

Contesting the Mommy Myth:

Un heureux événement (Eliette Abécassis) as Maternal Counternarrative

Julie Rodgers

— *C'est vrai, la maternité est un devoir, dit ma sœur. J'ai un mari, deux enfants et un bel appartement, et j'ai envie de tout plaquer et de partir, est-ce que c'est possible de le dire, ça?*

— *Non...en fait, oui, c'est possible. Il faut se l'avouer et le dire. Je crois qu'il faut avoir ce courage-là.*¹

One of the core arguments propagated by second-wave feminism was that motherhood, far from being all women's natural physiological destiny and true vocation in life, was, in fact, at least in its institutional form, a powerful tool of female subjugation, reducing women to their reproductive function and imprisoning them in the home.² From Simone de Beauvoir in the 1940s (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949) to Betty Friedan in the 1960s (*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963), and throughout the 1970s with Shulamith Firestone (*The Dialectic of Sex*, 1970), Adrienne Rich (*Of Woman Born*, 1977) and Nancy Chodorow (*The Reproduction of Mothering*, 1978), second-wave feminists called for resistance to and refusal of the oppressive model of motherhood glorified by patriarchal society. In their eyes, this model only served to stunt women's personal

1. Eliette Abécassis, *Un heureux événement* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005), p. 122, hereafter *HE* in the text.

2. The distinction between motherhood as institution and motherhood as personal experience is set out in very clear terms in Adrienne Rich's *Of Women Born* (London: Virago, 1977). Rich explains that the institution of motherhood is both male-defined and male-controlled and is deeply oppressive to women in its demands and expectations of perfection. The institution of motherhood is so narrowly constructed that it leaves little space for the much wider spectrum of real maternal experiences which, as I shall highlight in this article, are often fraught with contradiction and lie outside the strict paradigms of what the institution deems good and proper mothering.

and intellectual development and relegated them to a life of unpaid and unshared domestic labour.³ Given the insistence with which second-wave feminists put forward their case for an end to the tyranny of a monolithic, reductive and phallogocentric model of motherhood and the extensive and receptive female audiences that their publications reached, it would seem perfectly acceptable to presume that the need for a new and more liberating model of motherhood is no longer a key concern for women in the twenty-first century. This supposition is further strengthened by the fact that it is often argued nowadays that we have reached an era deemed to be postfeminist: in brief, a stage by which the goals of second-wave feminism are either claimed to have already been achieved, or, alternatively, viewed as no longer relevant.⁴ However, such assumptions are both naive and erroneous for, as I shall demonstrate in this article, the pressures of contemporary society on women to perform as perfect mothers are stronger than ever before. While it must be conceded that this is often an issue aligned with the more privileged classes, the importance of mounting a challenge to such constraining norms remains fundamental if women are truly to take control of their own mothering.

Recent research in the domain of motherhood has revealed that the achievements of second-wave feminists are slowly being eroded. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004) have identified what they

-
3. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1949); Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963); Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Morrow, 1970); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton, 1977) and Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).
 4. The term 'postfeminism' is, admittedly, much more complex than this brief definition implies. In fact, there is little agreement among scholars as to its precise meaning. However, it is most often employed to denote the casting off of the shackles of a supposedly out-dated feminism with an emphasis on women's emancipation having been obtained. On the other hand, it could equally be argued that our seemingly 'postfeminist' society is more 'pre-feminist' than anything else, as women, in their renouncing of second-wave feminist values, appear to have relapsed back to a former and deeply inhibitive set of ideological beliefs. See Sarah Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2004) for a detailed discussion of the terminology.

consider to be a particularly noxious form of motherhood in the twenty-first century (noxious in terms of how it impacts on women's maternal experiences) and have coined the term 'new momism' to designate this phenomenon. According to Douglas and Michaels, what is especially dangerous about this new breed of mothering is that it presents women with a 'set of ideals, norms, and practices [...] that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood' and that can be interpreted as valorizing women, but which 'in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach'.⁵ Diane Negra uses the term 'postfeminist retreatism' to describe what she sees in contemporary society as 'a pull back to a perfected domesticity' and 'a trend that posits motherhood as salvation'.⁶ Here Negra is employing the term 'postfeminist' not to suggest that all the goals of feminism have been attained, but, rather, to imply that society appears to have regressed, especially where motherhood is concerned, into an anti-feminist position. Another scholar arguing in a similar vein to Douglas, Michaels and Negra, and their theories of 'new momism' and 'postfeminist retreatism', is Elisabeth Badinter. In her most recent publication, the controversial *Le Conflit: La Femme et la mère* (2010), Badinter criticizes 'the silent revolution', or, rather, 'involution', of the last twenty years which, she declares, has undone all the achievements of the feminist movement by re-instating the maternal at the core of female identity and imposing an even more unattainable, almost tyrannical set of standards on mothers.⁷ In *Le Conflit*, Badinter repeatedly demonstrates the extent to which the spectre of the good mother continues to hover over and dictate women's experiences of mothering, outlawing any maternal feelings other than those that are positive towards the child. And yet, as Rozsika Parker demonstrates

-
5. Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), pp. 4–6.
 6. Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of the Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 9, 29.
 7. Elisabeth Badinter, *Le Conflit: La Femme et la mère* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), p. 9. This is not the first time that Badinter has challenged the institution of motherhood. In an earlier publication, *L'Amour en plus: Histoire de l'amour maternel* (Flammarion: Paris, 1980), she questioned the existence of 'maternal instinct'.

in her book *Torn in Two* (2005), the maternal experience is not so straightforward in terms of how a mother feels towards her child. On the contrary, it is essentially a highly ambivalent experience where opposing feelings of love and hate for the child co-exist, and which, as a result, ‘inevitably entails encountering dissonances and disjunctions between the lived experience of mothering and the sometimes contradictory yet usually prescriptive or normative ideals that mediate mothering’.⁸ However, as is suggested by the quotation which serves as an epigraph to this article (selected from *Un heureux événement*, the text that will be the focus of our analysis) and as Parker illustrates throughout *Torn in Two*, full and open discussion of the existence of maternal ambivalence is virtually prohibited.⁹ According to psychoanalyst Barbara Almond, contemporary society simply refuses to acknowledge ‘the dark side of mothering’:¹⁰

That mothers have mixed feelings about their children should come as no surprise to anybody, but it is amazing how much of a taboo the negative side of mothering carries in our culture, especially at this time. I believe that today’s expectations for good mothering have become so hard to live with, the standards so draconian, that maternal ambivalence has increased and at the same time become more unacceptable to society as a whole.¹¹

The aim of this article is to highlight the way in which an increasing number of contemporary women writers in French are experimenting with the textual space as a means of defying the oppressive norms of motherhood by allowing the voices of ‘other’ mothers, that is, ‘transgressive’ mothers whose maternal behaviour does not conform to

8. Rozsika Parker, *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (London: Virago, 2005), p. 2.

9. Parker, *Torn in Two*, p. 1.

10. Barbara Almond, *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. xiii.

11. Almond, *The Monster Within*, p. xiii.

societal expectations, to speak out and be heard.¹² Indeed, Almond makes a convincing case in *The Monster Within*, a psychoanalytical study of atypical mothering, for the use of literature in the bid to understand distressed mothering, explaining that fiction can sometimes illustrate more dramatically and thoroughly issues that cannot be published in clinical accounts due to confidentiality constraints.¹³

By concentrating on *Un heureux événement*, a novel that presents the reader with an ambivalent mother whose experience of mothering deviates, for the most part, from the prescribed model, this article will examine what could be termed as a backlash against ‘new momism’, ‘postfeminist retreatism’ and cultural ‘involution’ through the emergence of a strand of non-conformist first-person maternal narratives in contemporary women’s writing in French.¹⁴ Such texts trace a trajectory of unconventional mothering whose features incorporate: feelings of

12. For a detailed discussion of emerging maternal voices in contemporary women’s writing in French, Gill Rye’s *Narratives of Mothering* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009) is a key reference text. Rye examines an impressive range of ‘other’ mothering accounts, including lesbian mothering, mothering alone, traumatic mothering and, most pertinent to this article, ambivalent mothering. Rye acknowledges Abécassis’s *Un heureux événement* in her chapter ‘Mothering in Context’ as a ‘demystifying narrative about the ambivalence of pregnancy, childbirth, and early motherhood’ (p. 35) but admits that it came to her attention too late to be considered in depth in her study. While *Un heureux événement* is discussed by Lucille Cairns in her most recent book *Post-War Jewish Women’s Writing in French* (Oxford: Legenda, 2011), it features as simply one of many literary references to what Cairns terms ‘New Sites of Conflict’ (this is the chapter within which her discussion of Abécassis occurs) in contemporary Jewish women’s writing. This article, therefore, by providing an in-depth discussion focused solely on *Un heureux événement*, hopes to develop certain observations made by Rye and Cairns regarding this text and expand on its potential to contribute important findings to current research on the maternal in contemporary women’s writing in French.

13. Almond, *The Monster Within*.

14. It could be argued that the fact that the mother speaks in the first person in this novel is in and of itself ‘transgressive’. As first noted by Marianne Hirsch in *The Mother-Daughter Plot* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) and recently reiterated by Gill Rye in *Narratives of Mothering*, mothers rarely appear as subjects in literature. Instead, they are ‘overwhelmingly, objects of the narratives and discourses and of the fears and fantasies of others’ (Rye, p. 15). Thus, in the novel selected for analysis in this article, the mother is doubly dissident, in that she breaks with tradition by assuming her own voice as well as by delivering a narrative that subverts expectations of ‘good mothering’.

repulsion at being pregnant and disgust with the physical changes brought on by pregnancy; over-mothering (emotionally suffocating the child, exerting excessive control over the child's life); ambivalent mothering (being both repelled by and drawn towards the child); incompetent mothering (not meeting the child's basic needs); outright rejection of motherhood (aborting or abandoning a child, or deciding not to have children); child-abuse (whether psychological or physical or both); and, finally, at the extreme end of the scale, infanticide.¹⁵ *Un heureux événement* is part of this wave of subversive maternal writing in that it challenges and desacralizes many of the most prominent stereotypes associated with the experiences of pregnancy and being a new mother, exposes their inadequacies and transgresses their boundaries. During an interview where she discusses her motivation for writing *Un heureux événement*, Abécassis reveals that it was the quest for an alternative, more authentic representation of the mother's experiences, even if it risked shocking her readers, that spurred her on.¹⁶ Abécassis states:

Quand j'étais enceinte, et après avoir accouché, j'aurais voulu lire quelque chose qui m'aide à comprendre ce que j'étais en train de vivre. J'avais besoin d'être rassurée, mais je n'ai rien trouvé dans la littérature. Il y a énormément de manuels du genre

-
15. Examples of texts belonging to this current trend of transgressive maternal narratives in contemporary women's writing in French and which chart a range of non-prescriptive experiences of pregnancy and mothering include: Nathalie Azoulai, *Mère agitée* (Paris: Seuil, 2002); Geneviève Brisac, *Weekend de chasse à la mère* (Paris: Éditions de l'Olivier, 1996); Ying Chen, *Un enfant à ma porte* (Paris: Seuil, 2009); Marie Darrieussecq, *Le Bébé* (Paris: P.O.L., 2001); Annie Ernaux, *L'Événement* (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 2001); Pascale Kramer, *L'Implacable Brutalité du réveil* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2009); Véronique Olmi, *Bord de mer* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2001) and Mazarine Pingeot, *Le Cimetière des poupées* (Paris: Julliard, 2007).
16. Abécassis's desire to expose the myths of motherhood is reminiscent of a number of accounts of the maternal experience preceding the publication date of this novel. Texts that come to mind, and which have played an influential role in challenging how one thinks about motherhood include: Susan Maushart, *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Our Lives and Why We Never Talk About It* (London: Penguin, 2000); Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001) and Naomi Wolf, *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* (London: Vintage, 2002).

J'attends un enfant [...]. On en parle aussi dans les magazines, mais toujours sous un aspect très positif, avec des images un peu idéalisées [...]. J'aurais bien voulu lire des livres ou des articles qui me disent la vérité, toute la vérité, le côté merveilleux de la naissance, mais aussi à quel point c'est difficile, bouleversant. J'ai fini par écrire le livre que je voulais lire, mais que je n'avais jamais trouvé.¹⁷

It is not surprising, therefore, that reviews of *Un heureux événement* have focused on its honesty, lauding it as 'un roman rafraîchissant, dans la mesure où il va à l'encontre du politiquement (ou plutôt socialement) correct', a text that courageously denounces 'l'hypocrisie et les mensonges qui entourent la maternité', and even positing it as pertaining to 'la catégorie de romans nécessaires à la construction des esprits'.¹⁸ Her uninhibited writing about mothering is one of the reasons that Abécassis's account of the experience can be classed as a transgressive maternal narrative, or perhaps the more appropriate term is 'maternal counternarrative'. Andrea O'Reilly defines the latter as any practice/theory of mothering that seeks to 'interrupt the master narrative of motherhood'.¹⁹ *Un heureux événement* is undoubtedly such a text due to its relentless unmasking, questioning and, subsequently, deconstruction of many of the injurious myths associated with the established, patriarchal institution of motherhood. It should be noted that Abécassis's book has recently been adapted for the screen by director Rémi Bezançon under the same title (*Un heureux événement*,

17. Eliette Abécassis cited by André Durand, 'André Durand présente Éliette Abécassis' <www.comptoir litteraire.com/docs/41-abecassis-eliette.doc> [accessed 6 October 2012].

18. Quotations are drawn respectively from: Marie Javet <<http://parlons-bouquins.com/?p=28>> [accessed 6 October 2012]; Brigit Bontour, 'Eliette Abécassis, *Un heureux événement*' <<http://ecrits-vains.com/critique/bontour114.htm>> [accessed 6 October 2012] and Eloïse Trouvat, 'Eliette Abécassis, une mère subversive' <<http://www.mediacult.fr/2011/05/09/eliette-abecassis-une-mere-subversive>> [accessed 6 October 2012].

19. Andrea O'Reilly, 'Introduction' in *Feminist Mothering*, ed. by Andrea O'Reilly (New York: SUNY, 2008), pp. 1–22 (p. 4).

2011). This article, however, will concentrate its analysis solely on the novel, one the main reasons being that the film quite clearly dilutes ‘la noirceur du bouquin’ and ‘passe à côté de son sujet’, namely, the desacralization of motherhood that is at the heart of Abécassis’s *Un heureux événement*.²⁰

The first way in which *Un heureux événement* transgresses the master narrative of motherhood is by daring to inscribe the taboo of maternal ambivalence into the heart of the mother’s experience. Conflicted feelings about being a mother run throughout the entire novel and are manifested in a multitude of forms. Right from the opening pages of the book, when Barbara, the homodiegetic narrator, reflects on her relationship with the changing shape of her body due to pregnancy, it is evident to the reader that, for this particular character, the journey towards becoming a mother is already diverging from the promised and assumed trajectory. To clarify, rather than viewing her body as being in alignment with the images of the expectant mother that society presents to us, wherein she is glowing with health and pregnancy in general is depicted as an ‘exemplary time, when women look, feel and are their best’, Barbara is uncomfortable with her new form, to the point of disgust.²¹ She describes her body as encumbered and deformed, ‘un corps à la dérive’ (*HE* 30). She is embarrassed to visit her thesis supervisor in what she terms ‘cet état’ (*HE* 8), her malaise suggesting that she sees her maternal body as unwelcome, or, at least, out of place in the traditionally male-dominated environment of academia (her supervisor is a man). Barbara’s pregnant belly, ‘une drôle de protubérance devant moi’ (*HE* 7), is far from the cute ‘baby bump’ fetishized by popular culture,²² like that of ‘Audrey Marney enceinte

20. Nicolas Gilli, ‘Critique d’*Un heureux événement*’ <<http://www.filmosphere.com/movie-review/critique-un-heureux-evenement-2011>> [accessed 6 October 2012]. That the film version is noticeably more light-hearted than the original novel in its depiction of the difficulties of mothering is worth commenting on. It would seem that when the concept of maternal ambivalence is being presented to a much larger public, it has to be toned down and rendered ‘acceptable’.

21. Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, p. 63.

22. Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, p. 63.

sur la couverture de *Elle*. Il n'y avait que le ventre qui dépassait, tout le reste était mince' (*HE* 30). Instead, what our protagonist sees reflected back at her in the mirror is nothing short of a monstrous mutation: 'je me vis: à quatre pattes, les joues tombantes, l'œil morne, les narines dilatées. Soit j'étais devenue un chien, soit j'étais enceinte' (*HE* 9). This image of the pregnant body as grotesque and animalistic is reiterated when the narrator recounts a visit to an ante-natal class: 'Je me retrouvai avec une quinzaine de femmes enceintes en train de faire la respiration du "petit chien", à me demander si nous étions encore des humains, ou bien un troupeau' (*HE* 29). Barbara's unfavourable relationship with her pregnant form is further emphasized by her accounts of her pre-pregnant body as a source of pleasure and focus of care and attention: 'Je prenais des bains, j'enduisais mon corps d'huile et de parfum, je me maquillais' (*HE* 12). Her time was spent reading philosophy, travelling to exotic destinations, enjoying good food and wine and falling in love. Being pregnant, on the other hand, entails conforming to a lifestyle of strict self-discipline and sacrifice that, according to Badinter, 'n'est pas loin d'entrer en religion':²³

Finis les fous rires pour un rien, les grandes envolées que l'alcool suscite, l'état d'apesanteur si agréable après le troisième verre de champagne [...]. L'impératif catégorique s'abattait sur moi, aussi tranchant qu'un couperet. J'étais responsable d'un autre que moi. (*HE* 28)

This negative relationship with her maternal body does not improve once the narrator has given birth. In the same way that her expectant form does not correspond to any of the images of the exalted pregnant body projected by popular culture, she does not spring back into shape as a 'yummy mummy' post birth. The new mother finds herself in the double bind of being expected to embrace her pregnant shape but then, immediately after giving birth, required to 'expunge all traces of the maternal body and restore a taut and youthful figure', ensuring that 'the

23. Badinter, *Le Conflit*, p. 100.

corporeal effects quickly give way to patriarchal norms dictating the shape and the size of the female body': 'il fallait être mince à nouveau, mince au point de disparaître derrière un pylône comme dans la publicité pour les yaourts Silhouette' (*HE* 31).²⁴ Although reinhabiting her pre-pregnant form may be what she originally longed for, achieving this, and as quickly as society deems appropriate, is a very different matter. Thus, the narrator of *Un heureux événement* is left with a body that is just as unrecognizable and undesired post-pregnancy as it was during her expectant state, and 'furthermore' a body that deviates from the media images of mothers that she sees all around her. Therefore, instead of celebrating motherhood like all 'good' mothers should, Barbara laments what appears to be the irremediable loss of self that it has brought about:

Avant. J'ai 33 ans, des cheveux longs, soignés, raidis par des brushings. Je suis maquillée, habillée, parfumée.

Après. Je n'ai pas d'âge, mes cheveux tombent, mes yeux sont perdus dans le vide, je ne vois plus rien, car prendre mes lunettes est le jeu favori du bébé; je suis pieds nus, je porte des tee-shirts sales, et je n'aime que dormir. (*HE* 16)

She feels unattractive ('mes seins tombaient, mes cernes noircissaient, mes jambes se transformaient en piliers' (*HE* 97)) and views being a mother as reducing the female to a bestial rather than a glorious state ('Oublier tout. Réapprendre à être animal' (*HE* 76)). She certainly sees no resemblance whatsoever between her body, which she views as unruly, and that of the carefully packaged fantasy of the 'celebrity mom' whose smiling, serene, slim, manicured, perky, poreless profile regularly adorns the covers of women's magazines.²⁵

Not only does Abécassis's text push the boundaries of the socially accepted and expected with regard to the new mother's relationship

24. Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, pp. 120, 121.

25. Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, pp. 121–23.

with her altered physical appearance, it ventures even further in its transgression of 'maternal norms' by depicting the act of giving birth as well the newborn baby itself as grotesque. The body in labour with which we are presented in *Un heureux événement*, with its 'jambes écartées, le sang qui coule, le sexe béant dans le traumatisme de la naissance' (HE 44), challenges established tendencies to glorify the experience of giving birth as one that is serene and harmonious, 'un instant de bonheur total'.²⁶ Instead, it has more in common with Barbara Creed's concept of the 'monstrous-feminine' where the act of giving birth inspires revulsion 'because the body's surface is no longer closed, smooth and intact — rather the body looks as if it may tear apart, open out, reveal its innermost depths'.²⁷ Consequently, the narrator's partner, who witnesses the birth, 'à l'air aussi épouvanté que s'il venait de sortir d'un film d'horreur avec pour l'actrice principale sa femme' (HE 45). The fact that during labour the narrator is subjected to medical intervention without being asked her permission ('Plus tard, j'apprendrais qu'on avait pratiqué sur moi une épistomie' (HE 44)) reinforces the image of the birthing body as 'unruly' and as requiring 'expert containment and control' by a doctor who 'knows best' what the pregnant woman needs.²⁸

As previously stated, this image of the birthing body as grotesque also extends to what eventually emerges from within. The newborn baby is described as 'poilu, sale, dégoulinant de graisse et de sécrétions, rouge et violace, peu attirant' and as far removed from 'le visage du chérubin', 'le bébé rose et souriant' (HE 45) that the narrator was expecting to meet. For Almond, the monstrous baby can be interpreted as an externalization of maternal ambivalence and of the mother's anxiety that she will not be able to love her child 'properly', that is, in accordance with contemporary society's unrealistic demand for 'maternal perfection and selfless devotion' and which no mother

26. Badinter, *Le Conflit*, p. 62.

27. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 58.

28. Jane Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous-Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 87.

dare criticize for fear of being branded a failure.²⁹ The depiction in *Un heureux événement* of the narrator's newborn as grotesque is, therefore, highly symbolic and a further means by which Abécassis manages to inscribe the darker side of mothering into the text.

As well as contesting popular culture's representation of the maternal body as sublime and labour as an almost orgasmic experience, *Un heureux événement* threatens 'the fantasy of oneness',³⁰ that is, society's expectation of a natural and immediate bond between mother and child which is 'positioned as the core of "good" mothering'.³¹ During the narrator's pregnancy, the baby is experienced as an unwelcome colonizer of the mother's body: 'J'étais habitée par un autre, un alien, un étranger qui modifiait mon corps et le dirigeait, un être qui avait ses goûts et ses désirs et qui me commandait de l'intérieur' (HE 27). Being pregnant does not bring about the promised 'sentiment de plénitude'; rather, it is described by the expectant mother as 'un grand vide, un grand creux en moi' (HE 23). Similarly, the instant connection with the baby on giving birth promised by motherhood manuals — 'Votre petit bout de chou va bientôt sortir et vous allez l'aimer très fort car c'est la plus belle chose qui vous soit jamais arrivée' (HE 39) — does not come about quite so easily either. Instead, alone with the newborn in her hospital room, the narrator reveals a sense of despair: 'Je sentis tout le poids du désespoir s'abattre sur moi. Comme un découragement à l'idée de ce qui allait suivre, une tristesse abyssale' (HE 48). The baby is 'une inconnue' for her (HE 48) and she is worried that she will not be able to love it (HE 49), thus challenging, like Beauvoir and Badinter before her, the received notion of an innate maternal instinct in all women and relegating it to nothing more than 'un mythe moderne' (HE 38).³² That

29. Almond, *The Monster Within*, pp. 18–19, 14–15.

30. This term is borrowed from Parker's chapter 'The Fantasy of Oneness', in *Torn in Two*, pp. 27–55.

31. Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 103.

32. See the second volume of Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* and Elisabeth Badinter, *L'Amour en plus: Histoire de l'amour maternel* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980) for further discussion of the myth of maternal instinct. It is significant that the protagonist of *Un heureux événement* makes references to both of these texts: she has a copy of *Le Deuxième Sexe* on her bedside table (HE 7). We also learn that she has read Badinter's

the initial experience of encountering a child for Abécassis's narrator is one that is more tinged with sadness as opposed to joy also draws the reader's attention to the very real threat of post-natal depression in new mothers, but which, unfortunately, due to the stigma attached to this term, often remains unacknowledged and thus untreated in women.

A further means by which Abécassis subverts the dominant model of motherhood is by presenting the experience of being a mother in *Un heureux événement* as one that negates female subjectivity as opposed to enhancing it. In stark contrast to the commonplace 'notion that motherhood confers authentic self-knowledge' and a feeling of wholeness in that it allows women to achieve 'full womanhood'³³ and reach their supposed 'destin physiologique',³⁴ the narrator of *Un heureux événement* laments: 'Où est-ce cette plénitude épanouie de la femme qui a donné la vie?' (HE 97). Mothers in *Un heureux événement* are watched and judged both during pregnancy and afterwards: by the medical profession; mothering experts who set out impossible programmes of care (HE 109); other women/mothers (The La Leche League section in her neighbourhood) and also those who should be supporting them, such as their own mothers and partners (when pregnant, the narrator is subjected to 'le regard soudain sourcilieux de mon compagnon' (HE 28)). Their decisions and actions are no longer their own and there is an overwhelming sense of the loss of one's former self: 'On a quitté l'hôpital. Sur le seuil de la porte, j'étais triste: je n'étais plus moi, j'étais arrivée une, je rentrais deux' (HE 51). The narrator continues, using terms that evoke not fulfilment but emptiness (terms, it should be noted, that we have encountered before in the text) to describe the impact of motherhood on her identity as a woman:

Je ne serai plus la même. Jusqu'à sa naissance, j'avais été une personne qui se construisait peu à peu, à présent c'était fini. Désormais, j'étais vieille. C'était moi le passé [...]. Je n'avais

L'Amour en plus (HE 37).

33. Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, p. 63

34. Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, II, 330.

plus d'ambition personnelle, je n'en avais plus le temps, ma vie ne m'appartenait plus. Je n'étais plus qu'un *creux*, un *vide*, un néant. Désormais, j'étais mère. (*HE* 52–53)³⁵

On several occasions, as has been illustrated, she describes her own life as having ended with her daughter's arrival into the world: 'Mon bébé était la nouvelle force et j'étais l'ancienne. Ma vie était finie' (*HE* 134). As a mother, she is no longer an active subject in control of the course of her existence, but, rather, has been relegated to the margins and deprived of agency:

J'étais épuisée, à bout de nerfs, si fatiguée que j'avais une impression de déréalisation. En journée, je me traînais dans un monde vaporeux qui ressemblait à un décor de théâtre dans lequel il y avait des acteurs, et j'étais spectatrice. (*HE* 124)

In conjunction with the discovery in *Un heureux événement* that a woman's life is no longer her own when she becomes a mother, is the image of the baby, not as angelic and delicate, as in all of the paintings of Madonna and child, but as relentless tyrant.³⁶ On this subject, Badinter remarks astutely:

Ironie de l'histoire: c'est au moment où les femmes occidentales parviennent enfin à se débarrasser du patriarcat qu'elles retrouvent un nouveau maître à la maison! [...] C'est l'innocent bébé — bien malgré lui — qui est devenu le meilleur allié de la domination masculine.³⁷

Similarly, Barbara notes that her new existence resembles that of a slave (*HE* 61), with the power balance in the relationship between mother and baby clearly lying with the latter:

35. My italics. The terms *creux* and *vide* are also found in a similar context on page 23 of the text.

36. Wolf, *Misconceptions*, p. 226.

37. Badinter, *Le Conflit*, pp. 145–46.

Ce *monstre* d'égoïsme et d'indifférence, cette *manipulatrice* qui ne m'utilisait qu'à ses fins personnelles, cet être qui n'était obsédé que par sa propre survie sans jamais avoir aucune attention pour autrui [...]. Tout le reste lui était égal. Sauf peut-être le pouvoir. Car elle aimait le pouvoir. Dès qu'elle le désirait, il fallait qu'on accoure sinon elle s'énervait [...]. Une fois qu'elle m'avait utilisée, elle me jetait comme un vieux mouchoir. Elle n'arrêtait pas de m'humilier. (*HE* 60–61)³⁸

Alongside this sense of loss and being overwhelmed by the baby's constant needs is a feeling of deep loneliness in motherhood. Ironically, when Barbara is carrying out her pregnancy test at the beginning of the novel, she lingers a while in the bathroom so as to 'profiter de mon dernier moment de solitude' *before* she becomes a mother (*HE* 22). However, it is not long until she realizes that, despite the fact that through motherhood she becomes two, being a mother is perhaps the most isolating experience she has ever had. At several stages of the text, Barbara voices this sense of loneliness that has been brought on by motherhood: 'J'étais seule' (*HE* 8) and 'Je me sentais seule depuis que j'avais accouchée' (*HE* 79). Although she has a partner, Nicolas, he continues to go about his daily life as before, and, importantly, retains his contact with the outside world (*HE* 27), thus reinforcing the protagonist's sense that she is essentially mothering alone. Similarly, while one might expect motherhood, a shared female experience, to facilitate the establishment of a strong support network among women, this is not the case in *Un heureux événement*. Barbara reveals that she has never openly discussed motherhood, or been prepared for the realities of having a child by her own mother or indeed any other female friend: 'Et comment a fait ma mère? Pourquoi ne m'a-t-elle rien dit? Pourquoi personne ne m'a expliqué?' (*HE* 43) In addition, when she joins a local branch of The La Leche League for company and advice, she finds

38. My italics. The terms used to describe the newborn baby ('monstre' and 'manipulatrice') have the potential to shock the reader who may not be accustomed to narratives where mothers unreservedly admit, in the first person, negative feelings towards their child.

herself initially treated as an outcast for daring to speak truthfully about her experiences as a new mother:

Depuis que j'ai un bébé, je n'ai plus de vie de couple, je ne dors plus, je ne me lave plus les cheveux, je ne lis plus, je ne vois plus d'amis. Je suis devenue une mère, soit. Mais je ne savais pas qu'il fallait abdiquer tous les autres rôles, qu'il fallait renoncer à sa sexualité, à la séduction, au travail, au sport, à son corps, à son esprit. J'ignorais qu'il fallait renoncer à la vie [...]. Tous les regards convergèrent vers moi comme si j'étais une meurtrière, *ou pire une mère indigne*. (HE 78–79)³⁹

The only moment in the text when there is any real open discussion between women about the experience of mothering is towards the end, between the narrator and her sister. But this, it would seem, comes too late, with Katia, the narrator's sister, admitting 'J'aurais dû te prévenir [...]'. De ce que c'est d'avoir un enfant' (HE 121).

A final fantasy of motherhood upheld by the master narrative but violated by *Un heureux événement* concerns the supposedly consolidating impact of the arrival of a baby on the life of the couple. As we have seen in the previous quotation taken from the narrator's account of her visit to The La Leche League, since her daughter has been on the scene, Barbara 'n'a plus de vie de couple' (HE 78). And yet, as Badinter highlights, having children when one is part of a couple remains the norm in Western society, while actively choosing as a couple not to have children carries the risk of stigmatization and being branded an anomaly.⁴⁰ Ironically, however, often it is the very fact of introducing children into the couple that leads to its demise, due to the unequal distribution of childcare duties between the two parents and the fact that 'la mère efface [...] l'amoureuse et met le couple en danger'.⁴¹ Badinter states that:

39. My italics, to draw attention to the stigma attached to being a 'bad' mother. It is almost unspeakable..

40. Badinter, *Le Conflit*, p. 23.

41. Badinter, *Le Conflit*, pp. 29, 157.

[L]'idée convenue que l'enfant renforce la solidité du couple a fait long feu. Certes il crée un lien indissoluble entre père et mère, mais il peut aussi être paradoxalement une véritable épreuve pour l'entente entre homme et femme.⁴²

Naomi Wolf makes a similar observation, in *Misconceptions*, with regard to the impact of a baby on the life of a couple:

All around me, it seems, the baby's birth was cleaving couple after couple — once equals in roles and expectations — along the lines of the old gender roles. That was certainly what I experienced when my husband went back to work and I found myself with a tiny baby, staring out the kitchen window into the backyards of the suburbs [...]. The baby's arrival acted as a crack, then a fissure, then an earthquake, that wrenched open the shiny patina of egalitarianism in marriages of virtually every couple I knew.⁴³

The impact of having a child on the relationship between Barbara and her partner Nicolas in *Un heureux événement* does not bring them closer together, but, instead, pushes them further apart, to the point of breaking up by the end of the novel. First of all, Barbara notices that being pregnant, although this is posited by society as being the ultimate form of womanhood, deprives her of her sexuality as a woman.⁴⁴ Initially, this concerns the way that other men no longer seem to pay her any attention: 'Le regard des hommes avait changé sur moi. C'était un regard vide qui passait sans désir [...] parfois aussi vaguement dégoûté' (*HE* 29). Soon, however, this change extends to her partner Nicolas as well and leads to a deterioration in physical relations between the two:

42. Badinter, *Le Conflit*, p. 217.

43. Wolf, *Misconceptions*, p. 191. It could, of course, be argued that this notion of a stable pre-baby couple is simply another myth viewed nostalgically through the lens of the post-baby couple, in the same way that the experience of the post-baby body can distort the memory of the pre-baby body and lead women to view the former as an out-of-control body in contrast to what they 'remember' as more unified pre-motherhood self.

44. Granted, her loss of sexuality is situated within heteronormative discourse, but this is the context in which Barbara has chosen to position herself.

Nicolas me regardait avec effroi, avec circonspection [...]. Alors que je me consumais de désir et de concupiscence pour lui et pour le genre masculin en général, il me respectait [...]. Pour lui, j'étais deux; j'étais mère; j'étais femme enceinte. Je n'étais plus maîtresse [...]. La distance s'installa entre nous, de jour en jour subtilement, sans faire de bruit. (*HE* 32)

Once the baby arrives, the situation does not improve for a number of reasons. Obviously, Barbara, as a new mother, is often tired, preoccupied, self-conscious about her changed shape and feels that her body has been taken over by the baby (her breasts are now exclusively for feeding). But, she also notices that, in the same way that her partner's gaze towards her changed when she was pregnant, so too is her gaze towards him altered now that she is a mother. Nicolas's position within the couple is usurped by the baby: 'ma fille prenait la place de mon compagnon dans mon cœur. Le bébé prenait son côté du lit' (*HE* 102). In addition, just as Nicolas fails to see Barbara as a sexual partner when she is pregnant, Barbara no longer recognizes in Nicolas-as-father the man that she was in love with before the arrival of the baby:

J'avais aimé en lui son indépendance, je le retrouvais en petit garçon qui voulait faire plaisir à sa maman, en petit homme œdipien fier de montrer son bébé à sa mère. Je l'aimais homme, je pensais l'adorer en père, mais à ma grande surprise, je le retrouvais en fils. J'en conçus pour lui un sentiment nouveau et dérangeant: le mépris. (*HE* 75)

Further contributing to this change in sexual gaze between the partners brought on as a result of the baby is the fact that the everyday tasks involved in mothering remain, for the most part, the woman's responsibility. Barbara is the one who stays at home all day with the baby while Nicolas goes out to work, and when he returns in the evening the time that he spends with his baby daughter can be given freely rather than tainted with a sense of maternal duty: 'Avec son père, c'était

différent. Leur relation était gratuite puisqu'il ne la nourrissait pas' (*HE* 62). The baby in *Un heureux événement* is, as far as the narrator sees it, what finally puts an end to 'le temps glorieux de nos amours immenses' (*HE* 11). She states:

Avant j'étais amoureuse. Après notre relation fut impossible. Il y avait une barrière entre nous, une barrière physique infranchissable, et cette barrière, c'était Léa [...]. C'était elle, l'enfant de notre amour, le destructeur de notre couple. (*HE* 133)

The myth of parenthood as inevitably strengthening a couple is therefore well and truly debunked, with the narrator reaching the grim conclusion that 'de couple amoureux avec des enfants, sur la durée, je n'en connaissais pas un. Pas un seul' (*HE* 83).

An additional minor but not irrelevant point to make in the discussion of *Un heureux événement* as a maternal counternarrative relates to the ethnic origins of the narrator.⁴⁵ As Lucille Cairns points out, 'although little in Barbara's experience of motherhood is Jewish-encoded, it is nonetheless clear from various cultural references that Barbara *is* Jewish'.⁴⁶ The Jewish Orthodox view on motherhood is represented in the novel by one of the secondary characters, Myriam Tordjmann, who lives in the same building as Barbara. Myriam, who is barely thirty-five years old, already has ten children under the age of twelve. Barbara is bewildered as to how she copes, and it would appear that Myriam is indeed exhausted, resorting to prolonged breastfeeding as her only means of contraception. Set against Myriam's example, and given that Barbara is also a Jew, albeit a non-practising and assimilated one, the approach to mothering represented by the homodiegetic narrator appears even more dissident. Thus, the character of Myriam heightens the reader's awareness of *Un heureux événement* as a text that offers 'a serious probing of the extent to which motherhood, or at least certain elements of it, might be deleterious to the mother'.⁴⁷

45. The author, Abécassis, is also of Jewish origin.

46. Lucille Cairns, *Post-Jewish Women's Writing in French*, p. 225.

47. Cairns, *Post-Jewish Women's Writing in French*, p. 225.

To bring this article to a conclusion, I would like to return to the notion of maternal ambivalence introduced in the early stages of the argument and defined by Parker as ‘the experience shared variously by all mothers in which loving and hating feelings exist side by side’.⁴⁸ As we have seen so far, what is essentially transgressive about Abécassis’s narrative is that it dares to give a voice to the darker side of motherhood, the part that, as Almond reveals, has never really been acceptable to society despite its ubiquitous existence.⁴⁹ However, it is important to point out that, even though its overall focus leans towards the more difficult aspects of motherhood, *Un heureux événement* also includes moments of joy between mother and child (for example, when breastfeeding) and considers the anxiety that a mother suffers when separated from her child, a distress that is just as powerful as the irritation felt when she is constantly with the child.⁵⁰ Consequently, when Nicolas comes to collect their daughter (following their split), Barbara reveals that ‘lorsque je compris que le bébé s’éloigna de moi, mon cœur fit un bond dans ma poitrine, comme s’il partait avec eux, mon cœur’ (*HE* 141). Abécassis’s text captures the crux of maternal ambivalence in that it manages to convey the very fine and often uncertain balance between the love and hate, contentment and frustration experienced by a mother and directed at her child, as is evident in the following quotation:

Je posai l’enfant dans le berceau; elle souleva la main et la tendit vers moi. Elle m’empêchait de partir. Elle me retenait. Ou c’était moi, peut-être, qui ne me détachais pas d’elle? (*HE* 135)

What the reader is presented with in *Un heureux événement*, therefore, is clearly a form of ‘managed ambivalence’ as opposed

48. Parker, *Torn in Two*, p. 1.

49. Almond, *The Monster Within*, pp. 2–3.

50. After several visits to The La Leche League, Barbara becomes so adept at breastfeeding that she almost becomes a spokesperson for the group, gushing about the pleasures of fusion and *jouissance* produced by the activity (*HE* 79). Thus, where breastfeeding is concerned, Barbara appears to conform to rather than transgress one of the diktats associated with motherhood.

to ‘unmanaged ambivalence’.⁵¹ According to Parker, ‘managed ambivalence’ has the potential to be beneficial to mother and child as it creates space for reflection between the two whereas ‘unmanaged ambivalence’ is always destructive and, in the most extreme cases, can lead to abuse and even infanticide.⁵² While this, in turn, could lead to the accusation that Abécassis’s depiction of motherhood actually remains within the boundaries of safe and acceptable mothering, it should not detract from what is truly transgressive and, consequently, empowering about this novel, namely the message that an acknowledgement of maternal ambivalence from the outset can lead to the mother’s ability to manage her contradictory feelings and actually safeguard the relationship with the child. Thus it could be argued that the transgressive importance of *Un heureux événement* lies in its depiction of maternal ambivalence not only as normal but as desirable. Maternal ambivalence in *Un heureux événement* refuses to be the ‘crime that dares not speak its name’ — negative feelings towards the child are both acknowledged and articulated at an early stage as opposed to being suppressed and left to fester until they can no longer be contained.⁵³ Perhaps, then, this is the reason why, unlike many other subversive maternal narratives, *Un heureux événement* does not draw to a close with the loss of the child and, as a result, the inadvertent disciplining of the aberrant mother.⁵⁴ In fact, not only does *Un heureux événement* avoid ending with the ‘bad’ mother losing her child, but in the very last line of the novel the reader learns that the narrator has fallen pregnant a second time.⁵⁵ This, I feel, indicates a ‘triumph’ of sorts for the ambivalent mother who is not punished for her various transgressions, but, on the contrary, given the chance to mother again. In this respect, *Un heureux événement*

51. Parker, *Torn in Two*, p. xiv.

52. Rye, *Narratives of Mothering*, p. 105.

53. Almond, *The Monster Within*, p. 226.

54. Rye remarks on the prevalence of loss, usually the loss of the child to the mother, in accounts of transgressive mothering. *Narratives of Mothering*, pp. 156–67.

55. It is unclear in the text whether the father of her second child is Nicolas (her ex-partner) or Florent (the new man that she has been dating). It is quite possible that this time the narrator will be mothering outside of the normative social structure of the couple, hence a further subversion of the maternal master narrative may well occur.

manages to pave the way towards a more attuned form of mothering whereby acknowledgment of the troubling co-existence of love and hate towards the child propels deep reflection on the intricate nature of the relationship; and this complexity, according to Parker, is ‘arguably the single most important aspect of mothering’.⁵⁶

NUI, Maynooth

56. Parker, *Torn in Two*, pp. 8–9.