

Lesbianism and Maternal Ambivalence in H el ene de Monferrand’s *Les amies d’H elo ise* (1990) and *Les enfants d’H elo ise* (1997)

- 1 In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich distinguishes between two definitions of motherhood: the real-life, heterogeneous experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare; and the patriarchal institution, which ensures that these experiences, and all women, remain under male control¹. This institution, as I derive it from Rich, posits three fundamental assumptions about mothering: first, procreation is women’s sole or primary function; second, mothers love their children absolutely; and third, the art of childrearing comes naturally to women. Thus, the institution of motherhood expects women both to mother and to mother instinctively and perfectly. The unviability of these expectations means that women inevitably suffer, as Rich’s following testimony demonstrates:

I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is “unconditional”; and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity. If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren’t those parts then abnormal, monstrous?²

- 2 Rich’s observation that mother-love is assumed to be unconditional underpins my reading of H el ene de Monferrand’s *Les amies d’H elo ise* (1990) and *Les enfants d’H elo ise* (1997)³. In this article, I employ this observation in tandem with feminist psychoanalytic theories of maternal ambivalence to examine the interplay between the protagonist’s homosexuality and her strained relationship with mothering and with her children.
- 3 Under the institution of motherhood, both ambivalent mothers and mothers whose sexual desires are primarily directed toward other women are examples of maternal deviance. This institution, according to Rich, aims to preserve male-dominated society by regulating the female body, sexuality, and reproductive power. On the one hand, then, the institution regards as nonnormative configurations of mothering that operate outside direct male jurisdiction, such as lesbian families. Mothering, in Rich’s words, “is *sacred* so long as its offspring are *legitimate*—that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother”⁴. As such, the institution of motherhood delegitimizes women who mother without men, thus polarizing mothers into dichotomous moral categories. If good mothers, according to the institution of motherhood, appear subservient to male authority, lesbian mothers are deviant by default because they refute the norm of heterosexuality. On the other hand, maternal ambivalence challenges the assumption that mother-love is unconditional. Ambivalence, to paraphrase Rozsika Parker’s definition, describes the love- and hate-based emotions and impulses that women variously experience in relation to their children⁵. For mothers, to recognize and to admit such feelings can be distressing due to the supposed flawlessness of mother-love. Many feminists, including Parker and Rich, have endeavoured to normalize maternal ambivalence and to challenge the romanticization of mothering prescribed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood⁶. Ambivalent mothers also take centre stage in many works by twentieth-century women writers, as a wealth

of literary criticism has established⁷; yet the relative absence of lesbian mothers from French literature means that, inevitably, the vast majority of these studies address representations of ambivalence in heterosexual contexts⁸. In this article, I reorient maternal ambivalence as an object of French literary criticism toward narratives of lesbian mothering. My claim to originality, then, lies not in the treatment of maternal ambivalence, which, as I say, is a recurrent object of French literary criticism, but in the treatment of ambivalence from a lesbian perspective. Ultimately, I argue that Monferrand rejects the normative link between lesbianism and neglectful mothering and answers feminist calls to normalize maternal ambivalence, thereby deconstructing the norms of institutional motherhood as defined by Rich. I begin by deconstructing the link that Héloïse draws between her sexuality and her self-proclaimed failure as a mother, arguing that the protagonist's relationship with mothering and with her children is symptomatic of feminist psychoanalytic theories of ambivalence. I then consider Héloïse's ambivalence from the points of view of her three children. Next, I turn to the novels' representation of adolescent lesbianism, focusing on the common experiences of Héloïse and Mélanie. Finally, I analyse Erika's role as a quasi-stepparent in *Les enfants d'Héloïse*.

4 Despite Monferrand's mainstream success—*Les amies d'Héloïse* won the Prix Goncourt for best debut novel—her work has received little academic attention⁹. *Les amies d'Héloïse* is an epistolary novel set between 1964 and 1980. It describes the lives of a number of heterosexual and lesbian aristocratic women, centring in particular on the love triangle between Héloïse de Marèges, Erika von Tauberg, and Suzanne Lacombe. Twenty-nine-year-old Erika seduces a young but willing fifteen-year-old Héloïse. Héloïse then falls for Erika's former lover, Suzanne, who is almost fifty. Humiliated and jealous, Erika shoots Héloïse and returns to Germany. Soon after, Suzanne learns that she has a brain tumour and commits suicide. Grief-stricken, Héloïse marries, has three children—a boy and twin girls—and is widowed prior to the birth of her daughters. She and Erika are subsequently reunited after a ten-year separation. Set between 1981 and 1990, *Les enfants d'Héloïse* begins where *Les amies d'Héloïse* ends. *Les enfants d'Héloïse* abandons the epistolary form, but retains its prequel's inclination to foreground aristocratic female identities. Héloïse pursues her relationship with Erika while raising her son, Anne, and her daughters, Mélanie and Suzanne. Until Mélanie discovers Suzanne Lacombe's diary, the children are unaware of their mother's sexuality and of her and Erika's relationship. Thus, the reconciliation of lesbianism and mothering is arguably this novel's central theme. By casting Mélanie as a lesbian, Monferrand also returns to the exploration of adolescent lesbianism that she began in *Les amies d'Héloïse*.

5 In *Les amies d'Héloïse*, the eponymous protagonist unambiguously links her self-proclaimed failure as a mother with her sexuality: "Voilà comment je suis devenue une bonne maîtresse, tout en restant une bien mauvaise mère"¹⁰. Héloïse, whom Erika describes as "une mère distante"¹¹, often affirms that she regrets having become a mother: "*Mais pourquoi ai-je fait ces gosses? Pourquoi?*" (ADH 448). At first glance, Héloïse appears to uphold the normative equation of lesbianism with deficient mothering. And yet, she repeatedly acts to ensure the safety of her children and, in doing so, discredits her confessions of bad mothering. For example, Héloïse seeks the help of her lover, Melitta, to prevent a near miscarriage

during her second pregnancy, which underlines her concern for her twin daughters' wellbeing. When, to give a second example, Héloïse leaves her husband, an abusive drug user, she considers but decides against abandoning her infant son, Anne: "Voilà comment j'ai quitté le domicile conjugal. Et moi qui ai toujours proclamé que je n'aimais ni les enfants, ni les animaux, ni les malades, j'ai laissé le malade (imaginaire) et le chat, mais j'ai quand même pris l'enfant" (*ADH* 337). Monferrand humorously evokes Molière's *Le malade imaginaire* to trivialize her heroine's urge to abandon her child. In *Les enfants d'Héloïse*, the protagonist recalls the night when she left her husband:

Elle avait songé très lucidement à laisser le bébé à son père mais à la réflexion ne s'en était pas accordé le droit. Non parce qu'on l'aurait mal jugée, ça elle s'en fichait complètement, mais parce qu'elle s'était sentie tout à coup responsable de lui. [...] "En somme, c'est cette nuit-là [...] que j'ai commencé à l'aimer. Il était temps! Peut-être que je suis normale, finalement? Une mère d'ancien régime, en somme, comme les décrivent Ariès et Badinter". (*EDH* 122)

- 6 Héloïse's feelings for Anne challenge dominant beliefs about mother-love and exemplify Parker's conception of ambivalence, thus disrupting the norms of institutional motherhood. For Parker, ambivalence is not simply mixed feelings but refers to the coexistence of contradictory emotions and impulses toward the same person. "The positive and negative components," Parker writes, "sit side by side and remain in opposition"¹². Ambivalence, in other words, is not an oscillation between love and hate but describes the state of experiencing these feelings simultaneously; neither love nor hate ever ceases entirely. In this passage, Héloïse's dislike of Anne—the urge to abandon him—sits side by side with her love and her sense of responsibility for him. Her reference to the love that she has for her son contradicts her assertion in *Les amis d'Héloïse* that she hates children: "*Je déteste les enfants*" (*ADH* 142). Furthermore, the protagonist's indifference to the potential criticisms of others normalizes maternal ambivalence, although her tentative declaration of normality betrays some anxiety at not meeting the expectation that women love their children absolutely. It is notable too that the novel engages with influential literature on mothering and childhood—as evidenced by its references to Philippe Ariès and Élisabeth Badinter—of which a cornerstone is the historically variable nature of mother-love, as Héloïse notes. Indeed, Héloïse's admission that she started to love Anne when she left her husband suggests that mother-love is not necessarily instinctive but established gradually. Instead of labelling Héloïse as a neglectful mother, the novel thus seems to underline the mutability of mother-love—a phenomenon well documented by feminists. Ann Dally, for instance, suggests that parents loved their children less when infant mortality rates were high; it is, Dally claims, a natural human reaction not to become attached to what one is likely to lose¹³. Rather than assert that mothers today love their children more—a problematic argument, given that love is difficult to define and to quantify—it is perhaps more pertinent to emphasize Dally's ultimate contention that mother-love has changed in accordance with patterns of childcare. For instance, the class of women to which Héloïse belongs, the aristocracy, traditionally handed over the task of nurturing their children to wetnurses and nannies.
- 7 While Héloïse reaches a degree of acceptance of her own ambivalence, Erika and Héloïse's mother, Anne de Marèges, worry about Héloïse's lack of maternal fibre, leading Anne to give her daughter a copy of Badinter's *L'amour en plus*. Given

Badinter's contention that maternal instinct is relative—a contention that works to normalize ambivalence—Anne could be said to endorse Badinter's view¹⁴. And yet, in trying to convince her daughter that she is no different from other mothers, she implicitly asks Héloïse to defend her ambivalence and thus betrays her view that it *needs* to be defended and therefore cannot be “normal”. Encouraging Héloïse to mother actively becomes a sort of game between her, Anne, and Erika, thus satirizing the former's feelings of ambivalence. When, for instance, Héloïse plans to send her children to their grandmother's in Vienna for a month, Anne and Erika attempt, but fail, to foil the plan.

- 8 The fact that the children address Héloïse using the *vous* form could indicate that their relationship with her lacks the intimacy and trust that would engender the use of the *tu* form; yet the atypical distribution of *tu* and *vous* in Monferrand's novels has more to do with relations of power and respect than with degrees of closeness. Thus, Héloïse says *vous* to her own mother, even though the latter's acceptance of her daughter's homosexuality evidences an obvious affection between them. This suggests that the children's use of *vous* is a family tradition that reflects the characters' aristocratic milieu more than it does the closeness between Héloïse and her children. In *Les amies d'Héloïse*, Monferrand further plays with the *tu* and *vous* forms to establish the power relations between the teenage Héloïse and her older lovers:

[J]e suis bien contente que les précautions prises à l'époque de ma minorité nous aient conduites à ne jamais nous tutoyer. Tu ne peux pas savoir le supplément de sensualité qu'apporte cette pratique. Mes parents le savent bien, je parie. J'aimais aussi l'inégalité du rapport avec Suzanne. C'était le maître et l'élève... autre chose... (ADH 442)

- 9 As lovers, the mutual *vouvoiment* between Héloïse and Erika, emphasized by its juxtaposition with Héloïse's use of *tu* to address her best friend, Claire, is unusual and communicates Héloïse's emotional detachment from Erika and the resulting sexual pleasure. Indeed, Claire effectively confirms that, for Héloïse, this is a sex—rather than a love-based affair when, in response to her friend's self-expressed doubts about her feelings for Erika, she asks: “S'interroge-t-on sur l'amour, quand on le ressent?” (ADH 79). The skewed *tu-vous* distribution between Héloïse and Suzanne—Suzanne says *tu* to Héloïse, but Héloïse addresses Suzanne in the *vous* form—is equally unconventional, despite the thirty-year age gap, and evidences the sexually gratifying power relations of their affair, as the preceding extract indicates. In addition to trivializing Héloïse's maternal ambivalence, Monferrand thus deproblematizes her young heroine's presumed sexual exploitation by her older lovers. Unexpectedly, it is Héloïse, counselled by Claire, who toys with Erika and skilfully entices Suzanne into bed.
- 10 As my discussion thus far indicates, Héloïse's experience of mothering is characteristic of feminist psychoanalytic theories of maternal ambivalence. Indeed, she displays the will to protect her children alongside a wish to be rid of them. While these examples undoubtedly convey Héloïse's need for a sense of self that is separable from maternity, they do not vindicate her confessions of bad mothering. On the contrary, Parker argues that it is the dialogue between the simultaneous feelings of love and resentment that encourages women to reflect on their mothering and to try to know and understand their child. Parker's notional

theorization of a nonambivalent mother elucidates this point:

Perhaps this becomes clearer if we invent a hypothetical mother who does not experience ambivalence but regards her child only with hostile feelings, or conversely only with untroubled love. In neither case will she find it necessary to dwell on her relationship with her child or to focus her feelings on her child's response to herself because she will not know what is missing. It is the troubling co-existence of love and hate that propels a mother into thinking about what goes on between herself and her child.¹⁵

- 11 Put simply, the coexistence of love and hate can in fact improve women's mothering. According to Parker, then, "ambivalence itself is emphatically not the problem; the issue is how a mother manages the guilt and anxiety ambivalence provokes"¹⁶. Far from being a neglectful mother, then, Héloïse is reflecting on her feelings of love and resentment vis-à-vis her children, voicing—often unashamedly—her ambivalence, and expressing the disquiet around the supposed irreconcilability of lesbianism and mothering. Further, Parker distinguishes between "manageable" and "unmanageable" ambivalence¹⁷. In Monferrand's novels, Héloïse deploys humour to manage the negative emotions that she harbors in relation to her children, as evidenced by the ironic comparison cited earlier between the child, the cat, and her imaginary invalid of a husband. This enables the novels to subvert their heroine's declarations of bad mothering, infant hating, and her association of these with her sexuality. While they thus explore maternal ambivalence from a lesbian perspective, the novels do not imply that lesbianism causes ambivalence or that lesbian mothers are less able than heterosexual mothers to manage it. Admittedly, *Les amies d'Héloïse* depicts a stark contrast between its ambivalent heroine and Claire, a doting heterosexual mother who desires seven children and to have them at home for as long as possible, which could be said to reify heterosexuality as a prerequisite of mothering. The maternal experiences of the novels' other heterosexual women are, however, less idyllic; Erika's half-sister, Manuela, is trapped in an unhappy marriage and, in *Les enfants d'Héloïse*, falls pregnant with another man's child. Monferrand thus suggests that mothering is hard to varying degrees but that the difficulties of mothering do not necessarily have any relation to the mother's sexuality.
- 12 The novels' portrayal of mothering thus bears some resemblance to Rich's theory of a lesbian continuum—that is to say, "a range [...] of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman"¹⁸. According to Rich, then, sexuality cannot be reduced to a binary of heterosexual and homosexual desire, just as mothering, for Monferrand, is not reducible to a simple question of good and bad. By synthesizing Rich's lesbian continuum with the maternal experiences of Héloïse and her friends, it could be argued that Monferrand's work goes beyond the limits of binary logic. Monferrand's novels also expose the limits of normative sexual identity categories. For instance, Héloïse disrupts the conventional definition of lesbianism by engaging in and, crucially, enjoying the sexual side to her brief marriage. Indeed, as Héloïse comments on her marriage: "Un échec, oui, mais pas au lit. À la fin de leur mariage c'était même la seule chose qui marchait et ils se réconciliaient souvent sur l'oreiller" (*EDH* 196). She also has a one-off heterosexual encounter following her husband's death. One might thus be tempted to regard Monferrand's heroine as bisexual, if not for the unambiguous statement that, "Malgré tout Héloïse avait fini

par conclure qu'elle n'était pas fondamentalement bisexuelle" (EDH 196). Nonetheless, the novel undoubtedly questions the pertinence of normative sexual identity categories and, in doing so, endorses Rich's model of a lesbian continuum.

- 13 *Les enfants d'Héloïse* utilizes the perspectives of Héloïse's children to further normalize maternal ambivalence and to challenge the assumption that imperfect mother-love is damaging to children. While Suzanne doubts whether or not Héloïse loves them, the possible absence of mother-love is remarkably deproblematized:

"Maman? Ça dépend. Elle ne s'intéresse pas à nous. Peut-être qu'elle ne nous aime pas? Quand on y réfléchit c'est son droit. Pourquoi les parents seraient-ils obligés d'aimer leurs enfants?"

"Maman nous aime!"

"Qu'est-ce qui te le prouve? À mon avis elle nous aime bien, oui... et de nous trois elle préfère Anne." (EDH 246)

- 14 Suzanne's acceptance of, even complete indifference to, maternal ambivalence further challenges the normative stereotype that women love their children absolutely. Through her distinction between love, "aime", and like, "aime bien", the novel raises the important question of what it means to love one's child and encourages the reader to reflect on the fine line between these two degrees of affection, just as Parker encourages us to consider the proximity of love and hate. Moreover, Suzanne challenges the modern but widespread expectation that women love all their children equally by suggesting that Héloïse loves Anne more than she does her daughters. Indeed, Héloïse confirms her daughter's belief in conversation with Erika: "*Moi je ne suis pas une bonne mère. J'ai des préférences, mais elles varient. En ce moment, j'ai un petit faible pour Anne*" (EDH 155). As well as her habitual self-denigration as a bad mother, Héloïse again exposes the mutability and flawed nature of mother-love. Anne, for his part, adores Héloïse and is unquestioningly loyal to her. Indeed, when his paternal grandmother, whom he cannot abide, falsely tells him that Héloïse killed his father, he immediately concludes: "[S]i Maman avait tué Papa, elle avait une excellente raison" (EDH 67). Thus, Anne's love for his mother is unconditional, as Héloïse realizes when Anne informs her of his grandmother's accusation: "Qu'avait-elle fait pour mériter un amour aussi inconditionnel? Et qu'auraient pensé les filles dans la même situation?" (EDH 291). Just as the children reveal the variability of mother-love, Héloïse alludes to the different degrees to which children love their parents. *Les enfants d'Héloïse* thus goes beyond representing the mother's ambivalence to a portrayal of the shared ambivalence that mothers and children experience in relation to each other. Suzanne, for instance, states that she loves her grandmother, Lise—a friend of the family—and Anne more than she does Héloïse. Mélanie, on the other hand, prefers Erika to her mother. As such, the twins recall what Nancy Chodorow sees as an attempt by girls to identify with female figures other than the mother¹⁹. According to Chodorow, mother-daughter relationships are ambivalent because daughters seek to separate from the mother; adolescent girls may therefore idolize another woman or family member to effect their individuation from the mother.

- 15 Mélanie's identification with Erika is particularly strong, and she says that Erika might be the person she loves most in the world. Indeed, for Mélanie, Erika "était quelqu'un de mystérieux qui la fascinait totalement, depuis toujours. Plus exactement depuis le soir, à l'âge de quatre ans, où elle l'avait vue pour la première fois, ce dont elle se souvenait très bien" (EDH 54). Clearly, then, Erika made a lasting

impression on her lover's daughter. Mélanie attempts to maintain her attachment to Erika by opting to spend one Christmas in Le Cernix because, in previous years, Erika has spent a few days there, having managed to take some leave from work. As Mélanie enters puberty, her attachment to Erika becomes increasingly sexual. While the novel could thus be said to reinforce a model of genetically acquired homosexuality, Suzanne neatly challenges this view when her sister confides in her:

[J]e peux fournir quantité d'autres explications aussi simples. L'atmosphère, des choses presque invisibles entre Maman et Erika que tu as captées sans t'en apercevoir. Peut-être même es-tu un peu amoureuse d'Erika, je le croirais volontiers, d'autant plus que tu m'as avoué qu'elle te troublait. Bref tu as fait ton Œdipe à l'envers. (EDH 390)

Suzanne's reference to the Oedipal configuration reapplies, perhaps mockingly, Freudian psychoanalysis to nonheterosexual kinship structures. More obviously, she postulates sexuality as psychologically and socially conditioned rather than biologically determined.

- 16 By casting Héloïse's daughter as a lesbian, Monferrand returns to the exploration of adolescent lesbianism that she developed in *Les amies d'Héloïse*. For Mélanie, the burgeoning desire for other women is at first an isolating experience—an isolation that is perhaps compounded by Héloïse's discretion regarding her own lesbianism—before she gradually comes to terms with her sexuality by discovering and identifying with characters from the French lesbian literary canon. There is an obvious commonality, here, between Mélanie's experience as an adolescent lesbian and that of her mother. In *Les amies d'Héloïse*, the protagonist cites the poems of Sappho and Renée Vivien to explain her feelings about the love triangle between her, Erika, and Suzanne. Through the intertextual references to the poetry of Sappho and Vivien and, in *Les enfants d'Héloïse*, the works of Émile Zola and Jeanne Galzy, Monferrand might be said to trace the development of, and to position her own work within, a French lesbian canon and, in doing so, to legitimize the treatment of same-sex desire. Further, these references suggest Monferrand's own appreciation of literature—an appreciation that chimes with her heroine's belief that enjoying reading is the key to happiness. Mélanie first learns about lesbian desire by reading Zola's deprecating portrayal in *Nana*:

Donc cela existait et c'était tellement horrible que même Zola en était écœuré. Donc elle n'était pas seule et c'était rassurant. Enfin, rassurant? Dans la mesure où cela prouvait qu'elle n'était pas folle, c'est tout. Elle était tarée, et après tout quoi d'étonnant? On prétend toujours que les nobles sont dégénérés et elle l'était, ce qui constituait une excuse. (EDH 340)

- 17 Although reading Zola proved to her that she is not alone in experiencing same-sex desire, and therefore not mad, Zola's alignment of lesbianism with depravity is of little reassurance to Mélanie. Her interpretation of Galzy is considerably more positive, however: “[O]n n'était plus du tout dans les sous-entendus effrayants de Zola”; “Oui, les héroïnes de Galzy se cachait, mais elles n'avaient pas l'air de se sentir malades ou coupables” (EDH 375). In this way, Monferrand is overviewing the emergence of an empowering literary representation of lesbian desire and love. Indeed, whereas Zola aligns lesbianism with the unsayable, condemning it to silence—“Ce restaurant bon marché de Pigalle [...] avait quelque chose d'étrange à cause, justement, du ton allusif de l'auteur” (EDH 339)—Galzy's depiction is more overt.

- 18 Héloïse and Mélanie also share a desire to inscribe their sexuality in writing. Interestingly, Monferrand thus fictionalizes both lesbianism and the process of writing about lesbianism. In her first novel, one of Héloïse's letters to Claire includes a love poem of her own creation, which describes the physical side of her relationship with Erika: "Et le frémissement de ses mains immobiles/ Qui me faisaient gémir et me faisaient ployer.../ J'ai connu sa douceur dans un plaisir farouche/ Et sa brutalité dans un soupir léger" (*ADH* 94). Héloïse deploys nouns and adjectives in oxymoronic distribution; the stillness of the lover's hands contradicts their quivering, while the narrator's gentle sigh contrasts with the lover's brutality, which is also dichotomized with his or her gentleness in the previous line. This emphasises the plurality of physical sensations Héloïse associates with desire. In *Les enfants d'Héloïse*, Mélanie, Anne, Suzanne, and their cousins begin work on a story entitled *Le Feuilleton*, which initially focuses on the Thirty Years' War. As the others gradually lose interest, however, Mélanie begins to use the story as a space in which she can come to terms with her own lesbianism: "[*Le Feuilleton*] lui servait de point de départ à des rêveries imprécises sur les gens, la vie en général, et surtout les attirances secrètes qu'elle ressentait pour certaines élèves à qui elle n'avait, la plupart du temps, jamais parlé" (*EDH* 242). By fictionalizing both lesbian desire and the literary construction thereof, the novels underline the importance of writing as a medium of subversion, specifically the creation of a space for the inscription of nonnormative gender and sexual identities. For Mélanie, writing becomes a means to affirm a lesbian identity safely: "Dans ses livres elle se transformerait en homme et décrirait des femmes, des âmes de femme, des corps de femme, ce qui serait une manière de les aimer que personne ne pourrait critiquer" (*EDH* 341). Undoubtedly, it is problematic that Mélanie cannot assume her lesbianism openly; yet, at the same time, she is empowered by and enjoys the process of writing about her sexuality.
- 19 Whereas Mélanie's attachment to Erika becomes progressively sexual, the role that Erika covets and forges with Héloïse's children is a parental one. By building a positive relationship with Héloïse's children, Erika hopes to ensure her partner's long-term commitment to her: "En admettant qu'Héloïse tombât un jour amoureuse de quelqu'un d'autre, elle hésiterait certainement à détruire l'équilibre familial, même s'il s'agissait en l'espèce d'une famille hors normes" (*EDH* 17). Although Erika's motive for coveting the parental role is thus not entirely selfless, she nonetheless envisions the possibility of two women parenting together. Similarly, Anne de Marèges encourages Erika to move into the apartment block where Héloïse and her children are living with a view to providing the children with a "normal" family environment. Héloïse ironically wonders, however, whether her mother realizes how far her daughter's family goes against the norm. While *Les enfants d'Héloïse* thus acknowledges lesbian-headed families, it ultimately forecloses the possibility of publicly declaring this familial configuration. Nonetheless, Héloïse and Erika actively subvert the traditional family, as their conversation about Héloïse's plan to send Mélanie and Suzanne to boarding school illustrates:

– Il est vrai que ça ne me regarde pas. – Mais si, ça vous regarde! Vous vous souvenez de ce qu'a dit Lise, il n'y a pas longtemps, à propos des enfants et de nous? – Je ne crois pas. – Mais si, elle a dit que vous faisiez la mère et moi le père. Que toute notre attitude... – Elle plaisantait. – Pas tout à fait. Il y a beaucoup de vrai dans cette

remarque. Le père que je suis pensait qu'il fallait les séparer à l'école primaire, même si elles en pleuraient, et qu'il est bon de les mettre en pension maintenant, ce qui ne leur déplaît pas. Vous, vous jouez le rôle de la mère classique: vous vous tordez les mains en vous lamentant. (EDH 154–55)

- 20 Although the relationships between Héloïse, Erika, and the children are assimilated to a heteronormative mother-father-child triangulation, it is not insignificant that Monferrand's novel portrays an LGBT family, of sorts, prior to the emergence of same-sex parenting as a cultural, political, and social question during the French debates surrounding the PaCS in 1999. Indeed, *Les enfants d'Héloïse* is a reminder that, although LGBT families have gained visibility in the twenty-first century, and especially in the run-up to the legalization of equal marriage in 2013, such families are not as recent a cultural phenomenon as is commonly believed. Lesbian mothers have, of course, existed for as long as heterosexual mothers in cases where women, like Héloïse, have children in a heterosexual partnership before or while assuming a lesbian identity. Although *Les enfants d'Héloïse* thus nods toward a lesbian stepparent family, its characters never truly embrace this mode of kinship. While Erika lives a floor below Héloïse and the children, she never moves in with them and is never entirely incorporated into the family. Most importantly, Erika is never introduced to the children as Héloïse's partner, although the children eventually discover the nature of the relationship between Héloïse and Erika.
- 21 By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the theoretical concept that I set out at the beginning of this article: Adrienne Rich's institution of motherhood. The representation of mothering in Hélène de Monferrand's *Les amies d'Héloïse* and *Les enfants d'Héloïse* challenges the norms of this institution in two principal ways: first, by casting the protagonist as a lesbian, the novels question the taken-for-granted nexus between mothering and heterosexuality; and second, Héloïse's experience of mothering refutes the supposed flawlessness of mother-love. While the novels thus seem to reiterate the normative irreconcilability of lesbianism and mothering, my analysis has sought to resist this conclusion by interpreting the novels' depiction of mothering in light of psychoanalytic theories of maternal ambivalence. Héloïse's feelings in relation to her children, far from making her a "bad" mother, are characteristic of ambivalence. The novels therefore support feminist work on mothering that endeavours to normalize and to trivialize imperfect mother-love. In addition, *Les enfants d'Héloïse* prefigures the emergence and increasing visibility of LGBT families in the 2000s by portraying Erika as quasi-stepparent to Héloïse's children. In this respect, however, the transgressive potential of the novels is limited, since Erika's role in the family is always a marginalized one. Monferrand's novels should therefore be seen as a step toward the widening of family structures that France has undergone in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

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NOTES

- ¹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York and London, Norton, 1986 [1976].
- ² Rich, *Of Woman Born*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

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- ³ *Les amies d'Héloïse* and *Les enfants d'Héloïse* are the first and third novels in a trilogy. Lesbian mothers do not feature in the second novel, *Journal de Suzanne* (1991). Monferrand has also cowritten two detective novels with Elula Perrin: *L'Habit ne fait plus la nonne* (1998) and *Ne tirez pas sur le violoniste* (1998).
- ⁴ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
- ⁵ Rozsika Parker, *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*, London, Virago, 1995, p. 1.
- ⁶ See also Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley, Calif., and London, University of California Press, 1978; Ann Dally, *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal*, London, Burnett, 1982; and Ann Oakley, *From Here to Maternity: Becoming a Mother*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986. First published in 1979 as *Becoming a Mother*.
- ⁷ See, for example Diana Holmes, *French Women's Writing, 1848-1994*, London, Athlone, 1996, p. 246-265; and Gill Rye, *Narratives of Mothering: Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2009, p. 99-117.
- ⁸ Monferrand aside, only Jocelyne François published literary works featuring lesbian mothers before the creation of the *Pacte Civil de Solidarité* in 1999.
- ⁹ Two book-length studies of French lesbian writing contain analyses of Monferrand's novels. See Jennifer Waelti-Walters, *Damned Women: Lesbians in French Novels, 1796-1996*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000, p. 205-209; and Lucille Cairns, *Lesbian Desire in Post-1968 French Literature*, Lewiston, Edwin Mellen, 2002, p. 310-338.
- ¹⁰ Hélène de Monferrand, *Les amies d'Héloïse*, Paris, Fallois, 1990, <Le Livre de Poche>, p. 450; hereafter *ADH*.
- ¹¹ Hélène de Monferrand, *Les enfants d'Héloïse*, Paris, [Double Interligne, 1997], Éditions de la Cerisaie, 2002, p. 11; hereafter *EDH*.
- ¹² Parker, p. 6.
- ¹³ Dally, p. 44.
- ¹⁴ Élisabeth Badinter, *L'amour en plus: histoire de l'amour maternel (XVIIe-XXe siècle)*, Paris, Flammarion, 1980.
- ¹⁵ Parker, p. 7.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ¹⁸ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5, 1980, p. 648.
- ¹⁹ Chodorow, p. 137.