of his own. However, in what is at the time of writing NDiaye's most recent novel, *La vengeance m'appartient*, a mother kills not a single baby but all three of her young children. There is no question here of the reader being invited to share a dark maternal fantasy. The novel, according to a radio interview given by NDiaye in 2021, was inspired by the work she did with Alice Diop on the screenplay for the film *Saint Omer,* which Diop directed. This film, itself inspired by a real event, is a courtroom drama featuring the trial of a young woman who kills her baby by leaving it on the beach to be drowned by the incoming tide. NDiaye's novel also has a legal setting. It begins with the arrival of Gilles Principaux in the office of a lawyer, Me Susane. He asks her to defend his wife, Marlyne, who has killed their three children by drowning them in the bath. It ends with excerpts from the speeches apparently made by Me Susane at Marlyne's trial, although there is no indication of what the verdict of the court might be.

There are some points of comparison with Leila Slimani's novel, *Chanson Douce*, published in 2016. In both novels the murder of children has taken place before the novel begins. There is no doubt about its perpetrator, who in the Slimani novel is the children's apparently perfect nanny, and in the NDiaye novel is the children's apparently perfect mother. But whereas we have no direct access to the nanny's own interpretation of her act, as she is in a coma, after having tried to kill herself, in the NDiaye novel, to add to the analysis and conjecture of others, we have the reported words of the mother. She speaks in prison, where, like Medea, she is unrepentant.

Although the murder of the children frames the narrative, the principal focus of the novel is the life and state of mind of the lawyer, Me Susane, and the novel is mediated through her troubled consciousness. This adds a shifting veil to all the testimony, even though the murder, the events leading up to it and its aftermath are presented from several different perspectives. Reference is made to newspaper accounts, which incorporate the points of view of police officers and members of Marlyne's family and of colleagues and friends of her and of her husband. Gilles Principaux gives his version of the events and of his relationship with his wife to the lawyer when he visits her office. The narrative further incorporates two interviews which Me Susane has with Marlyne in the prison. We are told that the first interview has been recorded and then transcribed by the lawyer, but such information is withheld in the case of the second interview. In both cases, however,

the narration is one-sided, and we have only Marlyne's responses and not the lawyer's questions. Not only that, but we are told that some of Marlyne's thoughts and reactions come from the imagination of Me Susane (who is trying to construct a narrative of the events for herself) and that she imagines things that have not been said and that could not yet be known (*Vengeance*, pp. 63, 82). Me Susane herself is throughout the novel in a state of some distraction and mental anguish. Nevertheless, all that we know of the murder and of Marlyne comes to us, through Me Susane, at second or third hand.

Me Susane is in search of herself, of her past and of her relationship with her own mother and with her own views, and just possibly her own experience of motherhood. She believes, possibly erroneously, that as an adolescent she met Gilles Principaux, when he may have either abused her or inspired her. When she interviews him, she is seriously distracted by the after-effects of a fall she has had in the icy street. Yet more ambivalence emerges from Me Susane's exploration of various dubious websites which occasionally ''lui semblaient avoir discerné une obscure vérité'' ["seemed to her to have discovered an obscure truth''] (*ibid*., p.56). The truth which they seem to her to suggest is some sort of complicity on the part of Gilles Principaux. A haze of mystery and opacity envelops and permeates the narrative, which, nevertheless, engages us in such a way that we accept the simple, grim details of the murder and its discovery by the police, called to the scene by Marlyne, who never denies what she has done. What has occurred is clear. Its causes, however, cannot be established with certainty.

All the sources from which we gain our information, including Marlyne herself, concur in believing that Marlyne appeared to aim to be the perfect mother, entirely devoted to her children. She has not been forced into this determined devotion by straitened circumstances, like Rosie Carpe. She has made a conscious lifestyle choice. Others attest to her achievement of her objective. She breastfed all three children for a long time, and when the boys were of school age, always brought them home for lunch, to ensure they ate balanced, scientifically nutritious meals. Her love of the children is consistently represented as genuine. Her sensual delight in their bodies recalls Medea. Marlyne herself begs the lawyer to confirm that everyone, including teachers, her husband's friends and her mother and sisters, has asserted that she came close to maternal perfection. She states that her husband will describe her as an excellent mother, as indeed he does.

Marlyne is reported as explaining that she had always known that the children would not reach adulthood. She thought they would die in some horrible accident, mown down by a car, or in a fire, but she never even dreamt that she would kill them herself. The murder happened almost by accident, on a day when she awoke, feeling low and fearing a disaster would befall her children. She could not imagine how she would live without them. Washing the baby's hair in the bath she tipped the little girl's head backwards to rinse it (a detail that for those of us who have done exactly that when bathing babies strikes a chilling note of recognition). The child's face followed (it is not clear whether this was accidental or deliberate) and there was no way back. She felt that the moment that she had feared so much had arrived (*ibid*., pp. 178-180). Her younger son seemed

to relax as she drowned him but the eldest child, realising that she was going to kill him, fought her with all his strength. She shut her eyes because of the horror of what she was doing, against the sight of the child as he understood that she would kill him (*ibid*., p.119).

The novel's legal framework, and the variety of evidence included in the narration, seems to require a judgement on guilt and motivation from the reader. NDiaye, with her usual skill, offers us a possible explanation for Marlyne's action while, at the same time, imbuing her text with her customary ambivalence and implicit interrogation of what might appear to be self-knowledge on the part of the characters. The first suggestion as to Marlyne's possible motivation is offered from within the lawyer's musings. When Me Susane is reading everything that she can lay her hands on about the murder, and filling any gaps from her own fevered imagination, Marlyne is represented as saying that her life was lived in deference to her husband, whom she came to hate, despite, according to her, having nothing to reproach him for. His perceived control of her and the sense of inferiority that he made her feel were her fault not his. Her marriage to Gilles isolated her from her family, because of her own decision to stop working once she had children, and she herself was instrumental in isolating herself from her friends and making no real effort to properly relate to friends of Gilles. She asks, or Me Susane imagines she asks, how Gilles could have guessed that she could no longer endure the children and that she wished that he might die with them in an accident, so that she would find herself again ''libre et triste, libre et affligée et délivrée de son œil omniscient'' [''free and sad, free and afflicted and freed from his all-knowing eye''] (*ibid*., p. 78). Reading this, we are immediately reminded of Rosie and F. and their desire to return to themselves as they were before they were mothers.

Gilles claims that his marriage with Marlyne was successful but Marlyne hints that she was depressed. Perhaps the murder happened in a moment of something approaching madness when she sought to escape him and the life they had built in their perfectly kept house? Marlyne expresses herself content with her life in prison and seems to see her cell as a substitute womb where she can once again be herself, free from influence and pressure (*ibid*., p. 114). After the death of the children, she feels a great sense of calm. We saw F. similarly feeling comforted after she killed her baby, and Rosie's sense of relief when Titi fell into exhausted sleep. One way of looking at this is to accept Marlyne's suggestion that with the death of the children the worst thing that could happen had now happened, and she had nothing more in life to fear (*ibid*., p. 180). She did not always intend to kill them, but, now that she has done so, she has seen the whole of their lives. Medea justifies her murder of her sons in a similar way by saying that as they must die, she will kill them. This approach to a child's life is echoed by Gilles who describes Marlyne's actions as follows: ''elle a cru bien faire comme elle avait toujours bien fait auparavant, car elle leur a donné la mort car elle leur a toujours donné tout ce qu'elle pouvait et ce tout-là s'est révélé être la mort…'' [''she thought she was doing the right thing just as she had always done the right thing before for she has always given them all that she could and that all turned out to be death…''] (*ibid*., p. 164). He adds that she is mad. No-one else

has made this suggestion, and, when he makes it, Gilles himself is almost incoherent with emotion, yet he continues to preface all his sentences with the word ‘‘car’’ [‘‘because’’]. He explains with confidence how and what his world is.

Marlyne, however, before she found the isolation of her cell, failed to create a world in which she could live. Throughout her interview with Me Susane she prefaces all her sentences with the word ‘‘mais’’ (‘‘but’’). The repetitive use of this stylistic device has been analysed at some length by Lydie Moudileno with reference to *Rosie Carpe,* where the very first word is ‘‘Mais’’. Moudileno says the reiteration of this word, grammatically a conjunction, creates ‘‘a kind of hallucinatory incantation, which sets the tone for a universe characterized by disjunction’’, and underscores the protagonist’s disorientation (Moudileno, 2006, p.86). The use of the word by Marlyne suggests to me that she faintly but persistently resists interpretations to which her words might give rise. She is in a permanent state of something approaching contradiction, which has been similarly referred to by Cécile Narjoux as a ‘‘lutte intérieure’’ (‘‘an inner struggle’’), as if she resists whatever consequence or conclusion might be drawn from her words (Narjoux, 2021). The ‘mais’ prefaces Marlyne’s answers to Me Susane’s questions as a form of self-defence, or rather of self-assertion, which goes beyond the expectations to which she made herself conform in her search for Madonna-like maternal perfection. Marlyne has created a world of her own in which her act is justified, while, perhaps, knowing somewhere inside herself that it is not. Notably, she only ever refers to the murder as her “acte”. She admits ownership of the horrible deed, but something limits her ability to confront it in its true deadly reality.

The end of the narrative is congruent with the atmosphere of uncertainty which pervades the narrative. Me Susane’s speech in defence of Marlyne (this may be read as an actual speech or as a dreamlike attempt to explain events to herself as if addressing a court) concludes with a question as to the identity of Gilles Principaux. Significantly, it begins with the word “Car” and goes on to suggest an almost demonic desire on his part to sequestrate his wife in isolated domesticity, a dark obsessive plan in which their house itself has been complicit and continues to hold its secrets. The lawyer claims to know who he is, a question which bears more relation to the abuse she possibly suffered from him herself than to the case in hand. Her final words, and those of the novel are: “et si je me trompais?” [‘‘and if I was mistaken?] (NDiaye, 2001, p. 232). The promise of an explanation contained in the introductory “Car” is subverted.

We may be left believing that a wife, trapped in an unhappy marriage, became depressed and killed her children, but mystery surrounds the factors that drove her to take that course when she loved the children so much. And indeed, this version of the narrative barely accords with (what may have been) the words of the murdering wife herself. This exploration of the text, focussing as it does on the mother who murders, has illustrated how much in mothering remains unexplained.

Conclusion

In the three novels that this essay has reviewed, three women, who have displayed devotion in their mothering behaviour, move to the opposite extreme, from the Madonna to Medea. F. kills her baby in fantasy, Rosie, the most recognisably "real" of the three, comes agonisingly close to causing the death of her son, as devotion slides into apathy, and Marlyne, having come the closest of the three to maternal perfection, transforms into a monster worse than Medea, killing not two children but three. There is a progression in horror as, it seems, NDiaye pushes herself closer to depicting the incomprehensible.

Women have always been known to kill their own children, in the real world and in myth and literature. Adrienne Rich noted that numerous women have killed children that they could not rear for reasons of economics or of emotions: "children forced upon them by rape, ignorance, poverty, marriage, or by the absence of, or sanctions against, birth control or abortion" (Rich, 1977, p. 158). Narrators and dramatists reworking the Medea myth frequently try to avoid the horror of the murder of children by the mother who gave birth to them, perhaps because it is an act unbearably painful to accept. Christa Wolf, novelising the original myth in her work *Medea. Stimmen*, has the children killed not by Medea but by the people of Corinth. *Ruination*, a theatrical work by Ben Duke for the Lost Dog company, portrays Medea in the afterlife, protecting her children and seeking custody of them. Euripides himself, while not sparing us the horror of Medea's murder of her children, treats her at least empathetically if not sympathetically. In Toni Morrison's 1988 novel *Beloved* a mother kills her baby to save her from slavery, and in *Bord de mer*, by Véronique Olmi, a mother kills her two young sons because she has no hope of giving them the decent, happy life she believes that they should have. Morrison and Olmi elicit sympathy for the killer by putting the mothers under intense pressure, and the work by Morrison clearly suggests that it was an excess of love that drove the mother to kill her child.[5] Explanation does not, of course, excuse.

All three of NDiaye's women are shown as, to some degree, imprisoned and isolated by their maternity. Marlyne claims her isolation is self-imposed, while Me Susane claims the fault lies with Gilles. The windows of the room where Rosie lives with Titi, a room found for her by the child's father, are barred. F. is never apart from her baby. The mothers all love their children and yet are comforted when relieved of them or desire such relief. All are let down by their menfolk, who may find other more attractive women, like Jason and F.'s husband, or adopt a more distant role, like Max, the father of Rosie's baby, and Gilles, who enjoys the idea of being a father much more than the children's actual presence. There is no suggestion that any of the women were raped by the father of their children, one of the motives for infanticide posited by Rich. Even though Rosie sees Titi's conception as tainted, she is complicit in the sexual relations that lead up to it.

NDiaye very delicately reminds us that these women are mothers like other mothers. They all have experiences or emotions to which mothers would relate: F. admires her baby in its pretty outfit, Rosie struggles to give a resistant baby a bottle, and Marlyne tips

[5] For a further discussion of this see Eaton, 2021, pp.28-29.

back her baby's head in the bath to rinse away the shampoo. They may be monsters, but they also share in the everyday experience of mothering and indicate what a dangerous place that can be.

Marlyne's act is, as NDiaye said in her 2021 interview, an act of absolute egoism. As a loving mother, she has given her children life, but in dealing out death she takes too much upon herself. Death is not something a mother has the right to bestow. Ultimately, we should at least see Marlyne's act as a warning. Mothers are rightly invested in the health and wellbeing of their children and want to guide them into adulthood, and often beyond. There is, though, a point at which they must let go. The giving of life does not incorporate a right to decide at what point that life should end.

How should we as readers react to NDiaye's mothers? Do we see them as continually struggling to achieve a desired perfection, imposed on them by an internalised patriarchal or religious vision? Do we see ourselves in these women or do we see them as monsters? Some commentators have tended to the latter view and NDiaye would be the last person, I believe, to impose a single interpretation on us. Rather, NDiaye continues to explore the extremes of mothering behaviours and emotions and pushes her characters towards those extremes. In doing this she may challenge her readers to contemplate the dark edge of mothering behaviour and emotion and to consider whether we might, in certain circumstances, go over it. She explores the uncomfortable recesses of the maternal consciousness in a way which mothers and society are generally too afraid or inhibited to do.

Abbreviations

Femme *La femme changée en bûche*
Vengeance *La vengeance m'appartient*

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