

SOIS FEMME ET TAIS-TOI: THE SEARCH FOR SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH REVOLT IN  
MARIE CARDINAL'S LES MOTS POUR LE DIRE

by

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B.A., Kansas State University, 2007

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Modern Languages  
College of Arts And Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2009

Approved by:

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## Abstract

Much of the critical work on Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* has focused primarily on the hysteria of the novel's narrator and her subsequent journey through psychoanalysis. More recently, research on the novel has expanded to include the issues of the narrator's pied-noir identity, nostalgia and memory. While such criticisms shed light on the intent of the novel, they do not necessarily explain the enigmatic and oftentimes overlooked final line of the text: "Quelques jour plus tard c'était Mai 1968." In this thesis, I propose that this line is the key to understanding the novel; as such, I seek to re-examine *Les Mots pour le dire* through a feminist lens in order to explicate the seemingly malapropos reference to May 1968 and use it to explain central elements of the novel, including the narrator's madness, her tumultuous mother-daughter relationship and her eventual authorship.

That the events of May 1968 represent one of the most subversive and socially destructive periods in recent French history as well as a giant shift towards the moral left establishes the value of revolt in *Les Mots pour le dire*. Specifically, I argue that Cardinal attacks the collusion of the ballasts of patriarchal society, religion, capitalism and class, and how these institutions have profited from the subjugation of women in society. When viewed in this light, the narrator's madness cannot simply be the product of her mother's psychological abuses. Instead, her madness and subsequent detachment from society symbolize the ultimate rejection of a world in which she finds herself oppressed and manipulated. She thus emerges not as a woman consumed by insanity but as a woman in revolt.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like thank Dr. Hubbell for first introducing me to the works of Marie Cardinal and for assisting me with the completion of this project. Without her expertise, I would have surely gone as mad as Marie Cardinal while constructing this thesis. I must also thank Dr. Dehon, Dr. Clark and Dr. Corum whose knowledge and personalities have made my experience at KSU that much richer.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis first to my lovely, lumberjack husband, Evan, who supported me through many lonely nights of typing and provided me with countless bags of Cheetos and other necessities during said nights. GTM. Also, I dedicate this to my parents and dear friend Gabe for their support and love. Finally, to Michael K for his wisdom, humor and integrity that has always inspired me.

## Introduction

Marie Cardinal was an award-winning Pied Noir writer born in 1929 in Algiers to a wealthy, French, Catholic family (Hall 7). The youngest of three children, Cardinal shared an infamously tumultuous relationship with her mother that provided much inspiration for her novels. Among other things, Cardinal emphasized the lasting damage to their relationship caused by the death of her older sister, Odette. Dead before Cardinal was even born, Odette was the child her mother never ceased to grieve. Further estranging the pair was her mother's traumatic confession to a young Cardinal that she had attempted several times to abort her. Not surprisingly, Cardinal would in later years bluntly describe the woman as "terrible" (*Les Mots* 22).

Her parents divorced quite young, when her mother was only 28 years old and still pregnant with Cardinal. Because of the divorce, Cardinal lived with her mother who shared parenting duties with nannies. Her father remained largely absent from her childhood.

As an adult, Cardinal studied at the University of Algiers and the Sorbonne. She received a degree in philosophy in 1948 followed shortly thereafter by the acquisition of her *diplôme d'études supérieures*. In 1953, she wed French director and actor Jean-Pierre Ronfard. The couple had three children.

Like so many other Pieds Noirs, in the 1950s Cardinal and her family were forced to leave Algeria because of the escalating violence of the Algerian War. Comparable to the trauma that she suffered upon learning of her mother's desire to abort her, Cardinal's unexpected repatriation seemed to her like a second maternal rejection. This trauma proved to be lifelong and resonates in many of her novels, such as *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975) and *Au pays de me*

*racines* (1980). In particular, *Au pays de mes racines* features an anguished apostrophe to her homeland in which she speaks to Algeria as would an abandoned child to her mother: "Ma belle terre, ma mère, ma génitrice, de quelle manière ignoble et basse je t'ai perdue!" (54).

Following her departure from Algeria, Cardinal and her husband traveled extensively before finally settling in France in 1958. In her later years, Cardinal split her time between France and Quebec, where her husband ran a theatre organization. Saying that she felt a natural affinity for the Quebeckers because of their shared colonial past, Cardinal sought and received Canadian citizenship in 1984 (Pedneault 21). She continued to publish and give interviews throughout the 1990s before eventually passing away in 2001 in Malaucène, France.

Her career as a writer began as a byproduct of seven years (1961 to 1968) spent in psychoanalysis. Diagnosed with a hysterical disorder, Cardinal began to keep journals in addition to attending psychoanalytic sessions three times a week. She found that writing allowed her to re-explore and reinvent her sometimes tormented history. Eventually these writings culminated in the publication of her first book *Ecoutez la mer* (1962).

Over the course of her life, she authored more than a dozen novels, all of which feature a repetition of specific themes: identity, oppression, nostalgia and madness. Also typical of her work is a mélange of fiction and autobiographical "fact." Far from limiting their influence, the autobiographical elements of Cardinal's novels render all the more poignant the universality of oppression and its effect on marginalized populations (e.g., women). As Collette Trout states in her book *Marie Cardinal*, Cardinal was a master of turning the "personal into a political act" (239).

One of Cardinal's most lauded and criticized works, *Les Mots pour le dire*, embodies her capacity for transforming the personal into a political statement. Described by Cardinal as the

story of an ordinary woman going through psychoanalysis, the book ostensibly chronicles one woman's journey towards sanity with the aid of the talking cure. Its structure is specifically meant to mimic psychoanalytic sessions, with the narrator (oftentimes thought of as Cardinal herself) divulging to the reader all aspects of her madness while the psychoanalyst silently interprets.

Given the book's subject matter and structure, *Les Mots pour le dire* lends itself to Freudian literary criticism. In fact, the perceived link between psychoanalysis and the novel was and is so strong that famed analyst Bruno Bettelheim authored the preface and afterword of the novel's English translation, explaining that "I am writing this preface, and the afterward at the end of this book, because in my opinion *The Words to Say It* is the best account of psychoanalysis as seen and experienced by a patient" ("Preface" xi). Because of this emphasis on Freudian thought (which I would argue is an overemphasis), the narrator's troubled mother-daughter relationship tends to take center stage in much of the criticism of the book. This sort of framework requires that the mother be the antagonist, the source of madness, and the daughter her victim. Bettelheim even went so far as to suggest that the narrator, having internalized the "death wish" of the mother towards her daughter, could only "act like a puppet whose strings were pulled, against her conscious will, by unconscious processes working deep within her" ("Afterword" 304). In short, the narrator is powerless to act or think for herself, being instead controlled by the psychological trauma incurred from the many abuses of the mother.

The issue of the constant menstrual bleeding, the symptom that eventually pushes the distraught narrator towards psychoanalysis, is also frequently explained through the mother-daughter relationship with the daughter depicted as a hapless victim. Again, Bettelheim interprets her bleeding as the internalized death wish of the mother for the daughter. He explains in the

afterward of the novel's English translation that because the mother failed to abort the daughter so many years before, the daughter now unconsciously tries to abort herself through constant menstruation. She is hysterical and her body is acting out the trauma of her mother's desire to kill her ("Afterword" 304).

Walter Wagner echoes Bettelheim's Freudian views, arguing that the bleeding is the narrator's psychosomatic response to her mother's confession of the failed abortion (172). Kathryn Robson in her article "The Hysterical Body in *La Souricière* and *Les Mots pour le dire*" attempts to move beyond this interpretation, but she arrives only at the conclusion that the anarchical blood represents a multitude of childhood traumas being acted out upon the medium of the narrator's body (rather than just the knowledge of the attempted abortion). In the same vein, Patrice Proulx speculates in her article "Representations of Cultural and Geographical Displacement in Marie Cardinal" that the narrator's madness and blood are the result of the double loss of mother and motherland (529). In all of the above scenarios, the narrator remains the victim of childhood traumas generally inflicted by the mother.

What the above analyses ignore in focusing on the mother as the source of madness is that the mother is mad as well. Equally as powerless, defeated and stifled, she is also a "puppet . . . controlled by unconscious processes working deep within her" ("Afterword" 304). Cardinal acknowledges this connection through madness, writing that "la chose était justement le seul lien qui nous unissait. Elle [la mère] la connaissait, elle me l'avait transmise" (*Les Mots* 259). This then raises the question: if the mother is guilty of having transmitted the madness to the narrator, who or what transmitted it to her?

To address this question, the madness itself must first be defined. As the title of Cardinal's novel suggest, the debilitating madness of the daughter (and mother) comprises more

than psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., the bleeding). At the core, the daughter finds herself unable to communicate, hence the search for *les mots pour le dire*. As she discovers her voice through psychoanalysis (notably called the talking cure), her madness recedes. From this we see then that the madness in its most fundamental form is the inability to speak, to communicate. Samantha Haigh in her article “Reinventing Maternal Genealogies” posits that this fundamental lack on the part of the narrator (and thus on the part of the mother, too) finds its roots in patriarchal culture’s purposeful and “radical separation of mothers from daughters, and thus of women from themselves and from each other” (63). Through this “radical separation,” patriarchal culture denies women subjecthood, that is, the ability to see oneself and other women as subjects rather than objects to be traded by men through marriage. In order to break away from their designated role as the man’s Other and establish subjecthood, women must leave the “male marketplace” and become independent subjects, “no longer ‘for’ men but for themselves and for each other” (Haigh 66).

Thus the madness that the mother transmits to Cardinal is the inability to have intersubjective communication, to find “les mots pour le dire,” and not simply the hysteria brought on by the Freudian “death wish” (Haigh 65). The force that creates and sustains the madness, generally called patriarchal culture, is the collusion of religion, capitalism, and class, all of which require that women be oppressed for its proper functioning. Cardinal wrote in her novel *Autrement dit* of this ironic situation, ironic given that women are the “gardiennes” of the very tradition that oppresses and objectifies them:

Le masque, le costume, le maquillage, le jeu de la mère traditionnelle sont des carcans sacrés qui font souffrir les femmes jusqu’à l’hystérie, jusqu’au désespoir,

jusqu'à la folie de la possession . . . jusqu'à l'obéissance la plus bornée aux traditions mensongères qui ont fait d'elle ce qu'elle est. (*Autrement* 189)

Madness, then, actually unites the mother and daughter rather than dividing them as it represents the universal condition of women in patriarchal society. In this light, we see that all women are “mad.”

Because of the nature of the madness of the narrator, it becomes clear that psychoanalysis alone would be an insufficient cure. The mother-daughter relationship, too, is more complex than a simple hatred spurred from childhood trauma. For the mother and daughter to be reunited and for the madness to be cured, a new social paradigm is needed, specifically one in which women are valued beyond the socially constructed notions of gender and gender roles. I will propose in this thesis that Cardinal offers us the solution to female “madness” in the enigmatic final chapter of *Les Mots pour le dire* where she writes “Quelques jours plus tard c'était Mai 68” (279). Rather than seeking peace with mother, the narrator seeks selfhood (by which she will also achieve peace with the mother) through the rejection of and revolt against the ballasts of patriarchal society.

## CHAPTER 1 - The Revolt against Femininity

Marie Cardinal dedicated *Les Mots pour le dire* to her analyst, writing: “Au docteur qui m’a aidée à naître” (5). This coupled with her conviction that she is only an “embryon” pre-analyse indicates that her analyst not only teaches her to speak but also to be figuratively reborn (18). But reborn as what?

Many critics interpret this to mean that the narrator has overcome either the traumas inflicted by her mother or the loss of her homeland Algeria or both; she is thus reborn as a functioning member of society, devoid of the symptoms of madness that spur her initial visit to the analyst. While such interpretations shed light on the intent of the novel, they do not necessarily explain the enigmatic and oftentimes overlooked final line of the text: “Quelques jours plus tard c’était Mai 1968.” Given the politically subversive nature of the events of May 1968 in France, it is my view that the narrator’s rebirth signals a revolt against normality rather than a return to it.

In this chapter, I will propose that instead of being reborn as a functioning woman, the narrator is actually reborn as a woman cognizant of her limited role in Western society prior to the liberalization of morals and politics that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. Rather than being the product of childhood trauma, her madness and later sexual promiscuity serve as the ultimate revolt against traditional femininity and the system that demands it from her. As such, I will examine how women have been positioned as the Other in Western society, how traditional femininity functions in society, and how the narrator benefits from her madness.

### Woman as the Other

Simone de Beauvoir was the first to posit that women function in society as man’s Other in her text *Le Deuxième Sexe*. As she notes, women historically have been positioned as men’s

complement or as the Other while men represent the “absolute human type” and dominant figure of the male-female dichotomy (Beauvoir xxi). Why then does woman not conceive of man as the Other to her Self so as to achieve a more balanced configuration of humanity? Beauvoir finds that woman’s absolute submission inhibits her from claiming selfhood, an idea echoed in the narrator’s claim that she has unwittingly spent thirty-seven years in a state of “soumission absolue” (*Les Mots* 252). Literary critic Karen Green concurs with Beauvoir, contending that “women are not conscious of the schism that they are subjected to by an economy of masculine desire” (Green 11). Instead, the schism has been so accepted and perpetuated throughout time that woman’s subjugation has taken on the appearance of normality.

According to Beauvoir, women’s submission stems from their lack of solidarity as a group. In her view, women find themselves attached to the various groups of which they are a part, ranging from Catholicism to class, a system that creates solidarity not among women but among members of the many patriarchal groups that have been established by men. As such, they have no basis for their subjectivity. Women then cannot “authentically assume a subjective attitude;” because of this, women, like men, also view each other as objects or as the Other (Beauvoir xxv).

Literary critic Samantha Haigh argues similarly about women’s lack of subjectivity, crediting women’s lack of shared history (specifically citing a rupture in women’s lineage) with the separation of women from each other and from their desires. At the root of this rupture is the practice of marriage in patriarchal society, which she defines as the exchange of women in the male market. Haigh finds that the custom establishes two limited roles for women in society: the unmarried virgin and the married mother. As such, the maternal genealogy is broken, leaving women to take part in the harmful tradition of viewing one another as objects, as evidenced in

the strained interactions between the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* and her mother. Together the two exhibit what Nancy Potter calls internalized oppression, or the act of taking “from the oppressor the instrument of hatred and sharpen[ing] it on one’s body and soul. When one is bound by one’s own self-hatred, one becomes the oppressor unto oneself” (Potter 64). Specifically, the narrator and her mother are bound by gender roles and the demands of traditional femininity, both of which are social constructs. Thus while neither gender nor femininity is innate to women, both act to constrain the women’s behavior and thought in a way that alienates them from each other and themselves. From this, I argue that women in Western society are kept unaware of their limited position through the hoax of femininity.

### **The Hoax of Femininity**

As writer Jennifer Silva states, “in contemporary Western culture” traditional femininity “includes fragility, attractiveness, passivity and nurturance” (941). For many women, performing femininity through “attractiveness, sensitivity, and motherhood” (950) is a “fundamental source of meaning in their lives” (941). While many assume that femininity and masculinity are innate to the sexes, they are in reality socially constructed concepts. Nancy Potter explains that “within this (dichotomized) sex/gender system, . . . biological sex is taken as given, and gender is assumed to “naturally” follow—as is the appropriate object-choice of desire” (62). This, however, is not the case, as the process of acquiring gender begins at birth and continues throughout life. The narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* lashes out against this process and the artificiality of her subsequently feminine nature, saying:

    Jour après jour, depuis ma naissance, on avait fabriqué : mes gestes, mes attitudes, mon vocabulaire. On avait réprimé mes besoins, mes envies, mes élans, on les avait endigués, maquillés, déguisés, emprisonnés. Après m’avoir décervelée,

après avoir vidé mon crâne de moi, on l'avait bourré de la pensée adéquate qui m'allait comme un tablier à une vache. (*Les Mots* 160)

With the aid of the psychoanalysis, the narrator realizes that in desiring to be “normal” and feminine (in succumbing to the hoax) she has become her own oppressor.

If femininity is a socially constructed concept, from where does it come and how is it acquired? In *Les Mots pour le dire*, the systems of Catholicism, capitalism and colonialism specifically are condemned as sources of the narrator's skewed value system and learned, feminine behaviors.

### ***Femininity and Catholicism***

As literary critic A. G. H. Ring asserts, the Catholic Church has acted as the “gendarme de l'ordre, interdisant l'épanouissement de l'esprit féminin” primarily by relegating women to a position of objectivity by rendering them dependent on men for economic support and spiritual salvation (31). The interdictions of the Catholic Church would have been felt even more strongly in French Algeria where the religion was used to establish order and to guard the psychological distance between the native population and the French colonizers. As noted in the 1993 edition of *Algeria: A Country Study*, “proselytization of the Muslim population was at first strictly prohibited” following French conquest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; few conversions occurred even after the restriction was relaxed, which helped to maintain the cultural border between the colony's Arab and Christian populations. Furthering this separation was the establishment of various schools, hospitals, and workshops meant to provide economic relief to the native Algerians and to model Christian charity, all the while serving as a glaring reminder of the French Catholic dominance in the Muslim country (Federal).

Both the narrator and her mother exhibit the effects of the Catholic atmosphere of the colony and of their religious upbringing, particularly in the manner in which they express or suppress their sexuality. We see this most definitively in the mother's lifestyle choices; specifically, she pledges abstinence following her divorce at the age of twenty-eight so as to remain a member of the Church. Years later during analysis, the narrator comments on her mother's decision, lamenting that "cette jeune femme . . . avait raté sa vie, gâché ses trésors. Car sa religion était intransigeante en cas de divorce, plus jamais l'amour d'un homme, plus jamais de bras forts pour la bercer, la caresser . . . Plus jamais!" (*Les Mots* 193). As a child, however, the narrator is both too young and too unwilling to separate herself psychologically from her mother's religious faith because she views Catholicism as a means of reaching her emotionally distant mother: "La religion tenait une place très importante dans mon enfance parce qu'elle me servait à toucher ma mère" (*Les Mots* 82). Her efforts to please her mother through adopting her religion develops into a sort of mania, as evidenced in the narrator's childhood obsession with sin, specifically masturbation, and her unsuccessful attempts to avoid it: "je péchais, je péchais, je péchais, sans arrêt. Chacun de mes plaisirs en étaient ternis. Je me méfiais de moi-même et cette méfiance était lourde à porter" (*Les Mots* 86). Seeking to connect with her mother, she thus opens herself to the Church's message of sexual purity (as transmitted by the mother), thereby accepting women's sexual desire as both dangerous and subordinate to that of men.

We see the application of this idea most clearly when the narrator approaches puberty. In keeping with Catholicism's emphasis on abstinence till marriage, the mother views the narrator's impending sexual maturation as a threat to her virginity and thus her identity as a young Catholic woman. Likewise, the mother's own experience of being pregnant in the midst of a divorce provokes her anxiety regarding the narrator's maturing body. In an effort to spare her daughter

the pain of her own mistakes, the mother delineates the story of her conception, transforming it into a cautionary tale on the dangers of lust: “Me trouver enceinte en plein divorce! Te rends-tu compte de ce que cela représente? . . . Ah! tu es trop jeune, tu ne comprends pas ce que je veux dire!... Mais il faut que je te parle, il faut que tu saches ce que l’on peut endurer pour une bêtise, pour quelques secondes !...” (*Les Mots* 135). Clearly the *bêtise* to which the mother refers is her own lust that results in an unwanted pregnancy. Asking the narrator, “tu comprends qu’on est prise au piège?” the mother makes clear that pregnancy is the trap into which women fall when they try to act as men by satisfying their lust (*Les Mots* 136).

The mother’s explanation of menstruation itself further reveals her religious stance, as she offers only a brief overview of the physical aspects of it before expounding on its symbolic significance:

Tu sais que le rôle des femmes est non seulement de mettre des enfants au monde mais aussi de les élever dans l’amour du Seigneur... Dieu nous soumet à des épreuves que nous devons accepter avec joie car elles nous rendent dignes de nous approcher de lui... tu te trouves devant la première de ces épreuves puisque tu vas bientôt avoir tes règles. (*Les Mots* 112)

In the mother’s view then menstruation and childbirth are inherently dolorous events designed to allow women to approach God through pain, a fact that implies that suffering and anguish are innate to the female condition or, more specifically, to the lives of Catholic women. Likewise, she deems menstruation itself as a “sale” or dirty act, telling the narrator that “il faut que personne ne s’en aperçoive” (*Les Mots* 113). In this view, menstruation acts as an alienating force by rendering women unclean and creating the potential for unwanted pregnancy that would threaten their standing in society (Robson 100). For this last reason, the mother forbids the

narrator from socializing with males of any age (particularly Algerian males) while alone: “à partir du moment où tu auras tes règles tu ne devras plus rester seule avec un garçon et encore moins avec un homme. Toi qui aimes bien les jeux de garçons il faudra te contrôler. Finies les cavalcades dans la forêt avec les fils de Barbed ! . . . Tu ne devras plus te laisser toucher ou embrasser sur les joues. Nous devons toujours savoir où tu es et avec qui” (*Les Mots* 116).

As Ring writes, “l’interdiction de voir ses amis communique à Marie la puissance masculine: ses amis pourraient la rendre enceinte et ainsi l’exiler de la société catholique” (32). Interestingly, when the narrator questions her mother’s assertion that following menstruation she must be kept separate from men, the mother responds only that “je n’ai pas d’explications à te donner,” implying that perhaps she, too, does not fully understand the rules of her religion but that she and the narrator must comply with them anyway (*Les Mots* 116).

From the mother’s insistence on sexual purity comes also a somewhat unexpected byproduct: the narrator’s intense fear of rape that terrorizes her well into adulthood. As she tells her analyst:

J’appartenais à cette gigantesque horde d’êtres percés, livrés aux envahisseurs.

Rien ne protège mon trou, aucune paupière, aucune bouche, aucune narine, aucun guichet, aucun labyrinthe, aucun sphincter. Il se cache au creux d’une chair douce qui ne répond pas à ma volonté, qui est incapable de la défendre naturellement . . .

Quelle femme peut empêcher un homme qui le veut vraiment de la pénétrer et de déposer en elle sa semence étrangère ? Aucune. (*Les Mots* 247)

We see then that her mother’s coming of age speech, rather than instilling caution in the narrator, has instead established fear regarding her sexuality and the vulnerability of her female body. She thus finds herself alienated as a pubescent adolescent, first from the mother who has

emotionally rejected her perhaps before birth, then from her male, Algerian friends whose sexuality has taken on a menacing role, and finally from her own sexed body that renders her inherently vulnerable to rape and unwanted pregnancy.

Apart from the native Algerians whose behavior the narrator cannot emulate because of her social status, the narrator's father and his more liberal lifestyle provide the only obvious alternative model of sexuality to the rigidity of the mother's abstinence. Raised by her mother and Algerian nannies, the narrator claims to remember very little of her father, telling her analyst that "aucun homme n'est intervenu dans ma jeunesse. J'étais aux mains des femmes : ma mère, ma grand-mère, les 'domestiques' les bonnes sœurs-professeurs" and that she knew nothing of "l'univers masculin" (*Les Mots* 52). What she does recollect in great detail, however, is her mother's contempt for her ex-husband's sexual freedom. Writing later in *Autrement dit*, Cardinal recalls that her "mère le détestait, même plus: elle l'exécrait" for, among other things, his playboy lifestyle (22). Sometimes brushing past his mistresses in his apartment hallway when visiting, the narrator describes the confusion that his sexual dalliances caused her as a child:

Ma mère les appelait des 'poules' et le souvenir de la vulgarité de ce mot dans sa bouche me faisait trembler. . . . Elles sortaient comme j'entrais. Mon père faisait celui qui reconduit une simple visite. Il avait un sourire forcé et des gestes trop polis. Il savait se contrôler. Elles, elles avaient un déhanchement pour passer le seuil, un au revoir, un regard vers lui, un geste vers moi, qui en disait long. . . . Les maîtresses de mon père se moquaient de ma mère agenouillée sur son Prie-Dieu. Sa vertu... leur vice . . . un ange, des diables (*Les Mots* 50).

The binaries of virtue/vice and angel/devil that the narrator describes here illustrate the oppressive dichotomies of gender and sexuality; her father satisfies his lust with promiscuous

and immoral women while her mother, an *ange*, does not. Although the young narrator finds her father's behavior unsettling, incidents like this nevertheless serve to establish the father as a "symbol of sexual freedom" for her (Hartshorn 194). Consequently, the narrator finds herself both repulsed by and secretly attracted to her father's lifestyle that differs so wildly from that of the mother with whom she lives.

This contradiction coupled with the mother's insistence on sexual purity causes the narrator to perceive lust and desire as unfeminine; in her view pre-analysis, they exist as accepted facets of the "univers masculin" of which she as a female cannot be a part (*Les Mots* 52). We see this idea play out in her adult life when she describes to her analyst what it means to be a woman: "se faire baiser quand on n'a envie que de dormir, de se reposer. Avoir mauvaise conscience à cause de cela, jouer le jeu, regretter de ne plus pouvoir en profiter, craindre une autre grossesse. Chasser ces mauvaises pensées égoïstes . . ." (*Les Mots* 250). From this it seems that the most influential lesson of Catholicism that the mother imparts to her daughter is that "she must fear her sexual desires and suppress them as much as possible, in keeping with Catholic beliefs that [subordinate] women's desires to men's . . ." (Woodhull 157).

### ***Colonialism, Class and Femininity***

Like Catholicism, the issue of women's labor and the rules of class also adversely affect the lives of the narrator and her mother; both women find themselves undervalued and exploited in their personal and professional lives. Sociologist Maria Mies argues that such exploitation does not occur by accident; instead, "exploitation and oppression of women . . . are intrinsic parts of a system, a system, which, moreover, has existed for at least five thousand years and which has penetrated and structured all 'great civilizations' . . ." (Mies xiii). Capitalism in particular requires the devaluation of women's labor as it establishes the family as an economic unit in

which the father serves as the primary source of income; women's labor is then but "supplementary to that of her husband, the so-called breadwinner" (Mies x). As Mies writes, "the construction of women as mother, wife and the housewife was the trick by which 50 per cent of human labour was defined as a free resource" (Mies x).

Social class functions as a similarly oppressive institution, having direct effect on the behavior, choices and lifestyle of the narrator and her mother. Class distinction is of particular importance in the lives of the narrator and her mother given their status as Pieds Noirs in French Algeria. Cardinal offered a succinct illustration of the lifestyle into which she and her mother were born in a 1984 interview, telling interviewer H  l  ne Pedneault that her family was "  lite, mat  rielle et intellectuelle" and "cultiv  e, riche, aristocratique" (Pedneault 19).

Perhaps from generational differences, the mother illustrates to a greater degree than the narrator the pressures of growing up in such a family, particularly in her choices of marriage and employment. Specifically, it seems that the mother's decisions both to marry and later to divorce her husband are spurred at least in part by her class position. As literary critic Marie-Paule Ha argues, Cardinal to some degree regarded the Pieds Noirs as socially inferior to the French (Ha 317), as she makes clear in *Autrement dit* where she describes how the French "nous faisa[ient] sentir que, dans la hi  rarchie de la civilisation, nous   tions nettement une marche en-dessous de [eux] et nous ne le contestions pas car tout ce qui venait de France   tait ce qu'il y avait de mieux" (*Autrement* 21). She also notes that "  pouser un francaoui   tait une promotion," an assertion that applies perhaps more so to her mother's generation than to her own (*Autrement* 21). From a practical viewpoint, marrying a Frenchman also bolstered the strength of the colony given that "one of the problems of the white colonialists was the reproduction of the white master race in the colonies itself" (Mies 100). It follows then that the mother's description of her

ex-husband as a man “d’une belle famille française, sans prétention et tout à fait correcte” emphasizes that her attraction to him was based largely on his French, bourgeois identity (*Les Mots* 119). This would explain the mother’s later decision to divorce upon determining, among other things, that her ex-husband is not “un homme de notre milieu malgré les apparences et malgré sa naissance” (*Les Mots* 119) but rather “un aventurier” who has lost his bourgeois charm during his years spent as an *ouvrier* (*Les Mots* 120). As such, the narrator’s father proves to be a social liability rather than an asset, inciting the mother to tell her daughter that “je veux que tu te mettes bien dans la tête qu’en se déclassant on court à la catastrophe. On ne peut pas se marier avec n’importe qui” (*Les Mots* 120). Evidently, in the mother’s view, divorce is a lesser social offense than marrying outside of one’s class.

Like marriage, career choice is also presented as a matter of social class in *Les Mots pour le dire*. While both the mother and narrator are limited in their choice of employment as bourgeois women, the mother in particular embodies the traditional housewife of which Mies writes by refusing pay for her work outside of the home. Although the narrator is fairly vague concerning her mother’s education, she does tell us that her mother has had medical training and serves as a volunteer nurse in a military hospital and provides care to impoverished Algerians (*Les Mots* 139). During the narrator’s childhood, she finds her mother’s work both admirable and aggravating as she wishes that her mother would give her the same attention that she does to invalids. But as an adult in analysis, the narrator recognizes the true nature of mother’s charity, pitying her for “le sens qu’elle avait de sa classe” that “lui interdisait de gagner sa vie, de développer son esprit au-delà des limites données aux femmes” (*Les Mots* 193). She also grows frustrated with her mother’s refusal to work for pay, given that she has grown financially

dependent on her daughter after relocating to France from Algeria. As the narrator recalls to her analyst:

J'ai essayé, à l'époque, de lui faire monnayer ses diplômes : qu'elle soigne les gens contre de l'argent au lieu de les soigner gratuitement. Elle a opposé cette proposition une résistance formidable, c'était comme si je lui avais demandé de se prostituer. . . . Sortir du bénévolat qu'elle avait pratiqué toute sa vie, c'était une telle honte, un tel scandale : 'Dans notre famille cela ne se fait pas', qu'elle préférait, disait-elle, mendier. (*Les Mots* 260)

Clearly the mother is repulsed by her daughter's insistence that she accept payment for her labor as she tells the narrator time and again that "cela ne se fait pas" in their family, implying that doing so would go against the values of their class as well. In reality, her refusal to receive a salary is harmful to her survival; she literally must work to support herself as the narrator is finally incapable of doing so. The impact of the mother's unemployment is thus twofold: it renders her dependent while also restricting her from potentially taking a job from a male applicant. In this light, her complete rejection of paid labor represents what could only be a sort of brainwashing accomplished through the hoax of femininity. Cardinal supports this idea in *Autrement dit*, writing:

Il serait bon que les femmes découvrent comment elles sont manipulées jusque dans leur vie la plus privée. Il faudrait qu'elles sachent qu'au nom de 'leur nature féminine', on leur fait faire n'importe quoi. . . . Je peux témoigner . . . qu'elles ne savent pas que leur 'nature' est ce que la politique et l'économie *veulent qu'elle soit*. (*Autrement* 120, my emphasis)

The narrator also experiences the limiting power of *la politique* and *l'économie* when determining her own career path. Unlike her mother who studies medicine with little to no repercussions, the narrator chooses a decidedly unfeminine area of specialization: mathematics. Because the traditional male-female dialectic positions women as the illogical counterpart to men and the male logos, mathematics has traditionally been perceived as a masculine subject. Her family echoes this sentiment, as the narrator explains: “J’aimais les maths mais, dans ma famille, on disait que ce n’était pas féminin. Une fille qui fait des maths c’était, paraît-il, ‘incasable’ ou alors avec un prof de maths” (*Les Mots* 43). We see then that the pursuit of a degree in mathematics, in the view of the narrator’s family, would equate to the loss of the narrator’s femininity and, more significantly, render her unmarriageable (“incasable”). In French Algeria where the need to maintain a white presence was of primary importance, the narrator’s future plans stand to threaten the perpetuation of her bourgeois family and by extension of the colony itself. To appease her family, the narrator abandons math for a more feminine topic, choosing to study philosophy instead, a decision that leads to her first mental breakdown. The parallels between the literal suffocation (a symptom of her nervous breakdown) that she experiences and the suffocating oppression in her personal life is thus extremely meaningful, although the narrator fails to recognize this association until many years later in analysis.

Much like the demands of class that determine her behavior and lifestyle, capitalism also figures as an oppressive force in the narrator’s life. As Mies describes, women are the group “most responsible for consumption” and thus those most affected by the commoditization of everyday life (77). What is most interesting about women as consumers is the products that they consume. Cosmetics, washing machines, toothpaste, and cooking pots, as Mies lists, are all things that support the feminine ideal under capitalism and class as they are used for hygiene,

beauty and domestic duties. The narrator enumerates a list of similar items that she desires during her first brush with sanity: “le maquillage, les parfums, les robes, les dessous noirs, les colliers, les boucles d’oreilles” (*Les Mots* 156). How is it then that Western women seem to covet the same things? As an adult, the narrator explicitly blames women’s general obsession with cleanliness and beauty and thus the consumption of related products on the collective pressures of patriarchal society, saying of her own experience as a woman that:

C’est en effet à l’extérieur, dans la rue, dans les magasins, au bureau, à la maison, que j’ai compris ce que c’était que d’avoir un vagin, d’être une femme. . . . Se laver, se coiffer, se maquiller, s’arranger – *si on ne le fait pas, on a mauvaise conscience* : ‘Une femme doit toujours être propre et agréable à regarder.’ . . . Le lendemain, ça recommence: . . . compter et recompter sans cesse les quelques sous sans lesquels on ne peut rien acheter. Regarder dans la vitrine la belle robe qui vaut plus d’un mois de salaire . . . (*Les Mots* 249, my emphasis)

In asserting that it is from “l’extérieur” that the idea of womanhood comes, the narrator aptly identifies femininity as a socially constructed concept; it is not an innate quality to women but rather pressed upon them in the streets, stores, office and home. An important part of this creation of femininity then is the social pressure to assimilate. As the narrator writes, not assimilating (i.e., not performing without compensation the duties of a maid, cook and nanny, not purchasing and applying cosmetics, not coveting lavish clothing, not presenting oneself as a “woman”) results in guilt on the part of women. Such guilt is only the learned response to females’ lifelong inculcation of gender and femininity.

The actual act of transmitting class, religion and capitalism to the narrator - i.e., the oppression that the narrator experiences but does not fully recognize - is credited primarily to the

mother and the narrator's bourgeois education. The mother's influence is the strongest within the home, where she teaches the young narrator the qualities fundamental to a bourgeois woman. In the narrator's words, her mother:

me donnait les pièces les plus précieuses de l'uniforme invisible qui désignera ma caste à quiconque me rencontrera. Il fallait que je sois dressée de telle sorte qu'à n'importe quel moment, dans n'importe quelle circonstance, on puisse reconnaître mon origine. . . . Il me protégera, il m'aidera à reconnaître mes semblables et à me faire reconnaître d'eux, il inspirera le respect aux inférieurs. (*Les Mots* 117)

Here again class and femininity converge to determine appropriate comportment and dress for the narrator, all of which becomes doubly oppressive when we see that it not only dictates the narrator's behavior but also serves to distinguish her from socially inferior members of society (specifically native Algerians). Literary critic Patrice Proulx notes that the narrator as a young girl is "not strong enough to repudiate" the ideological framework of the overbearing mother that seeks to separate the narrator from the people and country that she loves, although she suspects even as a child that her privileged position in the colony is morally wrong (528).

School acts in a similarly oppressive way; education in the colony was used to "communicate national values," intentionally masking the "nationalist dimension of culture behind 'universalist' principles" (Rice 126). We see this in the narrator's description of the difference between "la rue," or life in the Casbah, and her French-run school, the former representing Algerian life and the latter that of the Pieds Noirs: "La charité, les bonnes mœurs, l'hygiène, la tenue! Je comprenais qu'il y avait deux vies: la nôtre et celle des gens de la rue. Dans notre vie je n'obtenais aucun bon résultat et dans la rue, qui m'attirait, tout me paraissait plus facile" (*Les Mots* 134). The emphasis on hygiene, charity and morals (all aspects of her

Catholic, bourgeois identity) in her school again serve a double purpose: to inculcate the young Pieds Noirs with French, bourgeois ideals and to separate them psychologically and culturally from the native Algerians. In *Au pays de mes racines*, Cardinal bluntly attacks this process, writing that “la France faisait qu’on supportait moins bien les mouches que les ‘indigènes’, qu’on s’habillait autrement, qu’on apprenait les fables de La Fontaine, qu’on avait des églises” (14). The young narrator seems cognizant of this process, commenting once that although she likes her Algerian friends and the adults who work at the family farm, she “n’étai[t] pas comme eux” (*Les Mots* 116). This distinction proves harmful to the narrator who secretly finds the Algerian’s way of life more sensual and attractive (in the same way that she admires her father’s sexual freedom) than her own that has been so limited by the interdictions of class and religion; her class and religion prohibit her from identifying as an Algerian woman while her place of birth and her own desires prohibit her from fully identifying as French. As Cardinal writes in *Au pays de mes racines*, “la coupure avec moi-même a commencé très tôt : Arabe-Française, Française-Arabe?”

We see then that in acquiring femininity, the narrator is likewise separated from her desires, her female body and her identity as an individual. Who is she beyond the confines of the feminine woman that Western society has made of her? While the narrator actively begins the creation of this new woman during analysis, I argue that the process of rejecting her feminine façade begins well before entering therapy.

### **The Revolt against Femininity through Sex and Madness**

Before attending psychoanalysis, the narrator seeks the aid of numerous general practitioners and gynecologists, all of whom consider her rapid pulse and constant menstrual bleeding to be her primary illness. Her psychological alienation and hysteria are thus deemed the

byproducts of her physical maladies by the many physicians, who, rather than treat her hysteria, ply her with medications and suggest a hysterectomy as a possible cure. The narrator recalls her early struggles to maintain the appearance of normality through the use of pills, saying that she could “aller me promener avec mes enfants, faire des courses, leur préparer des desserts et leur raconter les histoires pour les faire rire” but only after taking a “double dose, triple dose” of prescription drugs (*Les Mots* 17). Without the aid of medication, she finds herself unable to “vivre comme les autres,” that is to shop, cook, clean and submit to sometimes unwanted sex with her husband, among other decidedly feminine tasks (*Les Mots* 24). From this, it becomes clear that the goal of the medical treatment that she receives is not specifically for her to recover, but rather to exhibit prosocial behaviors by acting in accordance to the rules of femininity. In short, the physicians just want that she “be a woman” again.

Nancy Potter in her 2001 article “Key Concepts: Feminism” addresses this tendency to label women who fail to fully perform femininity as mentally ill. As she notes, “critics have argued that the powerful categorize as madness certain conduct they wish to control” (Potter 68). Similarly, feminist historians have argued that women throughout the ages have been institutionalized, medicated and restrained for acting outside of the norms of their gender. It cannot be ignored that mental illness and what constitutes it is determined by the powerful in society and, as it has been asserted, the powerful in society are men. It follows then that the narrator’s unsocial behaviors (alienation and hysteria) that threaten the stability of her family, take her out of the capitalist marketplace as a producer and consumer, and allow her to forsake her role as a sexual object and reproductive being would be labeled as madness. Furthermore, the dismissal of the narrator’s dissatisfaction in life as mental illness highlights how her many physicians blatantly ignored “the larger social context in which the locus of the problem is not

solely the individual . . .” (Potter 67). In reality, the locus of the problem is not her but the construction of society itself.

To return to the idea de Beauvoir’s idea of the male logos and humanity as masculine, women’s madness in general can be viewed as a rejection of male logic and by extension of patriarchal society because male logos serves as its basis (Thiher 304). Some feminists go even further with this idea, contending that madness is part of the feminine condition as it is “the feminine pole opposed to male rationality . . .” (Thiher 302). In this light, women’s madness is illogicality and irrationality (when juxtaposed with male logic) in their simplest forms. We see this exemplified in *Les Mots pour le dire* when the narrator, attempting to put into words *la chose* (what she calls her madness), finishes by describing her rupture with (male) logic and reason: “La chose, à l’intérieur, était faite d’un monstrueux grouillement d’images, de sons, d’odeurs projetés en tous sens par une pulsion dévastatrice rendant tout raisonnement incohérent, toute explication absurde, toute tentative de mise en ordre inutile . . .” (*Les Mots* 15).

Although at this point still unaware of the complex social system of which she is a part, the narrator aptly identifies her madness’s capacity to render the normal order of society obsolete, absurd and unreasonable. As such, her madness acts as a walking and talking revolt against the oppression that has dictated her entire life. For such an act of subversion, she must be medicated, hidden and made feminine once again so as not to disrupt the workings of the patriarchal system (Thiher 302). As we see, these are exactly the measures imposed upon the narrator before she embraces *la chose*:

Ma famille . . . avait secrété de nouveau son cocon autour de moi, de plus en plus serré, de plus en plus opaque, au fur et à mesure pour me protéger mais aussi pour se protéger elle-même. La folie se porte mal dans une certaine classe, il faut le

cacher à tout prix. . . . dans la nouvelle classe des puissants, elle ne s'admet pas. . .

Dans ce cas-là, c'est une honte. (*Les Mots* 19).

In addition to being drugged, she is also literally hidden from view in the attic of her uncle's clinic from which she eventually escapes with the help of a friend. Of her stay at the clinic, she tellingly says, "j'étais prisonnière" (*Les Mots* 23).

The rigor with which her family and many doctors attempt to suppress or hide the narrator's revolt against the world is intense and indicative of the degree to which women like her threaten the stability of the social system. We see then that her actions (i.e., withdrawal from a world that inherently does her harm) have the potential to overturn male hegemony completely should she persuade other women to join her in her state of revolt.

### ***Embracing "la Chose"***

Her madness, or what the narrator calls *la chose*, finds its roots in early childhood. Describing its growth as a "lente gestation" that continues through adulthood, she parallels the development of *la chose* with the development and assumption of her role as a woman (*Les Mots* 51). From this we see that the more that the narrator appropriates (or tries to appropriate) her learned femininity, the more she disassociates from society through her enveloping madness.

Given the intense social pressures to conform, the narrator initially finds it difficult to renounce fully her feminine ambitions despite unconsciously rejecting them through psychological withdrawal and constant menstrual bleeding. She is confused by her madness, viewing *la chose* as an impediment to her success as a woman rather than a tool of liberation. It is this confusion that sends her to the many physicians to seek a cure that they cannot provide. As such, during this time she says of *la chose* that "j'avais honte de ce qui se passait à l'intérieur de moi, . . . de cette agitation . . . J'avais honte de la folie. Il me semblait que n'importe quelle

forme de vie était préférable à la folie” (*Les Mots* 9). Later she even admits that because “la lutte contre la chose était épuisante,” she was more and more “tentée par les remèdes qui me livraient à un néant pâteux et doux”, i.e., prescription drugs (*Les Mots* 16). Thus while clinging to her intense desire to please her mother and the world at large through playing the role of woman, the narrator is terrified of the “agitation” or distinct feeling of dissatisfaction growing within her.

We see this best when she attempts to throw a party in honor of the birth of her second daughter, thinking that doing so will help to exorcise the growing rumblings of revolt within her. Still aspiring to be “la jeune femme modèle, digne de ma mère,” she spares no effort in creating an affair worthy of her class (*Les Mots* 210). While she considers the party a success, having fooled her guests into thinking her “une de ces merveilleuses petites jeunes filles qui, héroïquement, paient de leur personne pour que se perpétuent les traditions de leur classe,” the effort leaves her emotionally drained and on the verge of another nervous breakdown (*Les Mots* 210). Shutting the door on her last guest, she declares the party the most difficult “épreuve” of her femininity that she has ever undergone (*Les Mots* 210). Her near mental collapse demonstrates that despite her many efforts to be stereotypically “correcte, polie, bonne élève, propre, vertueuse, obéissante, économe, serviable, pudique, charitable, [et] honnête”, the narrator finds it increasingly difficult to fulfill this role in society (*Les Mots* 83).

The narrator cites her marriage to Frenchman Jean-Pierre as a similarly dolorous task, crediting it as the event that rendered *la chose* a permanent part of her life. Given her conception of sexuality and marriage, the narrator holds an understandably negative opinion of what her life as a wife and mother will be: “C’est ça être une femme: servir un homme et aimer des enfants jusqu’à la vieillesse” (*Les Mots* 252). Her despondency regarding the event is underscored by the complete lack of detail about her wedding or marriage, as she reveals only that it is “à partir de

mon mariage que la chose s'était installée" (*Les Mots* 258). She later expands on the damage of marriage during a session with her analyst, telling him that:

En fait, c'est à partir de mon mariage que la chose s'était enflée au point de tout envahir finalement. Elle s'était nourrie des grossesses, des mois d'allaitement, de la fatigue quotidienne dans laquelle vit une jeune femme qui a trois enfants, un métier, une maison, un mari. Dans l'état d'inconscience où j'étais, je ne pouvais pas voir plus loin que le bout de mon nez . . . . (*Les Mots* 208)

From this admission, we see how suffocated she is by traditional family life and femininity and the demands that they place on her. Now responsible for cooking, cleaning, and childcare as well as a career as a teacher, the narrator finds herself lost in a state of "inconscience," unable to see the possibilities of life beyond gender stereotypes (*Les Mots* 208).

In response to the many disappointments of her life, she slowly but surely submits to the alienation and refuge provided by *la chose*. This disassociation from the world serves also an awakening of sorts or a "mue" as she calls it, allowing her to consider her true identity for the first time in her life (*Les Mots* 40). With the help of her analyst, she recognizes the artificiality of her womanhood, admitting that "j'avais été entièrement façonnée pour ressembler le plus possible à un modèle humain que je n'avais pas choisi et qui ne me convenait pas. Jour après jour, depuis ma naissance, on avait fabriqué : mes gestes, mes attitudes, mon vocabulaire. On avait réprimé mes besoins, mes envies, mes élans . . ." (*Les Mots* 160). Because of her new perspective, she is forced to ask herself who she truly is outside of the woman that her class, family and religion have fabricated through a grand "supercherie" (*Les Mots* 161). As she admits, she is "personne," or no one. She has no connection to her childhood ambitions or desires, no individuality, no identity beyond what has been assigned to her as a human being

with female genitalia. She is like most other women in patriarchal society: “parées, parfumées, ornées comme des châsses, fragiles, précieuses, délicates, illogiques, avec des cervelles d’oiseau, disponibles, le trou toujours ouvert, toujours prêt à recevoir et à donner” (*Les Mots* 250).

It is in response to realizations like this that the narrator begins to embrace consciously *la chose*, calling it “un être tendre, sensible, riche” and saying that “je me mettais à accepter la folle, à l’aimer” (*Les Mots* 16). Likewise, she describes her experience as a madwoman as being taken to “un univers qui, lorsqu’il ne m’était pas hostile, m’était indifférent” (*Les Mots* 40). In terms of symptoms, *la chose* is reminiscent of a dissociative disorder as the narrator frequently describes it as intense alienation, solitude or even another state of being. As such, the psychological distancing of *la chose* permits the narrator insights on society and herself. While discussing this new knowledge, she tells the reader that madness allows her:

des pensées aiguës, subtiles, claires, qui me conduisaient à une plus grande connaissance, une plus profonde compréhension de ce qui m’entourait. Je considérais les autres et je les voyais employer des routes si différentes de celles que j’avais découvertes, si contraires même, si mauvaises pour eux que je voulais les arrêter, les prévenir du danger. (*Les Mots* 25)

Rather ironically then, madness allows the narrator clarity that she previously lacked. She consciously recognizes that bourgeois values and social class, formerly concepts that ruled her existence, are only masks used to dominate women like herself (Hall 50). Her madness is thus extremely liberating, allowing her to consciously examine and reject the hoax of femininity that, up until this point, she has accepted as true.

In addition to providing a new awareness of the world, the alienation of *la chose* likewise allows the narrator to revolt against femininity in everyday life by simply not participating. As

Cardinal writes in *Autrement dit*, “plus tu t'enfonces dans la névrose moins tu peux t'insérer dans la société” (30), an assertion that is consistent with the narrator's description of her madness: “je m'aliénais . . . je m'éloignais des autres” (*Les Mots* 209). Specifically, *la chose* prohibits the narrator from acting as a wife and mother because she cannot care for her children for extended periods of time; madness has rendered her “incapable d'élever correctement mes enfants” (*Les Mots* 24). Likewise, her constant menstrual blood serves as a barrier between her and the patriarchal world. Telling the readers, “comment ne pas expliquer par ce sang le fait que je ne pouvais plus vivre avec les autres?” the narrator describes how her blood refuses to remain hidden, instead staining her clothing and furniture (*Les Mots* 10). From this we see how the anarchical blood acts in protest of her mother's insistence that “il faut que personne ne s'en aperçoive” (*Les Mots* 113). Or more generally, as A. G. Ring writes, “Marie saigne en révolte contre sa famille puritaine, le sang étant l'expression primitive de son rejet des structures imposées sur sa personnalité d'enfant” (32).

Furthermore, the blood prevents her from engaging in sex, which in turn protects her both from unwanted sex, pregnancy and rape. Because she has been taught that being a wife and mother is “se faire baiser quand on n'a envie que de dormir, de se reposer. . . craindre une autre grossesse” (*Les Mots* 250) and that as a woman “rien ne protège mon trou, aucune paupière, aucune bouche, aucune narine, aucun guichet, aucun labyrinthe, aucun sphincter,” the bleeding represents a sort of self defense against her feminine vulnerabilities and responsibilities (247). As the narrator identifies, “mon corps fabriquait en abondance les matières adéquates dont certaines s'épaississaient au point de ne plus passer, de faire bloc, dont d'autres au contraire s'écoulaient sans cesse, interdisant ainsi l'entrée à quoi que ce soit (*Les Mots* 10, my emphasis). As such, the

bleeding is a barrier between her and her duties as a reproductive being, blocking both the entrance of a penis and the exit of an unwanted child.

Thus, regardless of the anguish suffered by the narrator during her time as a madwoman, she does profit from the experience because it allows her finally to revolt against the traditional femininity that has so oppressed her. Likewise, her experience causes her to recognize the universality of the oppression of women. In the narrator's words, "j'ai compris que les gens autour de moi vivaient dans leurs châteaux de cartes et que la plupart en étaient inconscientes. Tous des frères! Moi qui me croyais seule, anormale, monstrueuse" (*Les Mots* 236). In one scene she recognizes how she has benefitted from her revolt, revealing that "j'ai eu l'impression d'être une privilégiée" (*Les Mots* 236). Her mother figures among those in their "châteaux de cartes" or those who do not ever revolt and thus languish in oppression. As she tells her analyst:

Si je n'étais pas devenue folle je n'en serais jamais sortie. Tandis qu'elle, elle a repoussé la folie jusqu'à la fin . . . C'était trop tard, la gangrène s'était mise dans sa moelle. *Elle a peur de se révolter avec les mots et les gestes de la révolte*, elle ne les savait pas, ON ne les lui avait jamais appris. Elle leur a même laissé la possibilité de prendre son suicide pour un vice caché. (*Les Mots* 278, my emphasis)

What the narrator defines here is the undeniable relation between madness and revolt. Her madness represents much more than a clinical disorder or a reaction to childhood trauma - it is her rejection of and revolt against the system that oppresses her. Unlike her mother who was unable to escape the system except through death, she protests male hegemony by refusing to fulfill her role in society through alienation and bleeding.

## *The Revolt of Sex*

As a teenager, years before the narrator's anarchical menstrual flow begins and her psychological alienation takes hold, the narrator makes her first drastic attempt at revolt through losing her virginity. Having been taught by her mother and religion the value of her sexual purity, the narrator goes through childhood and adolescence fearful of and repulsed by her sexuality. As she matures, however, her abstinence begins to weigh heavily on her, as Cardinal describes in *Autrement dit*:

je n'avais même jamais flirté, . . . j'avais envie de tout ça mais qu'il y avait une quantité de tabous religieux, familiaux, moraux qui m'avaient tenue à l'écart de la moindre vie sexuelle. Au début cette virginité absolue m'a apparu comme quelque chose d'héroïque, de pur. Mais plus les années passaient plus cette virginité me pesait, je découvrais qu'elle n'était qu'une perversion de l'esprit, une indigne hypocrisie. (139)

Her decision to have sexual intercourse also seems to be provoked by a doctor's visit following her first nervous breakdown. As previously addressed, the narrator suffers a breakdown after being told to renounce mathematics and to study the more feminine topic of philosophy at university. In response, she and her mother visit a doctor who tells the narrator that her feelings of impending death during her breakdown were actually the result of aerophagia or, more simply put, gas. Further diminishing the importance of her breakdown is the mocking tone with which both the doctor and mother address the narrator during this appointment, as she describes: "Leurs commentaires affectueux s'étaient ornés de sourires et leurs phrases étaient enguirlandées de 'jeunesse', de 'amour', de 'mariage'. Je savais bien ce qu'ils voulaient dire et je baissais les yeux, je les laissais parler" (*Les Mots* 47). Understanding that her mother and doctor

both credit her breakdown to her young age and view love and marriage as the cure to her restlessness, the narrator consciously chooses to defy them and the interdictions of her religion by having sex for the first time.

In her description of the experience, the narrator details how she chose her partner, emphasizing that her decision was not based on love or commitment but sexual ability. She also stresses the enormity of the act, given that she had up to this point rejected even masturbation despite spending many nights “tendue au point de hurler mon envie, mon besoin” (*Les Mots* 49). She says:

Et voilà que tout à coup j’avais décidé toute seule de passer outre les principes de ma classe, les préjugés de ma famille, les lois de ma mère, de bousculer la colossale religion et de faire l’amour avec un garçon que je n’aimais même pas, avec lequel il n’y avait pas à chercher l’excuse de la passion ou de la raison. Simplement je voulais faire et je faisais l’amour parce que j’en avais envie. (*Les Mots* 49)

With one decision, the narrator defies her class, religion, family and mother while also aligning herself to some degree with the playboy father that her mother so despises. Sex seems to lose its appeal for the narrator, however, after her marriage to husband Jean-Pierre and as the ultimate reality of her role as a mother and wife sinks in. During this period, the bleeding begins and she refrains from sex. After years of analysis and her first experiences of subjectivity through their dialogues, the narrator’s anarchical menstrual flow stops and her interest in sex recommences. Her choice of sexual partners again is notable as it does not seem to necessarily include her husband. Instead, she describes the pleasure of sex with many men, calling herself a “conquérante” and saying of her lovers that “jamais aucun n’a deviné que ce qui comptait pour

moi c'était de faire tout ce qui m'avait *été défendu* jusque-là. Je ne cherchais rien d'autre, *mais je le cherchais avec une avidité extrême*" (*Les Mots* 156, my emphasis). Even after so many years, sex continues to serve for the narrator as a transformative act, not sex in general but rather sex that is engaged in by choice and out of desire. We see from this how the narrator has transitioned from the rigidity of her imposed abstinence and marital fidelity to embracing her father's more liberal lifestyle that she secretly admired as a child. She thus enters "l'univers masculin" or the realm of choice and sexual desire that she once considered impenetrable for her as a woman (*Les Mots* 52). Her sexual liberty also foreshadows her push to establish the new couple that I discuss in the next chapter.

Through madness and sex, then, the narrator begins her journey towards reconstructing herself and her identity. As Cardinal quips in *Autrement dit*, "si je veux entrer dans le jeu de la féminité il faut que je compose un personnage, il faut que je m'abandonne pour trouver la femme" (156). Through revolt, the narrator has begun the process of destroying her *personnage* and establishing her identity outside the confines of gender.

## **CHAPTER 2 – The Revolt against Motherhood and the Family**

Much like traditional femininity, motherhood and the traditional construct of the family also come under attack in *Les Mots pour le dire*. Although the narrator ultimately seeks a stable family life including children and a partner even following her awakening, what she wants fundamentally deviates from the stereotypical, traditional family. She likewise finds the traditional role of mother unappealing, given her own experiences as a mother pre-analysis and the poor model provided by her mother. She thus seeks to establish a new kind of motherhood based on communication and desire rather than obligation and tradition. As such, in this chapter I will examine how women's ability to procreate has been used to limit their position in society and how they have served as the guardians of patriarchal tradition. I will also discuss the pitfalls of the traditional family and how the narrator chooses to specifically reject the trap of traditional motherhood and wifedom.

### **The Mystification of Motherhood**

In *Autrement dit* Cardinal details what she calls “la gigantesque mystification” of motherhood (189). In her view, Western society's preoccupation with the power of childbirth stems from men's desire to pacify women while usurping their economic and political power. As she writes:

Je ne peux qu'imaginer le difficile travail qui a consisté à la fois à enlever toute puissance à la femme et à la parquer dans cette même puissance réduite à la capacité d'enfanter. Puis à faire de cette capacité d'enfanter la gloire de la femme, le sens de sa vie. La mère est née de cette défaite, de cet échec. La mère, cette sainte, cette suppliciée, cette salope, cette pauvre femme! (*Autrement* 189)

It is important to note that Cardinal's assessment of reproduction does not dismiss the overall value of the act, given that it is necessary to our survival. Rather, her denigration of traditional motherhood is spurred by the observation that the creation of woman as mother is nothing more than a "mascarade" established for the purposes of patriarchy (*Autrement* 189). Writers Kristine Baber and Katherine Allen examine this process in their book *Women and Families: Feminist Reconstructions*, finding that the romanticization of motherhood dates from the time of the Industrial Revolution. They argue that the great economic changes of the period sparked an increasingly distinct separation between men's work and women's work; as men's sphere grew to include paid industrial labor and merchantry, white middle and upper class women became increasingly sequestered in the home, preoccupied with childrearing. Consequently, women's "experience and influence became limited to love, marriage, motherhood and the home" (Baber and Allen 146) and their "horizon remains limited by the family" (Mies x). We see then that the notion of traditional motherhood is only 200 years old, a fact that both discredits the assumption that it is the natural role of women and lends credence to Cardinal's assertion that it is an artificial state meant to disempower women, as seen in the following citation from *Autrement dit*:

Les mères sont indispensables mais il est indispensable que leur travail soit gratuit car dans la répartition du budget de l'Etat il n'y a pas d'enveloppe pour elles . . .  
Autrefois, quand les gens, hommes et femmes, vivaient dans l'ignorance et l'esclavage, le partage des tâches n'était pas plus mal fait que le reste . . . Quand l'argent est entré dans la danse . . . les mères, elles, sont restées à la maison . . . sans argent . . . Autrement dit, à une époque récente, au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, à cause de la

poussée industrielle, à cause de l'insatiable attirance des hommes pour l'argent, la vie des mères a été totalement et définitivement dévalorisée. (*Autrement* 190)

Cardinal's sentiments echo those of Simone de Beauvoir who in *Le Deuxième Sexe* equates motherhood with slavery, contending that motherhood had been purposefully romanticized and thrust upon women by "men and the state in order to trap women into dependency" (Appignanesi 159).

As Emily Zakin observes in her article "Differences in Equality: Beauvoir's Unsettling of the Universal," the notion of women as mothers compounded with the denial of women's power and right to choice can manifest itself in resentment and violence towards offspring, rendering both women and children victims of the idealization of motherhood. As Zakin describes: "If the woman is discontent, if her situation denies her independence and self-realization, this might also have adverse effects on the child in her care. Her rebellion against this situation, or her acquiescence to it, takes form in 'symbolic' behaviors that are a 'grim reality for her child'" (115).

Although the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* chooses madness and alienation over abuse, we see that her mother's frustrated ambitions take a more violent turn. Unable to take a lover, work as a doctor and act on her free will because of her bourgeois morality, the mother represents an unnaturally pious figure entrenched in self-denial (Rice 131). As such, the mother is unable to move beyond her role as a single mother and volunteer nurse, spurring her rage that manifests itself as psychologically abusive behavior towards her daughter. One particularly memorable example of her rage occurs when the narrator as a young girl is left at home to eat dinner with her nanny. When her mother returns and finds that the narrator has refused to eat, she decides to frighten the child by posing as the *marchand d'habits*, a man who wanders through

the town buying and selling used clothing. Knowing that her child is terrified of the *marchand*, the mother threatens to give her to him should she not eat her dinner. While the child eats, the mother goes outside and sings the song of the *marchand*, terrifying the child and causing her to vomit. Upon seeing her daughter covered in vomit at the kitchen table, the mother becomes incensed and tells her daughter in a voice full of an “exaspération hystérique” that she must eat her vomit (*Les Mots* 175). As the narrator describes:

Alors j’ai mangé toute seule mon vomi de soupe et je l’ai fait non pas pour lui plaire mais parce que je sentais en elle quelque chose de dangereux, de malade, quelque chose de plus fort qu’elle et de plus fort que moi, quelque chose de plus épouvantable que le marchand d’habits. (*Les Mots* 176)

Mentioning specifically the “quelque chose de dangereux” that is stronger than her mother and herself, the narrator clearly references her mother’s rage that both terrifies her and prohibits her from forming the bond that she so desires.

The rage of the mother comes out perhaps most forcefully when she reveals to her daughter how she attempted to abort her upon finding herself pregnant in the midst of a divorce. The mother makes her confession during a conversation with the narrator about puberty during which she emphasizes the dangers of sex and the sinfulness of abortion: “c’est un péché monstueux que l’Eglise punit par l’Enfer et la France par la prison” (*Les Mots* 136). The conversation takes a strange turn when the mother admits her amateur attempts to abort her daughter by “accident.” It seems that bourgeois ideals and her own pride render the pregnancy unbearable for her. Because abortion was neither legally or morally an option for the mother, she rode bikes, went horseback riding, and even swallowed entire bottles of aspirin and quinine in the hope of “accidentally” terminating the unwanted pregnancy. In her words, aborting this way

“n’est plus un péché, ce n’est rien, un accident voilà tout” (*Les Mots* 136). After recounting the incident in the busy streets of Algiers, the mother then abandons the young narrator on the street like an “étron” to absorb the story alone (*Au pays* 181).

Cardinal wrote extensively of the psychological repercussions of her mother’s confession. In *Autrement dit*, she describes feeling as though her mother’s words have metaphorically mutilated her body and that after such a trauma “personne ne me rendra jamais mon esprit tel qu’il était avant . . .” (191). In *Au pays de mes racines* in which she recounts her first trip back to Algeria following her repatriation, Cardinal writes that the confession left her feeling emotionally and psychologically abandoned by her mother, forcing her to find a replacement mother in her surroundings, Algeria: “Je me suis accrochée à ce que j’ai pu, à la ville, au ciel, à la mer . . . Je me suis agrippée à eux, ils sont devenus ma mère et je les ai aimés comme j’aurais voulu l’aimer, elle” (181). The narrator of the *Les Mots pour le dire* suffers similarly, saying “là, dans la rue, en quelques phrases, elle a crevé mes yeux, elle a percé mes tympan, elle a arraché mon scalp, elle a coupé mes mains, elle a cassé mes genoux, elle a torturé mon ventre, elle a mutilé mon sexe” (135). In all three versions of the story, Cardinal emphasizes the psychological pain of her mother’s rejection of her, a pain so intense that it metaphorically mutilates her body in the same way that the abortion would have years before had her mother succeeded.

What is most shocking about the episode is how unaware the mother seems of the damage that her confession has caused. Ostensibly, she relates the story of her failed abortion to spare her daughter the pain of an unwanted pregnancy; however, the narrator clearly rejects this logic, saying “je sais aujourd’hui qu’elle était inconsciente du mal qu’elle me faisait . . . je lui servais d’holocauste” (*Les Mots* 135). Instead of acting as a concerned mother, the mother acts

out her rage towards society on her, rendering her a *holocauste*. Because the mother is *inconsciente* of her true intent (to harm her daughter), the incident represents another manifestation of the “quelque chose de dangereux” that the child senses in her mother when being forced to eat her vomit (*Les Mots* 176). Thus once again the mother’s resentment towards her role as a mother manifests itself in “symbolic behaviors” (i.e., psychological abuse) against her daughter (Zakin 115). Unfortunately for the daughter, her young age and overwhelming desire to connect with her mother leave her defenseless against the woman’s abuses.

Alcoholism also figures as a symptom of the mother’s resentment towards her limited role in society. While her addiction does not seem to directly affect the young narrator’s life as she was cared for mainly by nannies, it does shed light on their damaged relationship. As the narrator describes, “je la voyais boire son vin blanc et j’avais envie d’être le vin. J’aurais voulu lui faire du bien, j’aurais voulu la rendre heureuse, j’aurais voulu attirer son attention” (*Les Mots* 72). The narrator’s desperation to connect with her mother wanes as she recognizes the woman’s underlying savagery towards her, particularly following the abortion revelation. Years later as an adult and mother herself, the narrator admits to abandoning her efforts to reach her mother, saying “elle qui n’avait pas avec moi des rapports importants – uniquement les rapports stéréotypés d’une mère dont la fille a passé la trentaine . . . Elle ne m’a jamais parlé sauf pour me raconter son avortement raté, quant à moi il y avait une belle lurette que j’avais abandonné la recherche de la communication avec elle” (*Les Mots* 258). We see then that the one time the mother acknowledged her daughter through speech, she did so to harm her. The rest of their years together are marked by the mother’s glaring disinterest in her daughter as a subjective being, or as the narrator describes it “son indifférence à mon égard et sa hargne parfois” (*Les Mots* 262). This explains the narrator’s numerable, failed attempts to please and communicate

with her mother throughout childhood. Not only then does the narrator suffer from her mother's powerlessness that manifests itself as rage but also from her very disinterest in her.

As a mother, the narrator, too, exhibits resentment towards the idealization of motherhood. In sharp contrast with her mother, her resentment manifests itself as automatism and withdrawal in regards to her children and family life. Although she consciously desires children with her husband, the narrator ultimately feels trapped and powerless, revealing of her life as a mother that:

il y a eu souvent l'arc-en-ciel du rire de ses enfants, le vieil or de l'amour, parfois le rose de la tendresse. Mais il y a surtout le rouge de son sang, le noir de sa fatigue, le marron-caca et le jaune-pisse des couches et des slips de ses petits et de son homme. Et puis le gris de la lassitude et le beige de la résignation. (*Les Mots* 252)

As a result, during her periods of madness she finds herself specifically unable to function as a mother, unable to cook and clean and tend to the needs of her children. After several years of analysis, she makes the startling realization that she, like her mother, has only a superficial relationship with her children. Thus despite her best effort to avoid the mistakes of her mother, the narrator perpetuates them, albeit in a less outwardly violent manner. Realizations like these spark her later efforts to re-imagine and remake her family and herself as a mother.

### **Mothers as the Guardians of Patriarchal Tradition**

Given that the homemaker mother is central to the traditional Western family, Cardinal asserts that it is the mother who perpetuates male hegemony by inculcating patriarchal tradition in her children. As she writes in *Autrement dit*, women “sont les gardiennes de la tradition, de l'éducation, de tout ce qui est ou doit être stable . . .” (42). In her view then, women have

assumed the role of guardians of patriarchy through teaching the importance of religion, school (which, particularly in the colonies, is used to spread nationalism), class and in some cases colonialism to their children (Hall 42). In this way, oppression is normalized early in life and the children's ambitions, desires and characters become molded to the needs of patriarchal culture.

The transmission of French culture is particularly important in *Les Mots pour le dire* given the physical location of the narrator's childhood (Algeria) and her legal nationality (French). Literary critic Lucille Cairns explores this duality, arguing that Cardinal herself felt trapped by the binaries of her life, preferring the prelapsarian image of the Algeria of her childhood over her French motherland that she aligns with negative, patriarchal values (346). We see this in many of Cardinal's works, in which she explicitly casts Algeria in a positive (albeit overly simplified and romanticized) light, depicting it as sensual, irrational and exotic while France is the center of imperialism, colonialism, order and rationality.

Although Cardinal claimed to have sided politically with the native Algerians, her works imply a more colonial affection for the country and its people than a true understanding of Algeria's political need for autonomy. Winifred Woodhull argues similarly, citing the author's tendency to romanticize and feminize Algeria while ignoring her own role as a colonist as evidence of her underlying "collusion with neocolonial ideologies" (166). This idea is particularly evident in *Les Mots pour le dire* when the narrator discusses life after Algeria during analysis. While the narrator recalls only her intense love for the country and its people, she disparages her mother and what she views as her complicity with colonialism. We see this specifically when the narrator makes the claim that "cette Algérie bien-aimée . . . ne faisait pas de différence entre elle [the mother] et les autres, les profiteurs" (*Les Mots* 234). While the narrator's contention is probably correct, she fails to note that, by the same argument, Algeria

does not make a distinction between *her* and the profiteers, either (*Les Mots* 234). Evidently it is the narrator's belief that her love for Algeria establishes a sort of solidarity between her and the Algerian people that excludes her colonialist mother. Ignoring her own role as a white, privileged member of the colony also allows her to separate herself from her colonialist family, their patriarchal values and, more importantly, from her mother that she both loves and later despises. Despite her efforts, however, the narrator still projects some of the same underlying, colonial sentiments that she denounces during analysis. From this it becomes clear that the narrator has been unable to escape the indoctrination that she received as a child from her bourgeois, colonialist mother or more broadly, her role as a French, Catholic colonizer.

Catholicism plays a significant role in this indoctrination both because it is a powerful, patriarchal institution and because of its importance in the mother's life. As Ring notes, the narrator's mother "internalise l'ordre [de l'Eglise], le projetant sur son environnement" which includes, of course, the narrator (32). During therapy the narrator recounts trying to mimic her mother during mass, saying "je l'imitais . . . je la regardais pour faire comme elle" (*Les Mots* 79). Although the narrator claims never fully to accept the religious dogma pressed upon her by her mother, its effects can be seen both in her skewed conception of sexuality as previously discussed and in her underlying colonial tendencies. Specifically, the issue stems from the fact that Catholicism was used in French Algeria to differentiate the French colonists from the native Algerians, something of which the narrator is perceptive even at a young age. In *Au pays de mes racines*, Cardinal highlights this, writing that "après ma première communion, je suis devenue plus française" (*Au pays* 65). As Cairns notes, "formal insertion into Christianity made her "plus française" because it implanted the notion common in what was a largely Catholic French society of all people being sinners, but of some people – namely, Christians – being closer to

salvation than others” (349). Although I would argue that this realization comes to the narrator even before her first communion, Cairns aptly identifies how the notions of salvation, sin and innocence work to separate the Catholic narrator from everyone else – in this case, Algerian Muslims. Cardinal reveals how fundamental this distinction was for her as a child, writing that she felt forced to choose between “aimer le bien ou aimer le mal. Eux étaient le mal, nous étions le bien” (*Au pays* 31). Even more alarming is the covert manner in which religion works to establish this separation, as Cardinal notes: “Elle ne s’est pas opérée dans le but d’être différente des Arabes, non, elle s’est perversement opérée dans le but de devenir une bonne chrétienne, une bonne Française et une dame” (*Au pays* 32). As such, religion acts as an alienating force in the colony as the narrator, perhaps subconsciously, separates the saved from the unsaved, the civilized colonists from the native heathens in her childlike efforts to become “une bonne Française.” Although it might not be the mother’s goal to perpetuate prejudices through religious tradition, it is an obvious outcome of her efforts.

The mother also transmits the rules of class to the narrator. As the narrator finds, living up to the mother’s bourgeois morality requires that she modify her behavior, dress and thought processes so as to exhibit “la charité, les bonnes mœurs, l’hygiène, la tenue” characteristic of her class (*Les Mots* 44). Apart from her implicit lessons in bourgeois morality (particularly when she describes the significance of menstruation as discussed in the previous chapter), the mother’s own piety serves as a striking model for the narrator, so much so that even her presence elicits a strange control over the narrator: “Une fois ma mère dans la maison, l’atmosphère devenait feutrée, silencieuse, un peu dramatique” (*Les Mots* 93).

Because the young narrator desires to act counter to what her class expects of her, she turns her mother’s projections inward on herself, creating deep feelings of inadequacy and guilt

when she fails to measure up. As the narrator describes, “j’ai dû mesurer la force de sa volonté à tordre mon corps et ma pensée pour leur faire prendre le chemin qu’elle avait décidé . . . Ma mère m’avait dévoyée et ce travail avait été si bien fait, si profond, que je n’en étais pas consciente, je ne m’en rendais plus compte” (*Les Mots* 71). This idea of *chemin* or determining her own future that is free of oppressive values is repeated throughout *Les Mots pour le dire*. It arises first when the narrator relates her almost drunken ecstasy when experiencing Algerian street life that is so different from her own: “J’avais peur parce que je voulais plaire à ma mère, je voulais vivre comme elle le désirait, et je sentais pourtant en moi une force épouvantable qui me poussait hors du chemin que je devais suivre” (*Les Mots* 134). It resurfaces when the narrator describes going mad after finding herself unable to establish autonomy: “Plus j’essayais de trouver mon propre chemin, plus je désespérais de le trouver dans le terrain que ma naissance m’avait donné” (*Les Mots* 51). Finally, as she nears subjectivity after several years in analysis, the narrator describes herself as “une personne autoritaire . . . qui n’acceptait pas de passer par n’importe quel chemin” (*Les Mots* 192). That the narrator asserts that it is her bourgeois mother who initially decides which *chemin* she takes is thus indicative of the degree to which the narrator is controlled by outside influences – namely, class. This idea is again evident when the narrator describes valorizing bourgeois (patriarchal) morals so completely that she fails to recognize them as such before entering analysis:

La hiérarchie des valeurs était établie depuis longtemps, elle était transmise de génération en génération . . . Elle contenait non seulement la valeur des objets mais aussi la valeur des gens, des sentiments, des sensations, des pensées, des pays, des races et des religions . . . Les valeurs bourgeoises étaient les seules qui étaient bonnes, belles intelligentes, elles étaient les meilleures. A tel point que je

ne savais même pas qu'elles s'appelaient valeurs bourgeoises. Pour moi, elles étaient les valeurs, tout court. (*Les Mots* 232)

Her failure to recognize the bourgeois hegemony that has dictated her life and *chemin* further demonstrates her mother's success in transmitting patriarchy; in her childhood, bourgeois morality was normalized and accepted. As the narrator says, "que peut faire une enfant, même autoritaire, face à une adulte impérieuse, séduisante, secrètement folle, et qui, en plus, est sa mère?" (*Les Mots* 192).

What is most tragic about the mother's attempts to mold the narrator into a bourgeois woman is her own underlying dissatisfaction with her circumstances. As Colette Hall observes, the mother "a passé sa vie dans une prison de contraintes" and is a "victime de sa classe, elle a frustré son esprit, se cantonnant dans des activités d'infirmière bénévole alors qu'elle aurait pu être médecin" (49). Thus despite the harm that the interdictions of class and religion have caused her, the mother still seeks to perpetuate traditional values.

With her own children, the narrator seems less insistent on tradition perhaps as a result of her alienating madness and of course because of the general liberalization of Western society in the 1960s. She does however specifically recount her overbearing need to "create" her children by way of controlling their personalities in the same way that her mother did to her. In *Autrement dit*, Cardinal makes clear that her issues with her own mother and those that she has with her children are neither unique nor petty. Rather, they indicate the overarching danger of the traditional mother that causes both the woman and her children to suffer. Writing in *Autrement dit* of her children's troubled friends, Cardinal says specifically that "ceux qui venaient là et qui y restaient . . . c'est qu'ils avaient des problèmes. Et bien, à chaque fois, leur problème c'était leur mère. Il n'y a pas d'exception" (204). Mothers then are inherently a problem – that is not to

say mothers in general but rather the artificial (traditional) construction of the mother, the idealization of motherhood, and the perpetuation of patriarchal tradition through mothers.

### **The Traditional Family and the Couple**

The construct of the traditional family and couple also come under attack in *Les Mots pour le dire* because of their fundamental roles in patriarchal society. Given the narrator's fervent desire to guard her own crumbling marriage from divorce, her admission that "heureusement, grâce au divorce de mes parents et aux occupations de ma mère, je n'avais pas vraiment une vie de famille" seems ironic at the least (*Les Mots* 93). However, as she argues that the family is a microcosm of society, which she has identified as patriarchal, it becomes clear that in her view, she benefits from the dissolution of her family as it destroyed the potential model of oppression that it would have provided.

We see this early in the novel when the narrator asserts that "aucun homme n'est intervenu dans ma jeunesse. J'étais aux mains des femmes," implying that her childhood functioned outside of the traditional family model (*Les Mots* 52). As such, her mother alone serves as the convergence of patriarchal culture, imbuing the narrator with religious, colonial and class-related propaganda; however, as a single mother, she fails to provide a model of traditional family dynamics. The narrator's own marriage then represents the first true application of her mother's lessons of what it is to be a wife, as evidenced in her many pieces of motherly advice: "Les femmes doivent payer par de la peine le bonheur de mettre des enfants au monde . . . Comme on fait son lit on se couche, ma fille. A femme sale, maison sale . . . Il faut être autant épouse que mère si tu veux avoir un bon mari" (*Les Mots* 251). For this reason, it becomes clear as to why the narrator asserts that it is "à partir de mon mariage que la chose s'était installée"

(*Les Mots* 31); as she finds, her only role in this oppressive institution is to “servir un homme et aimer des enfants jusqu’à la vieillesse” (*Les Mots* 252).

Cardinal further comments on the imbalance of power in the traditional family and couple in *Autrement dit*, writing that, “c’est l’homme qui commande. C’est la femme qui élève les enfants. L’homme a besoin de libertés pour équilibrer le travail harassant qu’il fournit afin de nourrir tout le monde. La femme n’a pas besoin de libertés parce que, par nature, elle n’a besoin que d’un seul homme et que, par ailleurs, elle est comblée par ses enfants” (*Autrement* 161). By this standard, the family is an economic unit in which the mother’s labor is undervalued outside of the home and unpaid within the home, thereby reinforcing her dependency on the male and supporting the capitalist system (Mies x). As such, the traditional dialectic of male-female is embodied by the unbalanced power of the traditional couple. In such a couple, the woman is not an individual but rather an extension of her husband, who acts as the subject to her object. As Carolyn Durham writes:

a Couple represents two people who are in reality only one. As such, the couple is the central form in which the fundamental dualism of Western ideology has been embodied. For the apparent synthesis contained in the two-in-one concept of the couple in fact represents either a fundamental dichotomy . . . or a false unity based on the privilege of the male *one*. (“Feminism” 86, author’s emphasis).

Because the narrator ultimately chooses madness over the interdictions of femininity and thus attempts to reject the “fundamental dichotomy” of which Durham writes, her marriage with Jean-Pierre suffers. Together the two flounder, acting as individuals in a traditional union that requires that they act as one (or the “male *one*”). As the narrator refuses to divorce, a defiance

rooted in her own childhood desire to have a father, Jean-Pierre eventually accepts a job in North America, leaving her to raise their children while still entangled in her madness.

When describing the damaged state of her marriage, the narrator explicitly blames her marital distress on “tant d’années à vivre séparément nos vies! Tant de tromperies secrètes, tant d’actions qui n’avaient pas été partagées” (*Les Mots* 213). In this way, the narrator and her husband represent the couple that Cardinal later disparages in *Autrement dit*, where she writes that “dans la majorité des couples qui m’entourent ce désir n’est entretenu que par l’habitude, ou la coquetterie, ou la jalousie, ou l’intérêt, ou le goût d’une des deux forces de vaincre définitivement l’autre force” (*Autrement* 159). Because the narrator has not yet consciously recognized the need to restructure the couple and the traditional family so as to experience equality in her relationship, she views independence in the couple as negative. Although her assertions are correct in regard to the traditional couple, she later concludes that independence, communication and desire should be the basis of the new couple and by extension of the family.

### **The Revolt against Motherhood and the Family**

Over the course of her seven years in analysis, the narrator grows increasingly wary of her precarious position in society as a mother and wife; as she claims, “plus mon traitement se déroulaient, plus je me méfiais du rôle traditionnelle de la mère” (*Les Mots* 205). Eventually her *méfiance* turns to anger as she realizes the trauma that she has incurred and inflicted as a result of society’s imposition on women to perform prescribed roles. She likewise becomes cognizant of her repressed desires and ambitions, stating: “j’avais fais la connaissance d’une personne qui était moi et qui n’était pas un ange. J’avais eu le temps de m’habituer à mon orgueil, à mon goût de l’indépendance et de l’autorité, à mon égoïsme” (*Les Mots* 204). In *Autrement dit* Cardinal expands on woman’s need to reconstruct herself:

Veux-tu me dire avec qui est mariée la dame qui ne supporte pas que son mari fasse tomber sa cendre sur la moquette ? Avec son mari ou avec sa moquette ? Quels sont les véritables enfants de la dame qui ne supporte pas le désordre ? Ses meubles, son linge, ses objets, ou les petits êtres humains qu'elle a mis au monde ? Ces accessoires, et qu'elle essaie ensuite de comprendre ce que c'est pour elle, au fond, sa moquette, ses meubles, sa vaisselle. Si elle faisait cette démarche elle découvrirait une femme qu'elle n'a jamais rencontrée: elle-même. Une femme avec ses propres désirs, ses propres goûts, ses propres élans, sa propre créativité, . . . et ses propres qualités et non pas les défauts et les qualités de la femme. C'est explosif! (*Autrement* 161)

As Cardinal implies here, women's artificial preoccupation with mothering and housework (i.e., the mystification of motherhood) has separated them from their desires, their family and each other. In order to establish genuine communication and fulfilling familial relationships, the fundamental male-female dichotomy on which patriarchy and the family is based must be done away with.

The narrator begins this process by eliminating from her life the one responsible for having initiated her into patriarchal culture: her mother. Following their repatriation to France, the narrator, her children, and her mother share an apartment. While these accommodations prove helpful when the narrator is shuffled between clinics and unable to care for her children, as she develops self-awareness and independence she increasingly resents her mother's presence. Apart from their strained relationship, the narrator rejects the mother both because she represents the oppressive bourgeois, religious values that therapy has helped her to recognize and because she fears the mother's influence on her children.

In her old age, the mother has become a pathetic figure; having lost her money after leaving Algeria, she flaunts her well-worn shoes and moth-eaten blouses as if to advertise her Catholic piety. But as the narrator notes, “pour qu’on ne s’y trompe pas, elle jouait beaucoup de ses mains de reine avec . . . une minuscule chevalière d’or frappé aux armes de sa famille, à l’annulaire une alliance de diamants et, du côté de la senestre, une émeraude sertie de brillants” (*Les Mots* 261). Although poor and old, the mother clings to her role as a bourgeois, Catholic woman, an act that infuriates the narrator. Her disgust for her mother extends to their shared apartment as it reflects the gentile taste of the bourgeoisie: “Je ne pouvais plus vivre dans ce cube bétonné d’hypocrisie et de faux-semblants” (*Les Mots* 261). After rediscovering her violence in therapy, a notable feat according to Elaine Martin, who observes that even in the 1970s women were “socially restricted from expressing anger,” the narrator tells her mother to move out (Martin 211). A far cry from the child who desperately sought her mother’s affection, the narrator describes her emotionless decision to abandon her mother, saying that “c’est sans trouble, sans honte que je suis allée trouver ma mère dans sa chambre” (*Les Mots* 262). When telling her mother the news, the narrator says specifically of her children that “je veux les élever à ma manière” (*Les Mots* 262). Her mother eventually finds lodging with an acquaintance and the narrator withdraws all interest in her well-being. The narrator herself says of the abandonment that “je n’avais plus aucune curiosité pour ce monde que j’avais abandonné avec dégoût” (*Les Mots* 263). Her word choice indicates that her rejection of the mother is also the metaphorical amputation of the collusion of religion, capitalism and class (“ce monde”) represented by her family that has done her harm (Lane 154).

Seeking to avoid the same life for her children, the narrator dramatically restructures her relationship with them by consciously revolting against the role of the traditional mother.

Bucking tradition allows her to recognize her subconscious efforts to form her children's personalities to her desire just as her mother had done: "en leur parlant comme je leur parlais, en leur habillant comme je les habillais, en vivant comme je les faisais vivre, je leur imposais ma loi, mes idées, mes goûts" (*Les Mots* 256). As such, the narrator allows her children to establish their independence and personalities separate from her. As she describes:

Alors j'ai pris une position d'observatrice, j'ai essayé de les regarder le plus possible sans intervenir, sans m'entourer d'interdits surtout. Le seul point fixe, le seul indice de sécurité pour eux, était ma présence constante à leurs côtés, ma disponibilité à leur égard, en toute circonstance. . . . j'étais en train d'apprendre que je ne devais surtout pas me sentir responsable de leurs individualités. Ils n'étaient pas moi et je n'étais pas eux. J'avais à faire leur connaissance comme ils avaient à faire la mienne. (*Les Mots* 205)

As the narrator implies here, analysis has helped her to "détrui[re] la Mère, produit de ce milieu dénaturé" which in turn allows her to construct genuine alliances with her children rather than the superficial bond that she has with her own mother (Hall 50). In *Autrement dit* Cardinal expands on this new relationship with her children, discussing how together they question the accepted rules of society: "pourquoi ne faut-il pas mettre les coudes sur la table . . . pourquoi faut-il qu'une mère serve les enfants . . . qu'est-ce que la liberté quand on vit en commun" (*Autrement* 203). Although such conversations could pass as inconsequential, questioning such foundational values as parent-child relationships, particularly why the mother should be obligated to serve her children, is a subversive act. Unlike the narrator who for many years accepts bourgeois values as normal and natural, her children are raised to question established values, thus breaking the cycle of the mother as the transmitter of patriarchal values.

While breaking away from the role of traditional mother, the narrator also seeks to establish a more egalitarian relationship with her husband, Jean-Pierre, who has chosen to live thousands of miles away from her and their children. The first step in the restructuring of their couple occurs when the narrator allows Jean-Pierre to read her writings that eventually culminate in her first novel, *Ecoutez la mer*. Normally unable to communicate with each other, as the narrator admits that Jean-Pierre regards her as a mental invalid and relates to her as such, she is overcome when her writing reduces him to tears. As we see from Jean-Pierre's admission to his wife, "Comme tu es changée. Tu m'intimides, qui es-tu?" her writing has allowed him to see her as an autonomous individual rather than the weaker force of their couple (*Les Mots* 218). From this experience the two realize the potential of their union should they approach one another as individuals with individual desires and ambition, thereby rejecting the traditional dialectic of male/female. Following this realization, the narrator says that she and Jean-Pierre begin to form "un bloc" and that "nous nous sommes nourris de nos différences" (*Les Mots* 219). Their unity then depends on equality and choice rather than obligation and submission, a revolutionary idea given the era.

The extent to which Cardinal values the liberty of the individual in the couple is revealed in *Autrement dit* where she states that she and her husband knowingly enter into illicit affairs based on their personal desire to do so. As she writes, "je peux t'assurer que nous formons un couple, un vrai couple bien que nous soyons séparés par un océan . . . que nous formions séparément des couples annexes avec des idées, des objets, des gens. Mais ces couples annexes n'ont, pour l'instant, jamais pris le pas sur le couple central que nous formons nous deux, lui et moi" (*Autrement* 159). Acknowledging this significant break with tradition, Cardinal goes on to write that this sort of couple, while being in every sense a true couple, is "subversif,

révolutionnaire” (*Autrement* 162). Such a couple does not seek to form a symbolic person, but rather two individuals who come together by choice.

The foundational disruptions in the narrator’s relationships with her children and husband naturally culminate in the formation of a new sort of family. Although the overt structure does not change, the family dynamics alter drastically given the new emphasis on the individual and egalitarianism. Because of this, all members of the family stand to benefit equally from a shared balance of power that allows them to exist as individuals rather than as the symbolic “one” that requires both a hierarchy and the denial of their subjectivity. Given patriarchal society’s need for hierarchy and oppression, it seems that Cardinal’s assertion that “vouloir changer le couple c’est vouloir la révolution” rings true (*Autrement* 158).

## CHAPTER 3 – The Revolt against Silence

As the title *Les Mots pour le dire* suggests, the narrator's fundamental problem is her inability to have intersubjective communication. Although she gains self-awareness through analysis, I will argue that she ultimately cures herself by appropriating andocentric language through the act of writing, thereby establishing her subjectivity and finally coming to terms with the trauma inflicted on her by her mother. As such, in this chapter I will address how patriarchal culture silences women through language and how the narrator overcomes this limitation through the writing cure.

### Language as Androcentric and the Silence of Women

Many feminist theorists hold that language is an androcentric construct that excludes women. As Rita Felski writes:

Clearly, language as a socially determined medium of symbolic communication bears the marks of a male-defined cultural history, which in the context of Western societies has seen the development of binary conceptual models that privilege the masculine as rational and universal and have defined the feminine as its complementary or negative pole: women have consequently experienced a sense of alienation from a philosophical and cultural tradition which has consistently excluded or marginalized them. (42)

French in particular comes under attack as an androcentric or even phallogentric language because of its use of gendered grammatical features, which some female writers consider to be “the products of patriarchal reason and logos” (Thiher 302). Ring similarly argues that “la femme, étant l'Autre linguistique de l'homme, est marginalisée par le langage, surtout dans la langue française, dont les structures grammaticales séparent et différencient les sexes” (33). In

Ring's view, because language is inextricably bound to patriarchy, it is an inadequate means of expressing the feminine experience, hence the narrator's initial inability to find the words to say "it," the "it" being her experiences as a woman in Western culture.

Prior to attending psychoanalytic sessions, the narrator's communication is stunted at best. Her childhood is characterized by her many failed attempts at communication with her mother who, as the narrator notes, "ne m'a jamais parlé sauf pour me raconter son avortement raté" (*Les Mots* 258). Later as the narrator turns to madness, she finds communicating with her analyst equally as challenging. Despite her desire to speak and to be heard (as we see when she says longingly, "Si je pouvais parler à quelqu'un qui m'écoute vraiment!" after her first session with her analyst), self-expression eludes her. For this reason, her first sessions with her analyst are marked by evasive language and her inability to directly address the origins of her madness. As Cardinal reveals in *Autrement dit*: "Au début les mots sont sortis comme d'habitude. Il m'a fallu quelques mois de séance pour me rendre compte que je parlais comme un perroquet . . . que les mots que je prononçais ne m'appartenais pas, qu'ils appartenaient à ma famille, à mon milieu, à mon instruction" (62). Although the narrator literally speaks, she is in fact silenced as she lacks the means to *s'exprimer*, verbalizing instead the generic rhetoric of her upbringing. In an interview regarding her then new novel *Une vie pour deux*, Cardinal more directly addressed women's silence in Western society, saying of the lead female character "she is like those insignificant women, those women who signify something other than themselves, who are the expression of someone else (their husbands, their children and their social environment) and not of their own individuality" (qtd in Royer 46). Because of the influence of the mother and what she epitomizes, the narrator of the *Les Mots pour le dire* indeed represents one of the many

women who are “only the expression of the other, a discourse that takes place outside of themselves, externally to their existence” (qtd. in Royer 46).

The major issue with the narrator’s fabricated being and thus disingenuous speech is that she must reconnect with the mother and what she represents in order to find peace. Supporting Haigh’s idea of the need to reestablish the maternal genealogy so as to achieve subjectivity, the narrator claims that “pour me trouver il fallait que je la [her mother] trouve, que je la démasque, que je m’enfonce dans les arcanes de ma famille et de ma classe” (*Les Mots* 70). However, in order to do so, the narrator must delineate her past and the damage that patriarchal culture (largely as transmitted through her mother) has done to her and her self-concept. Specifically, she must address her socially constructed perception of her female body. It is in this quest that the narrator succeeds in re-appropriating androcentric language to establish the value of her body and her experiences as a woman in Western society.

To begin such a discussion, it must be noted that language is used to create symbolic meaning and value, or as Ring asserts, “l’appellation contrôlée est symbole de la qualité agréée par l’ordre établi et l’affirmation de l’existence: les produits qui n’en sont pas dotés n’existent pas” (Ring 33). Thiher, too, argues that “experience is what is communicated; reality is what can be codified by the linguistic system” (308). As such, the narrator’s self-perception is heavily affected by the belief that her (sexual) body is dirty and shameful. Having been taught by her mother that the female body is inherently open to rape and unwanted pregnancy as well as being the source of undesirable bodily functions like menstruation and defecation, the narrator for many years associates her body with fear and shame. Her sentiments are further compounded by what she later considers the lack of affectionate language to describe her body, specifically her genitalia and anus. In her view, “aucun mot ne contenait mon anus” (*Les Mots* 230) outside of

words that she considers “laid, vulgaires, sales, grossiers, grotesques ou techniques” (*Les Mots* 257). Because her anus exists outside of her bourgeois vocabulary, she feels as though she has none; it does not exist because there is no adequate word to describe it. In her words, “toutes ces choses n’existaient pas puisqu’on n’avait pas le droit d’employer les mots qui les désignaient” (*Les Mots* 232). It follows then that the narrator must also “discover” her vagina during analysis in the same way that she appropriates her anus. We see that doing so allows the narrator the insight necessary to understand and appropriate the androcentric language that has devalued her body and her need for self expression, among other things. In her words:

grâce à mon anus, j’avais compris que tout était important et que ce que l’on appelle sale, petit, honteux, pauvre, ne l’était pas en réalité, que c’était l’échelle des valeurs utilisée par mon milieu social qui avait jeté une voile hypocrite sur certaines personnes, certaines pensées, certaines choses, faisant ainsi mieux ressortir le propre, le grand, le brillant et le riche. (*Les Mots* 249)

As Colette Hall Trout notes, the narrator’s new understanding of language and its power to liberate and oppress enables to her unmask the mechanisms of patriarchal ideology (55).

Because the mother figures as the single greatest symbol of oppression in the novel, it follows that the narrator uses her newfound language to peel away the mother’s proud, Catholic, bourgeois exterior, exposing her for what she is: a frigid, disillusioned alcoholic. As analysis has allowed the narrator to recognize her mother’s abuses, the narrator has come to despise the woman that she once desperately loved. She has renounced any attempt to communicate with her while bitter that their one true conversation was her mother’s abortion confession (*Les Mots* 258). What the narrator must recognize, however, is that although her mother has unwittingly served as an agent of patriarchy, she is equally its victim, perhaps more so than the narrator

because of generational differences and the general liberalization of Western society in the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, the narrator's inability to view her mother as an individual has actually aided in the mother's victimization; her childhood desire for a mother-daughter relationship helped to prohibit the mother from forming an identity beyond the roles of wife and mother, ironically the very thing that the narrator seeks to do post-analysis. We see then that the two women shared a mutually oppressive, symbiotic relationship in which the narrator oppressed the mother by defining her as "mother" and the mother harmed the daughter both by transmitting patriarchal ideology to her and acting out her rage on her.

The narrator realizes this during her mother's last doctor's appointment before her death; she is brought to the clinic to address her alcoholism after the narrator finds her in bed, drunk and covered in feces. While the mother relates her life story to the doctor, the narrator discovers:

jusqu'à cet instant elle avait été ma mère, uniquement ma mère, pas une personne . . . Pour moi elle n'avait pas de nom, c'était: ma mère. Dans ce cabinet de médecin parisien je rencontrais *pour la première fois* Solange de Talbiac . . . dite 'Soso' pour les amis. 'Soso' dans le soleil, à l'ombre de sa grande capeline, de minuscules perles de sueur sur sa lèvre supérieure parce que sa peau de rousse ne supportait pas la chaleur. 'Soso' dans le jardin de ses parents, avec une brassée de fleurs dans ses bras . . . le désir insoupçonné de l'homme qui venait vers elle, le beau Français qui sentait l'aventure à plein nez. 'Soso' douce, toute jeune, innocente. (*Les Mots* 273, my emphasis)

Her first acknowledgement of her mother as Solange de Talbiac is when the reader first learns her name, too, reinforcing the narrator's assertion that up to this point, she has never considered her mother a person. Recognizing her name and thus her life outside of motherhood

grants the mother “subjective particularity,” transforming her into an individual in the narrator’s perspective (Martin 211). In spite of her breakthrough, however, the narrator has abandoned any hope for her mother’s recovery. The mother is too far gone in her addiction and ill-equipped to revolt in the way that narrator has. In the narrator’s words, “c’était trop tard” (*Les Mots* 273). For this reason, the narrator views her mother’s eventual death as a liberating event; too consumed in her addiction and dementia, death was her only way out.

Although the narrator misses her mother’s funeral, she visits her grave where she finally succeeds in addressing her dead mother as a subject, telling her “je vous aime. Oui, c’est ça, je vous aime. Je suis venue ici pour vous déclarer ça une fois pour toutes. Ça me fait du bien de vous le dire et de vous le répéter” (*Les Mots* 277). Although the narrator must have pronounced these words before to her mother, they are finally imbued with meaning, as she examines: “‘je’ (moi, la folle, la pas folle, l’enfant, la femme) ‘vous’ (ma mère, la belle, l’experte, l’orgueilleuse, la démente, la suicidée) ‘aime’ (l’attachement, l’union, mais aussi la chaleur, le baiser, et encore la joie possible, le bonheur espéré)” (*Les Mots* 277). That the narrator expands on their identities, identifying both the accepted and stigmatized roles that both women assumed in life (“la folle . . . l’enfant” and “ma mère . . . la démente”) reveals her reconciliation with her mother. She is no longer simply a symbol of male hegemony but also a woman encased in her desire to break free from the system she perpetuates, as evidenced in the narrator’s reconstruction of the mother’s formerly limited identity.

The narrator also recognizes that her mother’s fate of alcoholism and death could have been hers, too, had she not revolted against patriarchy first through madness and then through language and writing: “Si je n’étais pas devenue folle je n’en serais jamais sortie. Tandis qu’elle, elle a repoussé la folie jusqu’à la fin, jusqu’à son départ d’Algérie. C’était trop tard, la gangrène

s'était mise dans sa moelle" (*Les Mots* 278). The juxtaposition of the two women thus presents a dichotomy of which the reader must take note; the mother's acquiescence and complicity result in dementia and death while the narrator's revolt allows her to reposition herself as a subject in society. Given that the following chapter of *Les Mots pour le dire* reads only, "Quelques jours plus tard, c'était Mai 68," it seems that the mother's death, while ultimately liberating for her and the narrator, is meant to serve as both a cautionary tale and inspiration for readers following the same path as the mother (*Les Mots* 279).

While the narrator revolts against her position in society through madness and her rejection of the traditional family, writing is perhaps the most subversive act that she commits. Publication furthers this revolt as her works could serve to inspire readers to break from a position of silence, thereby perpetuating the narrator's revolt against the established order. In this way, the narrator's words serve as weapons and her language as a path to liberation from oppression.

### **The Revolt of Writing**

In his 2000 publication *Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature*, Allen Thiher writes that female writer's use of language to express revolt is an ironic act, given that they must use a patriarchal construct (language) to express their rebellion against patriarchy itself (309). Cardinal supports this view, arguing that female writers must work with a language that "n'est pas fait pour les femmes" in order to express themselves (*Au Pays* 89). As we have seen, the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* overcomes this limitation by recognizing the power of choice in language – choosing to use and valorize certain, sometimes indelicate, words over evasive language.

The narrator begins her career as a writer after several years in psychoanalysis, secretly keeping journals to document both her memories and fictional stories. Her joy at discovering language and writing is evident as she describes desiring writing as she would “un bel amoureux tout neuf” (*Les Mots* 206). Despite her zeal for the act, the narrator does not dare consider herself an actual writer. In keeping with Ring and Thiher’s assertions that language dictates reality, her reluctance to see herself as a author could stem from the gender marking for the French for writer – *un écrivain*. Ring’s argument that in the French language “certaines professions – le président, le professeur, le médecin - excluent la femme de leur pratique” indicates that the specificity of *écrivain* initially prohibits the narrator from assuming the title (33). Furthermore, Ring notes that few models of feminine writers exist to whom the narrator can aspire to emulate; we see this when the narrator enumerates the many books that she has admired since childhood: “*Madame Bovary, Les Dialogues de Platon, les romans et les essais de Sartre . . .*” (*Les Mots* 207).

Of her insecurities as a writer, the narrator reveals that “le fait même d’écrire me semblait être un acte important dont je ne suis pas digne. Jamais ne m’étais venue à l’esprit la prétention d’écrire” (*Les Mots* 207). Although she recognizes the importance of the *acte* of writing, given that it becomes her pathway to self expression, she feels ill-equipped and unworthy. Her hesitation, however, dissipates after her husband reads her work and the two connect intellectually as a result. As discussed in the previous chapter, the power of her writing – demonstrating her selfhood apart from her identity as a wife, mother and madwoman – transforms the narrator into an individual in Jean-Pierre’s perspective. She no longer represents one of the women that Cardinal pities that are only the expression of some other (male) person. Instead, she has established the existence of her own desires, thoughts and personality apart from

the artificial persona that her upbringing has created. Writing is thus a transformative act for the narrator.

This idea is especially evident when the narrator sells her first manuscript, as she reveals: “Ma vie était entièrement transformée. Non seulement j’avais découvert le moyen de m’exprimer, mais j’avais trouvé toute seule le chemin qui m’éloignait de ma famille, de mon milieu, me permettant ainsi de construire un univers qui m’était propre” (*Les Mots* 220). In *Autrement dit* Cardinal furthers this idea, writing that “avant de devenir écrivain j’ai été la femme que *je devais être*, celle que mon éducation et mon instruction avaient préparée” (59, my emphasis). It is thus not only psychoanalysis that delivers the narrator from her alienation and oppression, but also the act of writing. While analysis aids the narrator in determining patriarchal ideology as the source of her madness, in reality she also cures herself by affirming her value as a human being and her own existence through authorship.

The narrator’s decision to both appropriate androcentric language so as to express herself and to publish her account of life as a woman and madwoman, roles that render her doubly rejected by patriarchal society, is undeniably grounded in revolt. Authorship is her method of overcoming “women’s reduction to a position of silence in patriarchal culture” (Haigh 64).

A simple reading of *Les Mots pour le dire* reveals that the language of the book itself is subversive, apart from the narrator’s own appropriation of masculine language. Upon its publication in 1975, *Les Mots pour le dire* received significant criticism based on what readers considered its lewdness. Cardinal’s blunt and sometimes licentious writing style was atypical of female writers at the time, which explains in part her novel’s poor reception. She defended *Les Mots pour le dire* in her follow-up work *Autrement dit*, arguing that “quand tu refuses de t’excuser, d’employer aucun subterfuge et que tu sers des mots comme ils sont, de tous les mots,

alors la critique prévient le public . . . que tu es agressive, exhibitionniste” (83). In Cardinal’s view, refusing to hide behind effeminate language when expressing the feminine experience elicited criticism because many readers could not see beyond the obvious lens of patriarchy. Prominent issues in the book like the narrator’s constant menstruation and her childhood masturbation experiences were read as crass and inappropriate for publication. Trout argues similarly about the sexism of the public, citing the parallels between *Les Mots pour le dire* and Michel Tournier’s work *Les Météores* published in the same year. While Cardinal’s work was denigrated for its use of typically foul vocabulary, Tournier’s novel, featuring equally as “offensive” language, was hailed as a literary achievement (Trout 239).

The French intellectual scene likewise snubbed *Les Mots pour le dire* because of its bestseller status and readability. As Cardinal quipped in an interview, “en France, dès qu'une chose est obscure et confuse, on la soupçonne de profondeur” (qtd. in Trout 232). Feminists however were eager to claim the book because of its attack on male hegemony and gender roles. Somewhat ironically, Cardinal denied any association with the movement as well as the notion of *écriture féminine* because of her rejection of esoteric and elitist language; in her view, such language alienates the common woman in the same way that misogynistic and androcentric language does (Trout 234). She comments on this in *Autrement dit*, saying “je crains l’hermétisme, c’est-à-dire un chemin qui n’appartiendrait qu’à moi par lequel peu de lecteurs pourraient passer. Je crains ça non pas à cause de la solitude mais à cause de la prétention que ça implique” (61).

The book’s “lewdness” and Cardinal’s refusal to incorporate esoteric language demonstrates that *Les Mots pour le dire* itself, apart from its plot, serves as a revolt against the interdictions socially imposed on female writers of the time. More broadly, Cardinal seemed to

view the narrator's struggle for subjectivity as a universal one, rendering her book and the narrator's revolt a sort of guidebook for those trapped in oppression. We see this in the narrator's frequent reference to the *inconscience* of those around her. In one such scene, she declares, "j'ai compris que les gens autour de moi vivaient dans leurs châteaux de cartes et que la plupart en étaient inconscients. Tous des frères! Moi, qui me croyais seule . . ." (*Les Mots* 236). This parallels her assertion that as a child "je n'en étais pas consciente" (71) of her mother's attempts to make her into a bourgeois woman, while the mother, too, is "inconsciente du mal" that she commits against her daughter (135). Writing and publishing books like *Les Mots pour le dire* thus shakes the foundations of our "châteaux de cartes" by exposing the undeniable dangers of patriarchal ideology and male hegemony (*Les Mots* 236). It also gives a voice to those women in society who have none, as Cardinal writes in *Autrement dit*:

Ces femmes savent tout de la vie, de la mort, de la liberté, de l'amour, mais elles ne savent pas l'exprimer. D'une part elles n'ont pas l'habitude de le faire, ce n'est pas leur rôle, c'est le rôle des hommes, d'autre part elles n'ont pas les mots pour le faire . . . c'est pour elles que j'ai envie d'écrire quand je pense que quelqu'un me lira. (66)

For Cardinal and the narrator, writing thus functions as a personal revolt against their silence in society and androcentric language and as a political revolt by communicating the need for a new social order (Ring 36).

## Conclusion

Cardinal clearly identifies in *Les Mots pour le dire* how patriarchy through religion, class, colonialism and the construction of gender has harmed those not in the white, male ruling class. Given the year of its publication (1975), it likewise implies the most apropos solution of revolt and social change in its final chapter: “Quelques jours plus tard c’était Mai 68” (*Les Mots* 279).

Although the social context of *Les Mots pour le dire* renders the text dated and irrelevant for some critics, I would argue that the subject matter of the book supersedes its social context (Webb 19); the traditional male-female dialectic that comes under attack in the text has existed for thousands of years and was not done away with even following the second wave of feminism or the events of May 1968 that the narrator references. Furthermore, the quasi-feminist point view that I have taken in this thesis is neither meant to echo the claims of second-wave feminists, nor is it meant to disregard the more recent post-colonial readings of the text. Rather, I chose to examine *Les Mots pour le dire* from this viewpoint because I felt that the text highlighted the continued need for a shift in the sexist imbalance of power that exists in all cultures dominated by male hegemony, which unfortunately still includes much if not all of Western society.

This then raises the question: if patriarchy still exists, did the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* successfully revolt? As Winifred Woodhull argues, Cardinal at times exhibited a neocolonial affection for Algeria and its people. This comes across in the narrator’s attitude towards her mother and even in her assertion that “aucun homme n’est intervenu dans ma jeunesse,” given the stable presence of certain Algerian males during her childhood (*Les Mots* 52). The narrator’s underlying neocolonial tendencies represent a rather significant failure as her identity is partially based on her cultural and political solidarity with Algeria. Her inability to

totally reject colonialism, however, does serve as a poignant reminder of the powers of socialization and the normalization of oppression.

Where the narrator does succeed is in establishing an alternative model of family life and marriage, one in which choice, desire and the independence of the individual are fundamental values. As Cardinal writes in *Autrement dit*, “Chaque union doit être un choix, sinon ce n’est pas une union” (157). Likewise, her efforts as a writer to express the feminine experience and identify the struggles common to Western women are successful. Furthermore, language is what ultimately brings the narrator and her mother together, serving to reestablish Haigh’s maternal genealogy even after the mother’s death (68). Although the narrator is ultimately unable to completely reject all trappings of patriarchy, her examples of revolt highlight the need for a new social order and have the power to inspire her revolutionary sentiment in others.

As the subject matter and format of *Les Mots pour le dire* lend the novel to psychoanalytic criticism, much of the previous criticism of *Les Mots pour le dire* has taken a psychoanalytic approach that positions the narrator strictly as the victim of her mother’s abuse and explains her madness and subsequent bleeding by way of her mother’s abortion confession. Future research could continue my brief exploration of how the narrator actually benefits from her madness. Furthermore, the text is rife with examples of gendered behavior and discussions of what it is to be a woman; the benefits of her madness could thus be further examined through the lens of gender.

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