Invisible Chain: Breaking the Taboo of Abortion in Jeanne Caruchet's *L'Ensemencée* (1904), Annie Ernaux's *L'Événement* (2000) and Audrey Diwan's *L'Événement* (2021)

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In *L'Événement* (2000), the author's retelling of her experience of an illicit abortion in 1964, Annie Ernaux writes of a "chaîne invisible où se côtoient des artistes, des écrivaines, des héroïnes de roman", stating that "[s]on histoire est en elles". There is a timelessness to Ernaux's abortion narrative, jumping between two temporal spaces: the contemporary narrator's experience of writing the novel at the turn of the millennium, and that of the young Annie in the 1960s. Twenty-one years after the novel's publication, Audrey Diwan's film adaptation of the same name became another link on this chain, further highlighting the relevance of the story of a young woman's illicit abortion almost fifty years after the decriminalisation of abortion in France. This article extends Ernaux's "chaîne" further back in time, by adding another female-authored novel: *L'Ensemencée* (1904), by Jeanne Caruchet. I explore how these women's experiences of abortion are presented across these three works, examining the change in attitudes towards abortion, with particular focus on the evolution of female communities, from the Belle Époque, through the turn of the millennium and into the early 2020s.

Dans *L'Événement* (2000), où l'écrivaine raconte son expérience d'un avortement clandestin en 1964, Annie Ernaux décrit une "chaîne invisible où se côtoient des artistes, des écrivaines, des héroïnes de roman", et conclut que "[s]on histoire est en elles". Il y a une atemporalité dans le récit d'avortement d'Ernaux, qui oscille entre deux espaces temporels: celui de la narratrice contemporaine qui est en train d'écrire le roman au tournant du millénium, et celui de la jeune Annie des années 60s. Vingt-et-un ans plus tard, le film d'Audrey Diwan du même titre est devenu encore un maillon de la chaîne, qui souligne la pertinence du récit de l'avortement clandestin d'une jeune femme, presque cinquante ans après la légalisation de l'avortement en France. Cet article rallonge la "chaîne" d'Ernaux encore plus loin dans le passé, en y ajoutant encore un roman d'écrivaine: *L'Ensemencée* (1904) de Jeanne Caruchet. J'examine la représentation des expériences de l'avortement de ces femmes dans ces trois œuvres, afin d'étudier le changement dans les attitudes envers l'avortement, avec une focalisation particulière sur l'évolution des communautés féminins, de la Belle Époque, en passant par le tournant du millénium, jusqu'au début des années 2020s.

Keywords: abortion narratives; taboo; Annie Ernaux; Audrey Diwan; Jeanne Caruchet; female gaze

Published in the year 2000, thirty-six years after the titular event, Annie Ernaux's *L'Événement* provides a frank, first-person account of the illicit abortion that she underwent as a young woman. Although she had touched on the topic of abortion in her previous work, it is the first time she writes openly and in detail about her own experience of the procedure prior to the legalisation of abortion in 1975.[1] Audrey Diwan's film adaptation of the same name, released in 2021, brings a version of Ernaux's story to the screen. Where the link between the work of Ernaux and Diwan is self-evident, the connection to the third work explored in this article is not as immediately obvious. Largely forgotten in modern French scholarship, Jeanne Caruchet's *L'Ensemencée*, published in 1904, almost a century before Ernaux's text, tells the story of Armande and her attempts to terminate three pregnancies. Unlike Ernaux's Annie and Diwan's Anne (Anamaria Vartolomei), Armande is married and has the support of her husband in procuring and administering the abortifacients. Multiple abortive attempts are unsuccessful and by the end of the novel they have two children and a third on the way. If Ernaux's book and Diwan's film centre around the climactic abortion, Caruchet's novel is striking for the absence of such an event. Instead, it outlines the societal stigma and the mark left even by failed abortions on her sense of self. In this article, I argue that Armande can be placed alongside the book's

[1] Ernaux's first novel, *Les armoires vides* (1974), tells the story of fictional character, Denise Lesur's, abortion. For a comparison of the depiction of abortion in both novels, see Runde 2017.

Annie, the film's Anne, and indeed the three *créatrices* Caruchet, Ernaux and Diwan. They each form a link on Ernaux's "chaîne invisible où se côtoient des artistes, des écrivaines, des héroïnes de roman" (2000, 40). I examine how these female characters and creators deal with the taboos surrounding abortion and unwanted pregnancy, feelings of alienation from other women and the power of representation to forge new links.

Before delving into these abortion narratives, it is worth taking a moment to introduce the forgotten *créatrice*: Jeanne Caruchet. Born Jeanne Joséphine Nouguès, on 16 November 1872 in Brussels, she married Henri Émile Caruchet on 31 December 1896 in Paris. To this day, if she is known at all it is as the wife of this moderately successful artist, who illustrated works by Anatole France and Théophile Gautier among others. Her own page on the *BNF* online database at the time of writing gives very few details. It describes her as '[é]crivain. – Épouse du peintre et illustrateur Henri Caruchet'. It lists only one literary work, *L'Ensemencée* (1904), and credits her co-translation into French of *Lectures on General Nursing* by Victorian hospital matron Eva Lückes. She wrote at least one other novel, *L'Unique maîtresse* (1902), and was a regular contributor in *La Fronde*. Yet, partially due to her death at only thirty-four years old on 11 January 1906, her work has fallen into obscurity.

L'Ensemencée is one of over thirty Third-Republic French literary works to feature abortion, including Émile Zola's *Fécondité* (1899). Scholars on the history of abortion and women's reproductive rights in France note this trend and contextualise it within the wider preoccupations of the depopulation crisis at the turn of the century (Guerrand 1971; Sohn 1996, vol. 2; Cahen 2016). These works depict women who turn to abortion, such as Gaston Tournier's *La Fabrique d'anges* (1907) which provides the grisly details of an illicit Parisian abortion business, or Jean Darricarrère's *Le Droit à*

l'avortement (1906) where a conservative prosecutor learns to support his daughter's decision to terminate her pregnancy after the death of her fiancé. Of the novels he includes in his study, Guerrand declares *L'Ensemencée* to be '[l]e plus déprimant de la série' (1971, 25-26). Synopses of the novel also feature in the work of Koos (2001, 266), Knibiehler and Sagaert (2016, 497-499) and Le Naour and Valenti (2003, 43-44, 92). There has yet to be an extended close reading of the novel, however. It is one of the few female-authored French abortion texts from this period, and the only one to focus on the woman as she attempts to terminate her pregnancies. This depiction of an authentic female experience of abortion merits *L'Ensemencée* its place in Ernaux's chain.

Shame and silence

All three works grapple with the shame associated with the act of abortion, and the subsequent limitations on the ability to articulate their experiences. Jellenik notes that "[s]ilence, the indicible, or the inability to articulate, recur as themes throughout Ernaux's oeuvre" but most of all in *L'Événement*, as "this book about abortion eschews the term" (2013, 71-72). The euphemistic title, which Diwan chose to keep in her filmic adaptation, acknowledges the taboo surrounding abortion. Caruchet likewise makes a powerful statement in her title: *L'Ensemencée*. There is no obvious English equivalent which idiomatically captures the French, with options like "The Sown", "The Impregnated" or "The Inseminated" all proving unsatisfactory. The passive construction comments on the female protagonist's agency over her own body and further dehumanises her through the allusion to farmland and the haphazard scattering of seeds. Both titles are deliberately ambiguous and do not signpost the topic of abortion, unlike the novels by Caruchet's male contemporaries.

Ernaux's *L'Événement* is a deeply personal account of her lived experience of abortion, but the text grapples with the difficulties and potential fallout of writing her story. There are two protagonists – the young student coming to terms with an unwanted pregnancy in the 1960s (hence referred to as Annie) and the writer looking back at this time and attempting to find the words to convey her experience (Ernaux). The novel opens in a doctor's surgery as the present-day Ernaux awaits the results of an HIV test. After the relief of the negative result, she is taken back to "l'attente du verdict du Docteur N., en 1963, dans la même horreur et la même incrédulité" (15) in anticipation of the results of her pregnancy test. This shared sensation between past and present experiences ("la même horreur", "la même incrédulité") suggests a unified sense of self, one which the text soon begins to unravel. As Boucher notes, the 1963-4 plot is interrupted continually by "la narratrice", Ernaux, who jumps between moments in what Boucher terms "méandres de la mémoire" and sections in which she reflects on the writing process itself (2012, 105). When Ernaux is haunted by the abortion in her dreams, it is not from any shame around the procedure itself but from her inability to convey it in writing. She holds the finished abortion novel in her hands, which cannot be found in the bookshops and catalogues, and features the word "ÉPUISÉ" on the cover. Her uncertainty, "[j]e ne savais pas si ce rêve signifiait que je devais écrire ce livre ou s'il était inutile de le faire", reveals her preoccupation with the challenge of writing (25).

Ernaux's struggle over producing a written record of the abortion is not present to the same degree in Annie's ability to articulate her situation within the 1963-4 narrative. The text is littered with quotations taken directly from her diaries of the time, which Sardin links to Ernaux's desire to attain "a degree of extreme objectivity" (2008, 303). In one of the many paragraphs given in parentheses, Ernaux directly addresses

> la question de la preuve: en dehors de mon journal et de mon agenda de cette période, il ne me semble disposer d'aucune certitude concernant les sentiments et les pensées, à cause de l'immatérialité et l'évanescence de ce qui traverse l'esprit. (2000, 67-68)

As well as providing proof of her experience at the time, and a link to her younger self, the quotations themselves reveal a directness with language in the most difficult moments. In contrast to present-day Ernaux's extended musings on the writing experience, her diary entries are powerful in their concision: "Je suis enceinte. C'est l'horreur" (21). Indeed, Ernaux's Annie is quite open about her pregnancy with her social circle. She informs P., the provider of the male gamete, and Jean T. in hopes of getting assistance from them, but Annie also writes to her two female friends, and tells O. and André X. of her intentions to abort. After the procedure, she even tells Jacques S., to whom she had previously lied when she encountered him on the bus to her first doctor's appointment.

Diwan's Anne, in contrast, spends much of the film unable to speak of her condition. Approximately a third of the film's runtime passes before she turns to one of her peers, Jean (Kacey Mottet Klein). The exchange between them after the lecture runs to just over a minute, with neither character using the language of pregnancy. Instead, Anne asks indirectly: "Tu en connais une qui l'a déjà fait?" (2021, 0:32:33), with her frustrated interjection of "Mais non. Pas ça" (0:32:39) cutting off Jean's question, "De quoi tu parles? De…" (0:32:37), preventing him from uttering the final word, which, according to the English translation provided by the sub-titles would be *sexe*. Anne refers euphemistically to her pregnancy as "un problème" (0:32:45), with only her downward gaze toward her lower abdomen to explain further. The equivalent moment in Ernaux's text alludes to a similar awkwardness with language: "je lui ai dit d'*une forme détournée* que j'étais enceinte" (2000, 31, my emphasis). Ernaux's Jean T.

displays “un air de curiosité et de jouissance” (31), peppering her with questions, unlike Diwan’s Jean who initially attempts to curtail the conversation. It is only in the privacy of his apartment that he begins to probe for more information, before propositioning her. Another crucial adaptation in Diwan’s film is the timing of the encounter with Jean. In Ernaux’s text, by this time, Annie has already informed her sexual partner: “J’ai écrit à P. que j’étais enceinte et que je ne voulais pas le garder” (23), with no indication of any euphemistic language. In the film, Anne only contacts Maxime half-way through the film, in the scene that immediately follows the revelation of her pregnancy to her friends Hélène (Luàna Bajrami) and Brigitte (Louise Orry-Diquéro), and their refusal to help her at the latter’s insistence. The failed first call from the phone box is yet another barrier to her communication with Maxime that Diwan adds to Ernaux’s original narrative.

In contrast to Anne and Annie, Armande has the support of her husband, Roger, who takes the lead in procuring the substances required to make a home-made abortifacient. Even in the privacy of their own home, there is an uneasiness between the couple and reluctance to speak openly about what they are doing. The two lovers barely speak throughout the scene, and when Armande does break the silence, it is in a whisper, “‘Où es-tu allé, pour *en* avoir?’ dit-elle tout à coup, la voix assourdie, d’instinct” (1904, 31, original emphasis). Her refusal to utter the word *abortifs*, replacing it with “en”, is reminiscent of her encounter with her best friend, Marie-Louise, in the opening chapter set on the night before her wedding. When Marie-Louise suggests that Armande will soon have a cradle in the bedroom, she objects vehemently, with a horrified outburst: “Ah! cela… non! non!” (6). She elaborates:

> Non, vois-tu… je ne suis pas faite pour cela, je le sais bien; il y a longtemps que je le sais… […] C’est singulier, n’est-ce pas? C’est comme cela; je n’y peux rien… Mais je n’en veux pas, non, non! ni maintenant, ni plus tard… jamais! (7)

Although she speaks “à mots hachés, presque sans suite” (7), evoked by the repeated ellipses, Armande’s hesitations are no indication of her conviction, but more of her uncertainty on how to phrase an idea that is so “singuli[è]r[e]”. Her repeated assertions of “je le sais” and use of the indicative mood show that there is nothing hypothetical or undecided about her stance. At this early stage in the novel, however, the word that Armande cannot utter, and which she replaces with the euphemistic “cela” and “en”, is motherhood. Combined with Marie-Louise’s use of the metonym “berceau” (7) in place of baby, Caruchet hints at a narrative with a subversive take on the taboos surrounding female reproduction.

Within the narrative of the novel, Armande is acutely aware of the status of abortion and its potential impact on her relationship and social standing. Once they begin the abortive attempts she is overcome by shame:

> Dans le désarroi où la jetait la brusque irruption de ces choses nouvelles, c’était la honte qui dominait, une honte dont elle ne parlait pas, mais qui l’étreignait à chaque instant; honte de ces renseignements demandés à demi-mot, de ces emplettes clandestines, […]; honte de ces remèdes, de toutes ces préoccupations viles qui détrônaient les pensées d’amour… (35-36)

In this extract, “la honte” dominates Armande’s thoughts and the syntax itself, through its four appearances in the first sentence. The text imitates Armande’s state of mind, with Caruchet choosing semi-colons over full stops, allowing the ideas to run into each other in one long sentence, building momentum with the addition of multiple sub-clauses, and refusing the resolution of a final full stop with the sentence dissipating into ellipsis. Armande is aware not only of the implications of the abortive attempts on the

private matters of her marriage, but also of the effect on her reputation and honour as perceived by others.

Unable to discuss her pregnancies and attempted abortions outside of her marriage, Armande still lives out her desire for another interlocutor in her mind. In the following passage after the birth of her second child, she attempts to understand her lack of maternal sentiment and she imagines a doctor figure to console her:

> « Et pourtant cela est en moi comme un mal, comme une infirmité! […] Oh! avouer cela à un médecin, à un savant qui me comprendrait, qui saurait, lui!… Il ne me guérirait pas, mais il m'absoudrait, peut-être… Il me dirait:
> « Vous êtes un cas bien étrange, une anomalie, un monstre, mais ce n'est pas votre faute! »
> « Non, ce n'est pas ma faute!… Je suis la victime de quelque chose que je ne sais pas, d'une loi cachée que l'on ne m'apprendra sans doute jamais, et qui fait le malheur de ma vie!… Et malgré tout, j'ai honte!… Ah!… quelle misère!… » (197-198)

As with Ernaux's need to prove the reality of her narrative, Caruchet's protagonist is wracked by self-doubt and the passage is replete with language giving way to ellipses. What is striking here, and a reflection of the contemporaneous attitudes towards Catholicism in the build-up to the 1905 law on the separation of the Church and State, is that Armande does not seek medical advice from the doctor, but absolution, traditionally sought from a priest. In Ernaux's *L'Événement*, Annie also turns to the Church. Her encounter with the priest is no better and her only revelation is: "le temps de la religion était fini pour moi" (108). For Armande, however, the introduction of this second imagined voice of the doctor-scientist, combining the disinterested medical language – "un cas", "une anomalie" – with the more loaded and judgmental label of "monstre", gives Armande more confidence in her own defence. The uncertainty of

“peut-être” from the first paragraph is replaced by “Non, ce n’est pas ma faute!”, a stronger declaration of innocence.

In both versions of *L’Événement*, the protagonist turns to male doctors for help, with Diwan’s Anne more vocal in her desire for an abortion. Ernaux’s representation of Annie’s first appointment is related in one paragraph, crucially beginning after the intimate examination. In stark contrast, Diwan brings the viewer into the appointment with Anne, as she lays on the examination bed in her bra and briefs, with her entire abdomen, down to her right hip, in the frame. She is thus exposed as Dr Ravinsky (Fabrizio Rongione) performs the external abdominal examination, until he asks her to remove her knickers, at which point Anne’s knees rise to obscure her genitals from view as she undresses and the doctor continues with the internal vaginal examination. It is at this moment that he begins to ask the most probing personal questions about her period and sexual activity, making the procedure doubly invasive. Anne’s reaction to the news of her pregnancy is immediate; sitting up on the bed, she implores him: “Faites quelque chose” (0:14:25). Where the film’s doctor flatly refuses and explains the legal consequences, Ernaux, with no reference to any request in the book, explains: “Il m’a tout de même prescrit des piqûres pour faire revenir les règles” (21), the first set of injections that prove to be ineffective.

Once again, Diwan’s depiction of the visit to Dr Guimet (François Loriquet) portrays Anne’s desperation in attempting to procure an abortion. Where Ernaux has Annie going through the pretence of giving symptoms of tiredness and missing periods, and enduring another internal examination, in the film, Anne declares: “Je suis enceinte”, instead of undressing for the examination (0:22:24). Without directly asking for an abortion, she uses euphemism: “Je veux poursuivre mes études” (0:22:35), before leaning forward across the desk to add, “c’est capital pour moi” (0:22:40). The camera,

positioned over Annie's right shoulder from the moment she sits in the chair, shows the sudden change in the doctor's facial expression as he tells her to leave. At this moment, the perspective shifts, and Anne, with her forearms pushing down on the desk, fills the frame. Her eyes are open and her expression wild. She refuses to leave insisting, "aidez-moi" (0:22:50). The focus stays with Anne and her darting eyes with only the sounds coming from outside the frame: the doctor's sigh, followed by pen on paper. Until the end of the scene, the camera stays on Anne, her relief visible as she takes the prescription for a medicine to bring back her periods. The cinematic gaze on Anne during this interaction directly contrasts Annie's experience in the book, where after her request "de [lui] faire revenir les règles, à tout prix", she explains that the doctor delivers his "diatribe" "sans [lui] regarder" (41). In both the book and the film, the word *avortement* is not uttered in the doctor's surgery, and the euphemism of "faire revenir les règles" is sufficient to convey the meaning.

There is a third doctor in Ernaux's book, from the opening pages, who is not featured in Diwan's film. In an interview with *The Guardian* from April 2022, Diwan explains her reasoning for excluding the frame meta-narrative from her adaptation. She explains: "If I had included the author looking in the rearview mirror I would have confined this film to the past" (Elkin 2022). Ironically, through the erasure of this cross-temporal link between Annie and Ernaux, which, in the book, demonstrates the lasting impact of the event from decades earlier, Diwan attempts to demonstrate the significance of abortion even in twenty-first-century France, where it has been legal for almost fifty years. As well as forging a link between the stigma surrounding sex and pregnancy out of wedlock from the sixties to that of sexually transmitted disease at the end of the twentieth century, Ernaux's opening scene provides a significant contrast in the interactions between doctor and patient. Crucially, the doctor from 1999 is female.

The male doctors of the sixties who either refuse to help her or intentionally deceive Annie into taking preventatives against miscarriage are replaced by the "docteure" who appears to share Ernaux's experience, from the smile as she enters the room to her "air joyeux et complice" (15). Female complicity is here depicted as effortless, in stark contrast to Annie's attempts to find an accomplice among the male doctors she consults during her pregnancy. Runde compares this to Annie's experience with Dr N.: "The sense of unspoken understanding between the female doctor and her patient is nowhere to be found in this interaction between a man and a woman who finds herself in a situation of which he has no understanding" (2017, paragraph 7). There is something special about the homosocial connection between these two women, that surpasses the hierarchy of doctor and patient.

Female support networks

The absence of the *docteure* is just one example of many, wherein Diwan's film deviates from the source text, particularly in relation to its depiction of homosocial female relationships. Blackhurst notes that Diwan "is in some ways warier than Ernaux of the illusions of affirmative 'sorority'. Sisterhood is rarely a source of comfort in her *Happening*" (2022, paragraph 3). There is the addition of the two best friends, Brigitte and Hélène, and, as Blackhurst notes, "the film opens with a tender portrait of homosocial intimacy", but the rest of Anne's interactions with other female characters, particularly among her peers, are not so positive (2022, paragraph 3). In Ernaux's narrative, Annie's two closest female friends are studying elsewhere, but, in contrast to Anne, who hides her pregnancy from Brigitte and Hélène for as long as possible, she does not hesitate in writing to them of her pregnancy and desire to abort. The impact of Brigitte's response to Anne's admission – "ça nous regarde pas" (0:43:20) – and her

obvious disapproval, contrasts with Annie's friends who "ne jugeaient pas mais elles paraissaient effrayées" (56). Likewise, the smaller moments of support Annie receives in the novel from other women, like the female medical student who administers the first injection, and L.B., who gives Annie the "adresse et de l'argent" (61-62) for the abortion, are omitted and adapted, respectively. Diwan's Laëtitia (Alice de Lencquesaing) still provides Anne with the contact information for Madame Rivière (Anna Mouglalis), but Anne declines her offer of the money, preferring to sell her personal belongings to raise the 400 Francs required. The significance of L.B. for Ernaux is made clear in a parenthetical paragraph in which she describes her as "la première des femmes qui se sont relayées auprès de moi, ces passeuses dont le savoir, les gestes et les décisions efficaces m'ont fait traverser, *au mieux,* cette épreuve" (62, original emphasis). These individuals who supported her through the abortion process are all female, the "femmes" and "passeuses". Despite Jean T.'s role in connecting her with L.B., it is the female community that Ernaux recognises in this moment.

One significant "passeuse" in Annie's abortion narrative is O., whose filmic counterpart, Olivia (Louise Chevillotte), is one of the most altered characters in Diwan's adaptation. Ernaux emphasises the tenuous nature of her acquaintance with O., and acknowledges her more negative qualities: "Dans le débinage qui caractérise souvent, sans les affecter ni les envenimer, les relations entre filles, je me joignais aux avis qui la jugeaient agaçante et collante" (56). Here, young Annie's attitude towards this one classmate represents a wider trend in homosocial female relationships. It is this friction that Diwan develops in her portrayal of Olivia, who stands by as her friend, Claire (Leonor Oberson), verbally attacks Anne in the confrontation in the showers. The inclusion of the communal shower in the film could emphasise the community of women at the university, but instead the enforced nudity in front of her peers reveals

Anne's body with its injection marks, which Claire suggests could be syphilis. Diwan's representation of "les relations entre filles" (Ernaux, 2000, 56) in this scene, and elsewhere, for example the planted pornographic photograph in Anne's book by the same girls, is venomous. The O. from the book, despite her tendency to gossip and Catholic bourgeois background, becomes Annie's confidante, and plays a key role in the abortion itself. Having already told O. of her plans to abort, Annie actively calls for her assistance in dealing with the aftermath of the abortion, compared to Olivia's accidental involvement after investigating the noises coming from Anne's room. Furthermore, Ernaux's post-abortum scene establishes a greater connection between the two women, as O. not only cuts the umbilical cord, as Olivia does in Diwan's film, but she shares in Annie's emotional response to the foetus.

> Nous regardons le corps minuscule, avec une grosse tête, sous les paupières transparentes les yeux font deux taches bleues. […] Nous regardons le sexe. Il nous semble voir un début de pénis. […] O. s'assoit sur le tabouret, elle pleure. Nous pleurons silencieusement. (91)

The four occurrences of "nous" in this passage reinforce the shared experience of the two women. Indeed, the switch to the use of the present tense in this scene, which rarely appears outside of the metanarrative interjections from Ernaux the narrator, renders this scene an even more vivid experience for the reader, who becomes a third party in the "nous". There is no such shared moment in Diwan's film. Once the cord has been cut, Anne quickly loses consciousness, and Olivia's role in the abortion, and the film, is over.

In *L'Ensemencée*, Armande's female network is extremely limited. With both parents deceased, she has no maternal figure in her life until her marriage, but her mother-in-law has made no secret of her disapproval of the match due to the disparity in the couple's financial situations. Similarly to Diwan's first scene, the novel opens with a

moment of shared intimacy between female friends. As Armande sets up the marital home, her best friend since childhood, Marie-Louise, arrives to share in the pre-nuptial excitement. This chapter succinctly establishes Armande's close homosocial bond with Marie-Louise, who arrives at ten o'clock at night and is allowed into the "beau désordre" of the new home (3). The shared intimacy between the friends is shattered by Armande's pregnancy and the abortive attempts, as Marie-Louise makes her own desire for children clear in her reasons for marrying a man she does not love. Caruchet presents the distance between the two friends as more than a difference of opinion, but a fundamental lack of mutual understanding:

> cette question de la maternité les séparait complètement, mettait entre elles un monde. Désormais, le langage de chacune était inintelligible pour l'autre. Une mère et une amoureuse ne peuvent se comprendre, car elles incarnent les deux missions de la femme, les deux orientations diamétralement opposées de sa nature morale et physique. (133)

Stating motherhood and love-making as a woman's two diametrically opposed missions does seem to ignore the methods by which a woman becomes pregnant, as well as presenting a limited set of options for a woman's purpose.[2] Indeed, for the unmarried

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[2] The concept of a second alternative route to motherhood, as "amoureuse", would have been shocking for the majority of first-wave French feminists at the turn of the century, including Maria Pognon, who was voted president of the 1896 Feminist Congress because she was a "mère de famille dévouée" (Cova 1997, 99). Hubertine Auclert envisaged another pathway for women, taking advantage of society's veneration of maternity. She saw motherhood as the way to secure female suffrage, as the same qualities that make women effective mothers who organise their own families would make them effective leaders of the nation, leading to a new concept – *L'Etat-mère* (108). Madeleine Pelletier was unprecedented in her approach, leading by example as the first female doctor to work in a psychiatric

Annie and Anne, their impending maternity is the evidence of their shared status of "amoureuse", a marker of their sexual promiscuity, their *faute*.

In a parenthetical interjection from Ernaux towards the beginning, she turns the concept of the sexually active unmarried woman's fault on is head:

> Il y a une semaine que j'ai commencé ce récit, sans aucune certitude de le poursuivre. Je voulais seulement vérifier mon désir d'écrire là-dessus. Un désir qui me traversait continuellement à chaque fois que j'étais en train d'écrire le livre auquel je travaille depuis deux ans. […] M'y abandonner me semblait effrayant. Mais je me disais aussi que je pourrais mourir sans avoir rien fait de cet événement. S'il y avait une faute, c'était celle-là. (24)

Just as the pregnancy was an interruption to her studies and plans as a young woman, the "désir d'écrire" this novel disrupts her writing schedule for her other book. As a writer, she is compelled to turn this act of interrupted procreation into literary creation. The "faute" of the final line deliberately evokes the "faute" of the *fille-mère*, the pejorative term for a woman who has a child out of wedlock. The only occurrence of this term, which Ernaux gives without the hyphen, as "fille mère", is in her description of the hospital before her surgery. In reference to the young woman who attends with her mother, claiming that she is about to give birth, Ernaux reflects:

> Elle avait gardé l'enfant mais elle n'était pas mieux traitée que moi. La fille avortée et la fille mère des pauvres quartiers de Rouen étaient logées à la même enseigne. Peut-être avait-on plus de mépris pour elle que pour moi. (96)

She clearly makes a distinction between her status as "fille avortée" and that of the other woman, making it clear that she does not view herself as a "fille mère", although the

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hospital in France and in suggesting that homo- and heterosocial cohabitation as an alternative to sexual or family relationships (Pelletier, 1911).

term was often applied to unmarried women who interrupted their pregnancy before the birth. The term also occurs once in Diwan's film, when Anne returns to Dr Ravinsky (Fabrizio Rongione) after her attempted abortion with the knitting needle: "Je n'approuve pas vos démarches, mais je comprends vos motivations. Fille-mère, ce n'est pas simple" (0:51:26). Crucially, the male medical professional, who represents "the dominant classes" in Ernaux's work (Jellenik 2007, 130), associates Anne with this label rather than Anne herself.

In Caruchet's novel, it is Armande who compares herself to the figure of the *fille-mère*. Amidst the secret turmoil of the abortive attempts during the first pregnancy, Armande and Roger are invited to a celebration of Marie-Louise's engagement, where a group of men discuss a recent *fait divers* from the papers. A young woman has died after a botched abortion and her lover now faces prosecution. One man judges her harshly: "Cette fille avait été au plaisir, elle pouvait bien être à la peine" (50). His friend is more sympathetic: "Voyons, voyons, vous êtes dur! Mais l'affolement, la terreur?… Sa place qu'elle allait perdre, le scandale, la honte?… Et puis enfin, qu'est-ce-que vous voulez? Après tout, la malheureuse en est morte!…" (50). There is a patronising and pitying tone to his description of "la malheureuse". What is essential in this "affaire d'avortement" (49) is that the *avortée* was poor and unmarried, hence the "scandale" and "honte" are caused by the pregnancy itself, as the embodiment of her pre-marital sexual activity. The second speaker sympathises with her as she fits the profile of the *fille-mère,* alone in the world and with no support, and as she died in the attempt. Certain motives for abortion are easier for at least some of the public to swallow; in death the *fille-mère avortée* is the victim, not the perpetrator of a crime.[3]

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[3] For more on Belle Époque representations of the *fille-mère* see Bryan (2023).

Unlike the men at the party, Armande's first instinct is to empathise with the *avortée*, to compare their respective positions.

> Une honte lui courbait la tête, en pensant à tout ce qu'elle avait déjà tenté contre ce qui peut-être était en elle. Rien de ce qui pouvait excuser un peu la morte inconnue n'était valable pour elle, Armande, protégée par l'amour, par la loi […]. Combien le dur jugement prononcé ce soir par une voix anonyme, se serait fait plus dur encore, s'il se fût agi d'elle! Pareille à cette femme dont les journaux racontaient l'agonie et la mort, elle avait été au plaisir, et ne voulait pas être à la peine… L'autre avait payé de sa vie; de quoi Armande paierait-elle le même sacrilège vouloir?… (52-53)

This passage is key in revealing Armande's inner torment and her relationship to other women. She judges herself more harshly than the *fille-mère* as she is protected by her marriage and comfortable financial status. Crucially, she focuses on how she would be perceived by others. She understands that the only legitimate defences of abortion according to the mores of the time do not apply to her and therefore her own revolt against maternity would be judged more harshly than the unwed mother's abortion. In comparing herself to other women, in this way, Armande fixates on all the ways that she does not match up to ideals and stereotypes. She cannot be the sympathetic *fille-mère* whose motives for not wanting a child are defensible, just as she cannot be the natural loving mother. Yet, in this moment of identification with the deceased woman, Armande brings her experience into the invisible chain, alongside her own.

Empowerment through expression

By tackling the issue of abortion from the woman's perspective, all three works provide an empowerment of the female experience through representation. There is audacity on the part of the *créatrices*, but the narratives also explore the power of expression. The

most explosive moment of cathartic speech of the three works appears in *L'Ensemencée*, in the penultimate chapter, where Armande confesses her abortive attempts to Marie-Louise.

Mirroring the opening chapter, Marie-Louise makes an impromptu visit to the apartment, and she sees the vials of abortifacient on the mantelpiece. It is Armande who opens the dialogue:

> "Ah!… Elle t'intéresse?"
>
> "Non… mais je m'étonne de voir cela chez toi…"
>
> "*Cela…?* Quoi? "
>
> "Mais, ces… ces médicaments, voyons! Je ne me trompe pas, ce sont bien des drogues…"
>
> "Abortives?… Oui, parfaitement! Eh bien, après? " (245, original emphasis)

Such is the stigma, Marie-Louise is unable to say the word and Armande must finish the sentence for her. What is striking here is that Marie-Louise is clearly not as innocent and naïve to such matters, as she recognises the vials almost instantly as abortifacients. Where Armande used "cela" (6) to replace maternity in the opening chapter, here she denies Marie-Louise the same comfort afforded by euphemism. By challenging her friend and uttering the word "abortives", Armande is suddenly empowered to admit the secret that she has hidden from everyone, and she states her case matter-of-factly, without any hesitation: "Ah! oui, je m'en suis servie, mais sans succès, malheureusement!" (245). She is finally able to own her actions, and to defend herself against the accusations that have plagued her inner dialogues throughout the novel.

Once she has begun to speak, the consequences of such utterances no longer matter. The very act of speaking is an act of defiance against her friend's conservative ideals and the maternity forced upon her.

> Elle rompait enfin le silence jusqu'alors gardé sur la misère de sa vie, déchargeait son cœur, se laissait voir telle qu'elle était avec sa colère impuissante et désespérée. Ah! *crier* ce qui l'étouffait depuis si longtemps, *crier* ses pensées et ses actes, *crier* sa douleur de n'être pas semblable aux autres, ses efforts sincères demeurés vains, la torture de son être amoureuse que la nature forçait à la maternité! *Avouer* tout, être plainte ou blâmée, qu'importait? mais *parler, parler, dire* enfin les *paroles* qu'elle n'avait jamais osé *prononcer*! (246-247, emphasis added)

Unlike before, when the desire to confess to the doctor-scientist came from the need for absolution, here, there is no such yearning. She speaks for the sake of speaking and hence the lexicon of speech ("crier", "avouer", "parler", "dire", "paroles", "prononcer") dominates this passage. In finally voicing the words which have tormented her inner monologue, Armande is able to defend her actions. Ernaux describes this same desire to speak as the motivations behind her confession to O.:

> le désir qui me poussait à dire ma situation ne tenait compte ni des idées ni des jugements possibles de ceux à qui je me confiais. Dans l'impuissance dans laquelle je me trouvais, c'était un acte, dont les conséquences m'étaient indifférentes, par lequel j'essayais d'entraîner l'interlocuteur dans la vision effarée du réel. (56-57)

For both women, there is power in these utterances, and surprisingly, in response to her outbursts of direct speech which run across several pages, Armande does not find the judgment she has dreaded. It is not quite the unlikely bond that leads O. to assist Annie in the final moments of the abortion, but Marie-Louise is affected by her words: "Elle réentendait les dernières paroles d'Armande, et se disait qu'elle ne savait pas, en effet, ce que c'était l'amour…" (254). This is Marie-Louise's final appearance in the novel, but rather than concluding the chapter with her horrified reaction to Armande's

revelation, Caruchet gives a hint that Marie-Louise could be open to a different female perspective.

Within the fictional worlds they create, both Diwan and Caruchet deprive their heroines of female support - Ernaux's "passeuses" - as they navigate their way through their abortion narratives. Armande and Anne are othered by their experiences, but it is precisely through the depiction of their stories that they find an audience with whom to connect. As Elkin notes in her interview with Diwan and Ernaux for *The Observer*, the director's work has been linked to the cinematic female gaze, a comparison that Diwan has found increasingly limiting in its highlighting of her gender as a filmmaker (2022). In her discussion of the female gaze, in response to Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, and in the context of romantic comedy films, Cohen highlights the experience of the female audience over the gender of the director: "Here, women gaze as women, disconnected from a conventional male economy of desire, whether or not a man made the film or a patriarchal perspective informs it" (2010, 80). Iris Brey popularised the term in France, adding the possibility for a male viewer to share in the female gaze:

> Si nous devions définir le *female gaze*, ce serait donc un regard qui donne une subjectivité au personnage féminin, permettant ainsi au spectateur et à la spectatrice de ressentir l'expérience de l'héroïne sans pour autant s'identifier à elle. […] Nous ne la regardons pas faire, nous faisons avec elle. (2020, 39)

It allows the female character to be subject, rather than object, recognising her feelings and sensations, but beyond that, allowing all viewers to share them with her.

One scene in particular demonstrates Diwan's methods for creating this shared experience between viewer and protagonist – Anne's unsuccessful attempted abortion with the knitting needle. After a tracking shot following her preparations of the bowl of water and sterilisation of the knitting needle with the lighter, the camera pauses over her left shoulder, so that the spectator follows Anne's view down her torso to the mirror she

holds between her legs. Diwan then cuts to a new shot, a close-up on Anne's lower torso, her genitals once again obscured by her knee (reminiscent of the vaginal examination earlier) and her left hand, so that her pubic hair is just visible. As she begins to insert the needle, the camera pans slowly up her body, to rest on her face. The close-up shot of her face as she attempts the procedure lasts just over a minute and is unbearable to watch. Even the subtlest facial movements and grimaces of Anamaria Vartolomei's performance are visible and the camera rocks back and forth, matching the movement of her head as she writhes in pain. In an interview for *Télérama* while promoting the film, in response to a question about male viewers leaving during screenings in Venice, Diwan remarks:

> Je savais qu'est-ce que ça convoquerait chez les femmes mais je ne savais pas qu'en fait les hommes pouvaient un moment se glisser dans la peau de cette jeune femme et concrètement ressentir d'être impliqué charnellement dans ce dispositif. (2022)

In line with Brey's definition of the female gaze, Diwan's film brings in male and female viewers to share and experience Anne's abortion with her.

The knitting needle scene is an extended depiction of a single paragraph in Ernaux's text. The written description includes only a fleeting reference to the physical sensation: "Je tâtonnais sans trouver le col de l'utérus et je ne pouvais m'empêcher d'arrêter dès que je ressentais de la douleur" (53). Nevertheless, the following parenthetical meta-narrative interjection imagines potential reactions from the reader: "Il se peut qu'un tel récit provoque de l'irritation, ou de la répulsion, soit taxé de mauvais goût" (53). She justifies her choice as a feminist rebellion against the patriarchal hegemony: "si je ne vais pas au bout de la relation de cette expérience, je contribue à obscurcir la réalité des femmes et je me range du côté de la domination masculine du monde" (53). She refuses to write another of those (male-authored) novels

which “ne fourniss[ent] pas de details sur la façon dont cela s’e[st] exactement passé”, where an “ellipse” is given in place of the abortion itself (37), just as Diwan refuses to pan away from Anne’s agonised face.

Although Caruchet makes extensive use of ellipses in her protagonist’s direct speech, she presents the reader with the unabridged experience of taking an abortifacient.

> Elle prit le verre, regarda, respira. Un insurmontable dégoût tirait et abaissait les coins de sa bouche, soulevait déjà son estomac répugné. [Roger], anxieux, la contemplait avec une pitié tendre. Elle but. Sa respiration précipitée disait son effort; l’amertume odieuse faisait grincer ses dents. Enfin, elle reposa le verre vide sur la table. (32)

This description makes Armande’s physical repugnance clear, with the details painting a vivid image in the reader’s mind of her difficulty in swallowing such a disgusting (and potentially harmful) substance. The auditory description of her breathing and the close-up focus on her the details of her mouth are reminiscent of the sounds and sights of Diwan’s knitting needle scene. Although in this moment Armande is the object of the narrative (and her husband’s) gaze in this description, at this early stage of the novel, Armande has yet to find her voice. Caruchet’s third-person narrator can offer these insights into her experience, not unlike the relationship between Ernaux the narrator and Annie the young woman.

I will conclude by returning to the “chaîne invisible” between these women: Diwan the *artiste*, Ernaux and Caruchet the *écrivaines* and Armande, Annie and Anne, the *héroïnes*. Despite the differences in publication date, and methods and results of the abortion attempts, these women are all linked by a desire to utter the unspeakable, to show the unwatchable – to reveal what lies behind the ellipses. In an interview with *Télérama* (2022), Diwan explains that she read Ernaux’s *L’Événement* after she had undergone an abortion herself, and wanted to read an abortion narrative. This longing

for representation of what she had experienced brought her to the novel, but also to the act of adding her voice to a further representation of the story. When asked why she mentions her own abortion in all her interviews for the film, she explains her initial hesitation, before she realised that

> ce dispositif de honte sociale me traverse encore que je le ressens moi, et qu'en dépit du fait que je travaille trois ans sur le sujet j'ai toujours envie de me taire. Donc en fait je vais contre cet élan premier parce que je pense qu'il fait partie du problème. (*Télérama* 2022, 0:07:49)

Like Ernaux's refusal to further "obscurcir la réalité des femmes" (53), it is precisely because Diwan feels the enforced need for silence on the matter that she speaks. This is a far cry from the explosion of speech from Caruchet's Armande in her final confrontation with Marie-Louise, but the critical reception of the novel at the time revealed a more sympathetic response to her self-diagnosed singularity. The reviewer from *La Justice* (1904) describes her as "un exemple d'aberration sexuelle heureusement assez rare" but frames her as a victim of the wider issues around procreation in French society of the time: "Armande n'est pas à blamer. Elle est à plaindre." The reviewer from *Le Rire* (1904) goes a step further, evoking a whole readership of women who see themselves in Armande: "Voici un livre qui sera lu ardemment et discuté par toutes les femmes. Il révèle la secrète terreur qui rôde autour du mariage et beaucoup reconnaitront intérieurement le mal dont elles ont souffert." It is only through the representation of these stories, with all their uncomfortable moments, that communities can be forged – between women who have also experienced them as well as the "passeuses" who come to their assistance. Most importantly for these creative works, they form a new community of readers and viewers, who live through these stories on the page and on the screen, bringing them out of the darkness of shame and silence, making the chain visible.

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