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The Mother Figure in Contemporary Women's Theater

Abstract

Five French plays written by women playwrights between the years 1976–88 attest to significant changes in the dramatic presentation of the mother figure. The innovations occur at the general thematic level (with plays centered on the mother–daughter initiating encounter at the moment of giving birth/being born, the reversal of the mother–daughter roles later on in life, trial maternity, willful maternal eclipse, etc.) as well as at the level of the characters' speech, the setting, and so on. While some of the plays (such as Chantal Chawaf's *Chair chaude*, Denise Chalem's *A cinquante ans elle découvrait la mer* and Loleh Bellon's *De si tendres liens*) put into words typical female experiences rarely or never before voiced in front of a theatrical audience, others (such as Madeleine Laik's *Transat* and Denise Bonal's *Passions et prairies*) represent mental experiments that daringly reconfigure the meaning, timing and social as well as personal finality of motherhood.

The Mother Figure in Contemporary French Women's Theater

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Contemporary French Theater has become an experimental space in which, among numerous other pursuits, female playwrights actively reconfigure the Mother figure. I will present in what follows several innovative dramatic instances of the Mother character: the Mother–Daughter continuum in Chantal Chawaf's *Chair chaude* (1976) *Warmth: A Bloodsong* (1994); the posthumous Mother articulating the unspeakable in Denise Chalem's *À cinquante ans elle découvrait la mer* (1985) 'At Fifty, She Was Discovering the Sea'; the striking reversal of the Mother–Daughter roles in Loleh Bellon's *De si tendres liens* (1984) 'Such Tender Ties'; *maternité à l'essai* 'trial maternity' in Madeleine Laïk's *Transat* (1983) *Deck Chairs* (1984) and willful maternal eclipse in Denise Bonal's *Passions et Prairies* (1988) 'Passions and Prairies.'¹ In so doing, I limit myself to only a few among the many aspects and plays that could have been invoked here.

Transfiguring Labor and Birthing—Chawaf: *Chair chaude*

Chair chaude is a hymn play that gives ample, resonating voices to the mother-and-child physical and spiritual continuum. Chawaf opted for the Mother–Daughter dyad, never before presented on the stage and rarely approached even in today's culture with such emblematic solemnity. There are three characters in the play: LA MÈRE (the Mother), LA FILLE (the Daughter) and LE COEUR (the Heart or, if written *Choeur*, but identically pronounced in French, the Chorus in ancient Greek tragedy, as Chawaf states in an explanatory note). She defines LE COEUR as a multiple character, meant to represent human life in general and to suggest the innumerable human bodies

that surround and include the pulsating Mother–Daughter double protagonist. To suggest this special Chorus—and vigil—of heartbeats Chawaf recommends kaleidoscopic movements of actors and actresses differently dressed but sharing a common characteristic (a unique mask or jewel, for example) and successively crossing the stage in various directions. These movements are meant to express the human presence that surrounds the sacred process of giving birth.

LA MÈRE and LA FILLE are reminiscent of Paul Claudel’s *animaux spirituels* ‘spiritual animals’ in *Partage de midi* (1906) ‘Noon divide.’ They form at times a single character and are at other times two distinct ones. The episodes of pregnancy, specifically the act of giving birth, the mother-and-daughter joint effort, the act of being born and the first gestures of LA FILLE, are not presented in chronological order. LE COEUR is part, in turn, of LA MÈRE and LA FILLE while simultaneously including them together with all human beings, male or female. Its voices are polyphonic. LE COEUR speaks at times in the name of LA MÈRE, describing her body, the body of the daughter, their contact, the moment of birth, and her motherly everyday work. It is, less often, the voice of LA FILLE, commenting on the inner or outer proximity of her body to the mother’s body. At times, as in “Nous sommes toute proche, toute proche” (*Chair* 61) ‘We are near, very near,’ the *nous* ‘we’ seems to refer to the dual speaker LE COEUR-and-LA FILLE. There are instances where LE COEUR speaks in the name of LA MÈRE-and-LA FILLE. Finally, LE COEUR speaks, most often, in its own name addressing its proper theme of blood circulation, but also referring to mother and child from inside the body of the first, or from the outside world, to the anthropological theme of archaic mothering, or the sociological theme of life destruction. As a result, the three characters cannot always be completely separated. All of them are LE COEUR ‘heart’ and all of them are *Chair chaude* ‘warm flesh.’ All of them participate in life and warmth as bodies that interpenetrate or continue each other.

The place (*le Lieu*) of the play is stratified, with a protective vegetal layer under which one discovers a performing space, tender and warm (hence the title of the play), situated both inside and outside the maternal body, ventral, uterine and epidermal. To express the

special nature of this space, whose beat rejoins the pulsation of the characters and is in fact part of the maternal protagonist, Chawaf imagines an ad hoc modulation (and dance) of light on the stage.

The action of the play is represented by the natural and spiritual process of pregnancy and birthing during which LA MÈRE and LA FILLE gradually and joyfully recognize and proclaim each other's distinct existence, body, and speech. The play consists of three dramatic components that bear no titles. The first two parts are short. They represent the orchestrated beginning of the speaking exchange between LA MÈRE and LA FILLE (first fragment) and between LA MÈRE and LE COEUR (second fragment). The initial fragment is dedicated to the miracle of water; LA FILLE praises the fountain that weaves dewdrops, flowers and moss, trees and their luminous reflections (one recognizes the vegetal layer alluded to above) while LA MÈRE describes the soapy bubbles that caress linens freshly scrubbed at the communal fount. In the second fragment, LE COEUR and LA MÈRE evoke the trauma of birth. LA FILLE had sickly, nearly dead eyes, she was freezing to the touch, a doctor intervened and her eyes are now beginning to clear. In the final and most lengthy segment—divided in two by the English translators—the mother and her daughter work together on a farm while trying to help a wounded couple returning from battle. And they vow to “faire un monde semblable à la caresse” (68) ‘turn the world into a caress.’ The biological and spiritual miracle of birthing is continued by a female vision of benefic social change.

Like her daughter, and because of her, the mother is new herself. The first spoken exchanges between mother and daughter are centered on mutual recognition. There is a plenitude of speech that results from poetically combining ritual and Biblical language with medical terminology.

The turns of the characters mainly consist of declarations, proclamations and enumerations. LA MÈRE and LA FILLE utter and confirm to each other their dual being and its thrilling live expansion and separation into distinct human beings:

(1) LA MÈRE. Tu es là. Ton visage roule des étoiles, il s'approfondit jusqu'aux racines de l'univers. Tu es la vie avec moi, la vie devant moi, la vie derrière moi, la vie en moi, la vie au-dessous de moi, la vie au-dessus de moi, la vie à ma droite, la vie à ma gauche, la

vie en largeur, la vie en longueur, la vie en hauteur, la vie dans le coeur de mon amour pour l'amour, la vie dans la bouche de mon amour pour l'amour, la vie dans l'oeil de mon amour pour l'amour, la vie dans l'oreille de mon amour pour l'amour...

LA FILLE. Tu tintes... (*Chair* 18-19)

THE MOTHER. You are here with me. Your gaze moves the stars; it plunges to the depths of the universe. You are life with me, life before me, [life] behind me, [life] within me, [life] above me, [life] at my right, [life] at my left, the width of life, the length of life, the height of life, life in the heart [of my love for love], [life] in the mouth [of my love for love], [life] in the eye [of my love for love], [love] in the ear of my love for love... / THE DAUGHTER. You [*ring*] charm me...² (*Warmth* 235)

(2) LA MÈRE. Il y a de toi à moi cette douceur de la chair chaude, ta respiration dont je m'approche jusqu'à la conserver dans mes mains, à ne vivre, à n'entendre plus que la musique respiratoire de tes lèvres entrouvertes et de tes narines... (*Chair* 25-26)

THE MOTHER. We are linked by the softness of warm flesh, by your breath, which I approach till I can hold it in my hands, till we merge, till I hear only the music of your breathing, your nostrils and half-opened lips... (*Warmth* 236)

Life devours itself, with LA FILLE swallowing LA MÈRE in *gros bouillons* 'large gulps' and reminding LE COEUR of women assimilating the men with whom they procreate. It is interesting to note that this mythical image of universal nourishment (man's body and flesh is eaten by the woman, the woman's body is absorbed by her child) is given voice in the play by the most inclusive of the three characters:

LE COEUR. L'homme pompé par le vagin secrète son insinuation collante, filante, que mes cuisses mangent. Il m'impregne, onctueux, glaireux, lent, et il s'appuie avec lourdeur et il circule sans hâte et je prends le temps de déguster, il filtre par mes reins, il passe dans mon urine, il se donne bouchée par bouchée à ma bouche

où il entre avec du pain et je le mâche, je le marie à ma salive et à ma langue; mes doigts et mes ongles tellement c'est bon cherchent à m'aider à presser toute la viscosité de cette bave, le beurre jaune, la bonne graisse fine où je trempe et l'homme s'écoule du sac de ses testicules fripés et la masse physiologique sur moi s'étale en rivières, en hormones, en plaines, en richesses, en forêts du pays gluant de la vie. (*Chair* 43-44)

THE HEART. Man, drawn up by my vagina, secretes the sticky substance that nourishes me. He impregnates me, oily, slippery, slow, and he leans heavily and moves without haste, and I take time to savor him. He filters through my kidneys, passes into my urine, gives himself mouthful by mouthful to me. My fingers, my hands, encourage the nurturing juices, the fine buttery fat. And man's substance flows from his [*wrinkled*] full testicles, and his mass spreads itself upon me in the rivers, hormones, plains, fields, and forests of life's rich countryside. (*Warmth* 240-41)

To live is to let oneself be devoured, freely, joyfully, in an endless round of reciprocity, where the essential actions of eating and giving birth are incessantly reversed. Even the sun is *du lait crémeux à manger* 'foaming milk, there for the sipping' (*Warmth* 237)—LA MÈRE tells her daughter.

Like in Claudel's plays, the archaic poetic density of the text alternates with the modern precision of the description or narration:

(1) LA FILLE. Abrite-moi dans ton haleine, dans la sécurité de nos mains dont les doigts s'entrelacent, et dans l'étable dont les bêtes tiennent chaud, et dans le poussin sous la poule. (*Chair* 49)

THE DAUGHTER. Let me be sheltered... within the reaches of your breath... within the hollow of our interlaced fingers... within our animal warmth—as in a stable or under a brooding hen's breast. (*Warmth* 243)

(2) LA MÈRE. La matière du vermillon, la matière de l'écarlate se dilate, l'air est entré, les plaques flottent sur l'épaisseur, les blocs soudés se détachent, la vie entraînée par ses poussées descend et

les corps se renforcent, se chevauchent, prennent la position avec laquelle ils émergeront; je bouillonne de sang, la chair se bouscule, se fraye un passage, se sale de lait, les hématies, le plasma du sang se chargent d'électricité, le ventre, les seins se tendent, s'engorgent, s'hypertrophient, se déplissent, le mouvement extenseur gicle des fissures de l'énergie rouge qui devient obèse, qui se boursoufle, qui avance en saillie et les autres rouges, les caillots fondent et le cordon ombilical présente sept noeuds et la vie fait irruption dans le jour... (*Chair* 52)

THE MOTHER. Air penetrates my expanding tissues. Vermillion and scarlet matter harbors densely floating particles, while soldered masses detach themselves from my walls. Life carried along in the flood descends and begins to emerge, and our bodies reinforce each other's movements, my blood boils, my flesh explodes; forcing a passage, growing salty with milk; my blood cells, my plasma are electric, my belly, my breasts, are stretched, engorged, overfilled. They unfold themselves, their expansion mirrored in the release of red energy, swelling, bloating, bursting forth; and the other red matter, the blood clots, melt; and the umbilical cord presents its seven knots, and life empties into the day... (*Warmth* 242-43)

By choosing to center a play on labor, birth and the MÈRE-FILLE's initiatory dialogue, Chawaf goes beyond many taboos of dramatic representation while at the same time redefining not only motherhood, but also inner and outer space, time and speech on the stage. The magnificent verbalization of sensations and emotions that were never before put into public words recaptures motherhood, with its roots in the archaic past and its conscious exploration and spoken transmission in a future that has already begun. Like Luce Irigaray, who gave a voice to the silence of female lovers during sexual fusion, Chawaf unburdens motherhood of part of what has for so long remained unspeakable or muted. She brings the reader/spectator face to face with the image of the triumphant passing of life between two perceptive and sensitive human beings that understand and express the miracle in which they participate. She shows the majesty of the Mother and the Daughter at the moment of their

utmost togetherness and, to do so, she resorts to inner language and to same-age, fully articulated, ideally mature characters.

This could not have been expressed via a mother-son couple. It is the reversibility of the mother and daughter, as well as the continuation in the past as well as in the future of the infinite chain of birthing that gives Chawaf's play its special aura.

In particularizing the mother-child couple, Chawaf implicitly raises the question of the distinct nature of motherhood according to the sex of the child. In a later section of this paper, I shall discuss a play that explores some possible developments of a mother-son relationship.

Posthumous Mother, Unspeakable Truth: Chalem: *À cinquante ans elle découvrait la mer*

Unlike Chawaf's mythical and ritual universal play, Chalem's is a portrait play—a case study, as social scientists would say, except for the fact that the intensity of the evocation corresponds to a deep existential need of the playwright. Its *écriture* 'writing' belongs to the theater of memory and remembering, calling to mind Samuel Beckett and Marguerite Duras, rather than Claudel and Irigaray (as was the case with Chawaf). This time, the theme of the play is not physical and spiritual motherhood in general. The author presents instead a clearly delineated singular mother. LA MÈRE is a traditional Jewish immigrant widow, who raised her two children alone, aiming at full integration in their country of adoption (which we guess is France). Her son has emigrated to Canada and her daughter informs her, on a fateful Hanukkah day, that she plans to leave for the United States together with her partner Serge, whom she does not intend to marry. Faced with her mother's disapproval, LA FILLE bursts into recriminations and gives full expression to her contempt for LA MÈRE. The scene that starts with a Hanukkah benediction and ends up with LA MÈRE cursing her daughter as well as herself is central to the economy of the play. LA MÈRE blames her daughter for giving her the worst possible news on a Hanukkah day, for her lack of feeling, for not understanding her, ultimately for not loving her. She also speaks as an immigrant who vainly struggled to assimilate and raise children that belong to their new country, yet discovers that they want to leave it; she sees herself as the self-sacri-

ficing mother who brought warmth to the lives of her children and is met with their cold indifference. LA FILLE in turn accuses her mother of being a tyrant, thinking only of herself, being unable to talk of things other than food, money and *faits divers* 'trivia,' obliging her to attend family meals that impinge on her encounters with her lover (whom LA MÈRE systematically omits from her conversations), never reading, always being nervous, and living in a disgusting house among ugly things. The random order of the accusations, which I have maintained in the enumeration, is due to the violence of the interaction that leads to the curse.

Like Duras's play *L'Eden Cinéma*, *Eden Cinema*, or the story *Une femme* 'A Woman' by Annie Ernaux, this play starts after the mother's death. Torn between nostalgia and remorse, LA FILLE recalls LA MÈRE's life, her words and gestures, the moments spent together with her as well as their distressing last encounter.

To render the loving and violent pain of LA MÈRE, Chalem concentrates on the poverty of her repetitive vocabulary (reduced to around fifty words and expressions) as well as on her verbal pace. The typographical disposition of the maternal speech (through dashes, elimination of periods and commas, blank spaces marking the lack of a precise word) metaphorically expresses LA MÈRE's feeling of helplessness faced with the grown up daughter, fully educated and able to express herself with equal ease in different registers of language, who is not only abandoning her, but also leaving behind her whole way of life.

The text is thus especially innovative at the locutionary level. LA MÈRE speaks as she lives: without stopping to think (she is unconsciously frightened by what she could discover), almost without breathing, so as not to give time to her daughter for answers that she obscurely foresees and dreads. On the other hand, LA MÈRE sees clearly and enunciates with deep simplicity the difference between generations and the mutations that currently affect motherhood and, more generally, parenting.

The key scene of benediction-malediction during Hanukkah is balanced in the economy of the text by a hypothetical turn (that LA MÈRE might have narrated or described in a letter to her daughter and that LA FILLE imagines after her mother's death) in which LA MÈRE finally gives voice to what could only be said posthumously

between mother and child: she had always been fully conscious of the unconditional preference that bound father and daughter, while unconsciously detaching them from herself. The blanks that occur in the text signal the difficulty and pain with which this message, silenced during her life by LA MÈRE as well as by LA FILLE, comes to words:

LA MERE. [...] tu te souviens si petite déjà quand je me disputais avec papa tu me disais eh bien divorce comme s'il n'y avait qu'à appuyer sur un bouton ...mais ce que tu ne sais pas mon ange c'est combien tu l'aimais ton père — combien tu y étais attachée les crises de jalousie quand il s'occupait de ton frère que vous avez tous les deux délaissés d'ailleurs pourquoi est-il si loin embrasse-le pour moi tu étais sa petite dorée à papa comme tu étais blonde alors peu à peu j'ai bien senti que moi je ne comptais pas je n'étais jamais complice de vos jeux la fête que tu lui faisais quand il rentrait du travail il jetait son pardessus me lançait à peine bonjour et vous jouiez jouiez et moi j'étais toujours là pour gronder surveiller t'obliger à manger et ce baiser le soir qu'il fallait qu'il te donne pour que tu t'endormes ce baiser Grassie comme il a dû te manquer depuis

et tu voulais que je divorce Grassie mais tu en aurais été malade chérie

ça tu ne voudras jamais l'admettre jamais il n'y a pas très longtemps que tu t'intéresses à moi Graziella non pas très longtemps

une mère doit toujours se sacrifier pour ses enfants les enfants avant tout.

je suis si fatiguée. (*Mer* 18-19)

THE MOTHER. [...] remember when you were so little already when I quarreled with papa, you told me to divorce him as if one only had to press a button ...but what you do not know my angel is how much you loved him your father— how much you were attached to him, the jealousy crises when he spent time with your brother whom you both

pushed aside why is he so far away, hug him for me, you were
papa's fair-haired child, how blond you were then little by
little I felt that me, I did not matter, I was never part of your games
the celebration you gave him when he came home from work he
threw his coat, barely said hello to me and you played
played and me I was always there to scold
to supervise to make you eat and that evening kiss
he had to give it for you to go to sleep that kiss
Grassie how much you must have missed it since

And you wanted me to divorce Grassie but you would
have been sick dear this you'll never
want to admit never it has not been very long
since you have taken interest in me Graziella no not
very long a mother has to always sacrifice herself for her chil-
dren children before everything else.
I am so tired.

LA FILLE will, however, dismiss this glimpse of painful truth and hasten toward an egoistical definition of her mother: mothers allow us to recapture our childhood, they are our way of reliving time lost. In so doing, LA FILLE reduces the mother to her usefulness for the child. The melancholic qualifications of LA MÈRE in LA FILLE's speech—"mon égoïste mon enfantine" 'my selfish, my childish,' "ma négligente" 'my negligent,' "Majestueuse ... Maternelle maman" 'Majestic ... Maternal mom'—show no empathy. LA FILLE is still feeling superior, without really understanding her mother's view and position.

Maternity is thus presented in the play as an endless separation (implicitly inaugurated by giving birth to the child). Mother and daughter are as much apart as mother and son or, for that matter, wife and husband. Fusions are short and episodic, subsequent affinities are elective, psychologically and socially determined. Mother and child live opaque lives, without achieving spiritual proximity. In comparison with Chawaf's maternal utopia, Chalem makes us face, if not maternal dystopia, at least, the reduced significance of maternity in certain circumstances. These circumstances seem to be connected with an unconscious perception by the child of the

greater social importance of the father. In Chalem's play, the daughter's feeling of superiority might have originated in her childhood alliance with the father, even if at times she had been aware of his inadequate behavior toward her mother. Perceiving the strength of LA FILLE's attachment to her father, LA MÈRE had stayed married, renouncing divorce. While LA MÈRE in *Chair chaude* was moving inside and outside of her own body, to better feel and understand LA FILLE, and was protected by a woodland scenery mirroring and mirrored by *l'utérus boisé* 'the forest uterus' as well as by LE COEUR's generous humanity, LA MÈRE presented by Chalem has no space of her own: she is a stranger with respect to the other members of her own family, a lone immigrant in a foreign country, a poor lodger in a miserable house, a self lost in a painful subjectivity.

Discontinuous Maternity and Its Happy Reproduction—Bellon: *De si tendres liens*

The play *De si tendres liens* explores the staging of a new style of maternity. In the initial explanatory remarks, Bellon signals the fact that her work belongs to the theater of interiority, put into motion by remembering and memory rather than by realist representation.

The space of the play is the landscape of the mother's and daughter's memories. Its time is a memorial time, in which, for once, the mother and her daughter are both at the same level of experience—the reason for the playwright's stipulation that the actresses who interpret their roles be of the same age—between forty-five and fifty years (*Liens* 11).

In the play, the gestures and words of CHARLOTTE, the mother, resurface in the behavior of her daughter JEANNE and, inversely, the words of JEANNE as a child are recurring in the aging CHARLOTTE's speech and mind. The spectators perceive the similarity—often the sameness—of the reactions, as the play unfolds. Sometimes, episodes are repeated after just a small number of paragraphs; other times, the distance between two (quasi-) identical repartees can amount to as much as forty pages. An example of such memorial echoing is, among many others, the following, where (1a) occurs at the beginning of the play, when JEANNE is an adult mother in turn, (1b) dates from JEANNE's childhood and (1c) goes back to the initial moment of the play, this time letting us hear CHARLOTTE's inner

speech:

(1a) CHARLOTTE. Mais assieds-toi. Pourquoi ne restes-tu pas un peu?

JEANNE, *regardant sa montre*. / C'est que je n'ai pas beaucoup de temps.

CHARLOTTE. Juste un moment. Tu n'as rien à me raconter?

...

CHARLOTTE. Cinq minutes, reste avec moi cinq minutes. (*Liens* 17-18)

CHARLOTTE. But sit down. Why don't you stay a bit?

JEANNE, *looking at her watch*. I don't have much time.

CHARLOTTE. Just for a moment. You have nothing to tell me? [...]

CHARLOTTE. Five minutes, stay with me for five minutes more.

(1b) JEANNE. Tu restes avec moi un petit peu?

CHARLOTTE. Cinq minutes, pas plus. Après tu dors.

JEANNE. Tu veux pas te coucher à côté de moi?

CHARLOTTE. Si. Mais pas longtemps. (*Liens* 26)

JEANNE. You stay with me a little bit?

CHARLOTTE. Five minutes, no more. After that, you go to sleep.

JEANNE. Don't you want to lay down near me?

CHARLOTTE. Yes, but not for long.

(1c) CHARLOTTE. Tu vas partir. Me dire de passer une bonne soirée. Tu vas m'embrasser. Me demander si je n'ai besoin de rien. Je vais répondre que non. De rien, de rien du tout. De quoi aurais-je besoin? J'ai ma télévision. Merci. Merci d'être venue me voir. Tu es tellement occupée. Tu sais quel plaisir cela me fait, toujours. Immense. L'important, dans ma vie, c'est toi. Moi... Je peux sortir ou ne pas sortir, me lever ou rester couchée, je peux vivre ou mourir... J'existe si peu. Je ne compte plus. Dans la rue, les gens, ils vont quelque part. Moi, quand je sors, c'est pour être dehors. (*Elle s'est couchée sur son lit*.) Mais toi... Tu reviendras? Dis? Tu ne me laisseras pas toute seule? Je serai gentille, je te promets, je ne me plaindrai de rien, tout sera parfait. Tu vas fermer la porte, tu vas

partir. Attends, attends un peu, reste encore. Cinq minutes, reste avec moi cinq minutes.

C'est la scène du début de la pièce qui reprend, le même éclairage, la même phrase, le même geste. Jeanne se retourne.

JEANNE. Cinq minutes, d'accord. (*Un temps. Elle se penche sur Charlotte.*) Qu'est-ce que tu as? Tu pleures? (*Liens 122*)

CHARLOTTE. You are going to leave. Tell me to have a good evening. You'll hug me. Ask if I need anything. I'll answer no. I need nothing, nothing at all. What would I need? I have my TV. Thank you. Thank you for coming to see me. You are so busy. You know how happy it makes me. Huge. The important part in my life is you. Me... I can go out or not, wake up or lie down, I can live or die. I exist so little. I don't matter anymore. On the street, people, they go somewhere. Me, when I go out, it's to be outside. (*She lies down on her bed.*) But you... You'll be back, won't you? You'll not leave me all alone? I'll be nice, I promise, I'll not complain of anything, everything will be perfect. You'll close the door, you'll leave. Wait, wait a bit, stay a little longer with me. Five minutes, stay with me for five minutes more. / *The scene from the beginning of the play starts again, same light, same phrase, same gesture. Jeanne comes back.*

JEANNE. Five minutes, OK. (*A beat. She bends over Charlotte.*) What's the matter? You're crying?...

The cyclical character of the play reinforces the impression of *déjà-entendu* 'already-heard,' of an unending repetition of former mothering gestures. It is a good repetition, though. CHARLOTTE has taught JEANNE to combine maternity with the other aspects of her life, to be intensely alive as well as a devoted mother and the play expresses the understanding, by the two mothers (for JEANNE has children in turn) of the fact that their moments of sadness (as a child or as an adult) were and are forms of love that do not stem from previous maternal errors:

CHARLOTTE. [...] Je me dis parfois qu'à ta naissance j'aurais dû ne plus rien faire... que profiter de cette merveille qui ne reviendra jamais et dont je regrette chaque seconde. (*Un temps.*) Tous ces

jours perdus loin de toi. (*Un temps.*) J'essaie de me souvenir. Ce que j'ai fait et ce que je n'ai pas fait. Je me sens coupable de tout.

JEANNE. Il ne faut pas. Je te voulais à moi toute seule, mais c'est parce que je t'aimais. Rien ne pouvait me rassasier de toi...

CHARLOTTE. Tu m'as si souvent reproché...

JEANNE. J'avais tort. Maintenant je le sais. (*Un temps.*) Ma pauvre chérie, nous n'avons qu'une vie, et les meilleures années de cette vie, je voulais te les prendre, rien que pour moi. (*Liens 125-26*)

CHARLOTTE. I tell myself at times that I should have done nothing else after you were born... only enjoy this once in a lifetime miracle and of which I regret every second. (*Pause.*) All these lost days far from you. (*Pause.*) I try to remember. What I did and what I didn't. I feel guilty of everything.

JEANNE. You mustn't. I wanted you all for myself, but only because I loved you. Nothing could satiate my desire for you...

CHARLOTTE. You have so often reproached me...

JEANNE. I was wrong. Now I know it. (*Pause.*) Poor dear, we have but one life, and the best years of this life, I wanted to take them from you just for me.

Motherhood, like everything else in life, must remain discontinuous. To balance one's love for a child with all the other things to do opens the path for an accomplished and rich existence. Mothers have to resist at times being engulfed in mothering, for the good of the child as much as their own. Especially when mothering a daughter. The light touch of combining maternal love with everything else, the live architecture of a successful existence will be imprinted upon the daughter. The play presents us with the happy reproduction of motherhood and the deep understanding between mother and daughter that develops later on in their lives.

Trial Maternity, Rented Child—Laïk: *Transat*

To Chawaf's direct and grave voice, Laïk opposes the ludic indirectness of an equally unexpected and intense dramatic situation in *Transat*. The play is built around two characters, MADAME SARAH and TOMMY, who are respectively trying to assume the roles of mother and child. More exactly, and as defined in the *List of char-*

acters, TOMMY, the child, is *un enfant de compagnie* 'a companion child' whom MADAME SARAH ordered from a Location Agency that provides children, after choosing among more than one hundred candidates, and MADAME SARAH is the client whom Tommy is expected to satisfy. The two characters are both unaware of the details of their respective roles at the start and find themselves, therefore, in an impromptu play within the play. Like MADAME SARAH, we thus learn that TOMMY has practiced *le métier d'enfant* 'the child profession' since the age of nine, that he has already accumulated four years of experience during which he learned to fulfill *les attentes insoupçonnées des clientes* 'the unsuspected expectations of his female clients.' MADAME SARAH in turn works for an institution that allows her to invent her maternal role at leisure but required her to accept a boy, while she would have preferred to work with a girl³:

TOMMY. Comment m'avez-vous choisi?

MADAME SARAH. Pardon?

TOMMY. Oui ! Il n'y a pas que moi, il y a un tas d'autres enfants à l'agence.

MADAME SARAH. Oui, il y en avait des centaines, de tous les âges, de tous les styles et j'ai passé la nuit, seule, avec tous ces garçons sur l'écran à...

TOMMY. L'écran? Quel écran?

MADAME SARAH. L'écran pour projeter les diapositives.

TOMMY. Ah, je vois... Et dites-moi, pourquoi tous ces garçons? Vous ne vouliez pas de petites filles?

MADAME SARAH. Si, moi j'aurais préféré une petite fille. Mais c'est eux qui ont fixé la distribution : ils tenaient aux deux sexes, ils ont exigé un garçon. (*Transat* 24)

TOMMY. How did you choose me?

MADAME SARAH. I beg your pardon?

TOMMY. Yes! I am not the only one, there are plenty of other children at the agency.

MADAME SARAH. Yes, there were hundreds, of all ages, of all styles and I spent the night alone, with all those boys on the screen...

TOMMY. The screen? What screen?

MADAME SARAH. The screen for projecting slides.

TOMMY. Oh, I see... And tell me, why all these boys? Didn't you want little girls?

MADAME SARAH. Yes, I would have preferred a little girl. But they were the ones who set the distribution: they insisted on having both sexes, they required a boy.

It is not excluded that the institution for which MADAME SARAH works—'they' in the following excerpt—registers her dialogue with the boy. Like TOMMY, like mothers and children in fact, MADAME SARAH has not received any precise instructions. She defines TOMMY's future contribution in vague metatheatrical (and, in a sense, one could say existential) terms:

TOMMY. Et quel sera mon rôle?

MADAME SARAH. M'aider à soutenir la continuité.

TOMMY. La continuité? Quelle continuité?

MADAME SARAH. La 'continuité dialoguée'.

TOMMY. C'est ce qu'ils vous ont demandé?

MADAME SARAH. Oui. (*Transat* 4)

TOMMY. And what will be my role?

MADAME SARAH. To help me sustain the continuity.

TOMMY. Continuity? What continuity?

MADAME SARAH. 'Dialogic continuity'.

TOMMY. This is what they asked for?

MADAME SARAH. Yes.

Little by little, following TOMMY's falsely *ingénu* questions that deftly alternate with stories and actions (let us not forget that Laïk suggests that the role be played by an adult), MADAME SARAH defines the range and meaning of her role and gives the boy the rough draft of their interaction:

TOMMY. Et ils ne vous ont pas donné des indications plus précises?

MADAME SARAH. Non, ils disent que je dois travailler sans filet, sauter sans parachute, me lancer dans le vide. C'est une sorte de test, de situation artistique expérimentale. Je sers un peu de co-baye, de tête chercheuse.

...

TOMMY. ... Mais vous avez tout de même une idée de l'histoire, un canevas?

MADAME SARAH. Une piste de départ plutôt, ...; c'est l'histoire d'une femme qui n'arrive pas à avoir d'enfants. Elle essaye par tous les moyens, mais ça ne marche pas.

TOMMY. Alors?

MADAME SARAH. Alors elle se dit qu'un enfant pourrait l'aider.

TOMMY. A quoi?

MADAME SARAH. A avoir un enfant...

TOMMY. Et comment pourra-t-il l'aider?

MADAME SARAH. Elle ne le sait pas encore... Elle pense qu'ensemble ils trouveront les secrets de fabrication, qu'il l'aidera à ne pas tomber dans les pièges. L'essentiel c'est qu'ils parlent, qu'ils parlent, qu'ils ne s'arrêtent pas de raconter des histoires. Ils vivront tous les deux ensemble, pendant le week-end de la Pentecôte, sous le même toit. (*Transat* 13-14)

TOMMY. And they didn't give you more precise instructions?

MADAME SARAH. No, they say I have to work without a safety net, jump without a parachute, throw myself into the void. It's sort of a test, an experimental artistic situation. I serve as a guinea pig, an inquiring mind...

TOMMY. But you have at least some idea of the story, a canvas?

MADAME SARAH. Rather a starting point, ...; it is the story of a woman who does not manage to have children. She tries by all means, but it doesn't work.

TOMMY. Then?

MADAME SARAH. Then she thinks a child might help her.

TOMMY. To do what?

MADAME SARAH. To have a child...

TOMMY. And how will he be able to help her?

MADAME SARAH. She doesn't know yet... She thinks that, together, they will find the secrets of creation, that he will help her avoid traps. What is essential is that they speak, that they do not stop telling stories. They'll live together, during the Pentecost week-end, under the same roof.

This reminds us of the minimal solidarity between the driver and LA DAME, who are both enclosed during a number of hours in front of the same screen (the highway) in Duras's scenario-play *Le Camion* 'The Truck.' Or of the verbal solidarity that keeps alive frail conversations between the lonely characters of Beckett. Pentecost might prove inspirational for MADAME SARAH's motherhood quest.

A *logodrame* centered on speech rather than an action play, *Transat* progresses via TOMMY's stories, reciprocal questioning, the two characters' respective ways of spending time, while always coming back to the basic idea:

TOMMY. Et quel projet la femme a-t-elle conçu pour cet enfant?

MADAME SARAH. Vous parlez comme une règle de grammaire, vous allez finir par m'intimider!... Elle veut partir avec lui sur les mers, faire une longue croisière en compagnie de l'enfant... mais auparavant, avant de prendre le large, elle souhaite d'abord faire un essai.

TOMMY. Un essai de maternité?

MADAME SARAH. Oui, c'est ça. Alors elle s'adresse à l'agence de location pour enfants et...

TOMMY. Et j'arrive.

MADAME SARAH. Oui. Elle n'a pas l'habitude des enfants, elle se sent maladroitement avec eux... elle craint surtout qu'ils s'ennuient en sa compagnie. Alors, elle se laisse faire, elle se repose un peu sur lui. Il la dépanne chaque fois qu'elle cale, qu'elle manque d'inspiration... Mais vous ne dites plus rien? Vous ne vous sentez pas bien? Je parle trop peut-être? (*Transat* 18)

TOMMY. And what project did the woman conceive for that child?

MADAME SARAH. You speak like a grammar rule, you'll end up by intimidating me!... She wants to travel by sea with him, to take a long cruise with the child ... but before sailing, she first wishes to undergo a trial.

TOMMY. A trial of maternity?

MADAME SARAH. Yes, that's it. So she contacts the talent agency for children and...

TOMMY. And here I come.

MADAME SARAH. Yes. She is not accustomed to children, she feels clumsy with them... she mostly fears that they'll be bored in her company. So, she lets herself go, she relies on him a little. He gets her out of trouble every time she stalls or lacks inspiration... But you don't say a thing? You don't feel well? Maybe I speak too much?

As the play progresses, TOMMY suggests to MADAME SARAH more concrete ways in which to play the maternal role:

MADAME SARAH. J'aimerais que vous me fassiez l'Enfant.

TOMMY. Mais JE SUIS un enfant.

MADAME SARAH. Je n'arrive pas vraiment à m'y faire.

TOMMY. Tutoyez-moi! Ça sera peut-être plus facile! Donnez-moi des ordres, dites-moi des mots tendres, giflez-moi! Enlevez vos gants. Appelez-moi par mon prénom... Je ne sais pas moi... Faites avec moi comme votre mère avec vous quand vous étiez petite!

Laissez-vous aller comme tout à l'heure!

Abandonnez-vous... (*Transat 21*)

MADAME SARAH. I would like you to play the Child.

TOMMY. But I AM a child.

MADAME SARAH. I can't really manage to get used to that fact.

TOMMY. Don't be so formal with me! Maybe it will make things easier! Give me orders, offer me tender words, slap me across the face! Take off your gloves. Call me by my first name... I don't know... Do with me as your mother did with you when you were little!

Let yourself go, like a moment ago!

Abandon yourself...

It is only when MADAME SARAH likens him to Marlon Brando, though, that TOMMY takes on a certain consistency and the halo of a conventionally seductive masculinity. He is now trying, little by little, to dominate his patron-partner, in a half-filial and half-erotic relationship implicitly inspired by his encyclopedic knowledge. The final story narrated by TOMMY—he let/made one of his female cli-

ents fall through the window—is in an isotopic continuity with this mutation in the power relation. The play ends, like Eugene Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* 'The Bald Soprano' or Fernando Arrabal's *L'Architecte et l'empereur d'Assyrie* 'The Architect and Emperor of Assyria,' with a reversal of roles. MADAME SARAH leaves the place of the experiment and goes to get hired in TOMMY's place, for playing the role of a little child that is as unfamiliar to her as the maternal role.

The public looks at MADAME SARAH, who looks at TOMMY, while also knowing that MADAME SARAH in turn is under surveillance by her company. Indirectly questioned, approached as a mental landscape, maternity appears to consist in playful reciprocity, privileged access to the child, multiple occasions of listening to it. Mothers occupy the first loge in the grand theater of children unexpectedly growing into adults (*Transat* 71-72).

One can try the maternal role and give up, preferring the role of a child to the role of the mother. One can play mother with a stranger, just to begin to understand it. And during the trial process, at least when the child is a boy (and let us say it quickly, a boy of a certain type, a boy like Marlon Brando), it can happen that one discovers oneself involved in a woman-man rather than a mother-son kind of relationship. The play invites us to think of maternity lightly, without its previous history of love, procreation, giving birth, and physical or spiritual contiguity. It gives shape to one of the forms mothering a son may take in our modern lives.

A Maternal Eclipse—Bonal: *Passions et prairie*

In *Passions et prairie*, the examination of maternity goes still further. Like MADAME SARAH, LA MÈRE of this play is a woman without qualities. She is in fact the only character without a name, either in the *List of Characters* or in the speech imparted to them. Gathered at the green outskirts of town on a beautiful spring day in order to observe a solar eclipse, YOLANDE, LILIANE and BLANCHE, LA MÈRE's daughters and their respective husbands MAXENCE, VINCENT and ROGER—all between 35 and 40 years old—will discover, at the end of the play, that it unexpectedly combines with a maternal eclipse. The play belongs to the dramatic family of *King Lear*, except for the fact that the protagonist is female. It boldly continues, at the

thematic level, Laïk's reflection on non-biological motherhood in *Transat*. YOLANDE, the co-owner of a pork-butcher's shop, LILIANE, a painter, and BLANCHE, who dreams of becoming a surgeon, imagine less and less the place that LA MÈRE, who is endlessly aging, could still hold in their lives and homes. They postpone answering and in fact elude her questions concerning future arrangements. After a last, slight attempt at making sure that she is not hindering her daughters' plans for her, LA MÈRE cuts the Gordian knot and announces her decision to adopt a thirty-year old Canadian, Lionel Galupeau, her boarder for six years, and to spend the rest of her life traveling with him throughout the world. Stupor gives way to consternation and will move to relief toward the end of the play. There is first the *silence de granit* 'granite silence' with which the daughters and sons-in-law receive the news. YOLANDE and LILIANE envision their evacuation from LA MÈRE's memories because of her new life to come. MAXENCE, a pork-butcher shop owner, and ROGER, a policeman—the right-wing husbands (while LA MÈRE has been *de gauche* 'left-wing' her whole life, like VINCENT and possibly BLANCHE, the youngest daughter, who considers herself unloved) are vaguely wondering whether Lionel has gone through the naturalization process, which could have bearing on the inheritance of the three families. All are relieved to learn that Lionel is homosexual and that there is, therefore, at least no danger of future progeny and further crumbling of the common inheritance.

YOLANDE and LILIANE lament that they are orphans before the death of LA MÈRE, despite the fact that they have forgotten her birthday, merely fulfilling their filial obligation with a weekly phone call (each Monday at noon) and see no other solution for her last years than the nursing home. Nonetheless, the play makes us understand that things happen this way not because of a lack of love, but because there exists an inexorable social channeling of parents' and children's lives that rarely tolerates exceptions. As LILIANE, who has the gift of tender speech among the three sisters, puts it: "L'amour est toujours là mais sa face est défigurée" 'Love is still there, but its face is disfigured' (*Passions* 27).

YOLANDE and LILIANE, because of the dangers that surround their marriages, are not able to make a place in their lives for their mother; nor do they have any affection or strength left to think of

LA MÈRE. Anyhow, they know that a mother is given forever, that she is, as long as she lives, the one that is always there, the only one for whom they will not have to make special efforts. Yet, their own solitude to come is already visible and partially allays their guilt. YOLANDE senses MAXENCE is losing interest in the meaning of his work and gradually abandoning her, and notices that their sons already clearly prefer spending their holidays with their friends' parents. LILIANE can no longer stand VINCENT being humiliated day after day in his teaching profession. BLANCHE has lived as an outsider after the death of their father whom she has always preferred to LA MÈRE. What is more, she discovers that her marriage to ROGER was a mistake and is ready to accept LILIANE's proposition to hand VINCENT over to her. The evolution of their men, which so preoccupies the three sisters at this moment in their lives, distances them from LA MÈRE's life whose stark reality they fail to grasp.

The most important part of the play is represented by LA MÈRE's words, often interrupted by silences, hers as well as those of her daughters and sons-in-law. LA MÈRE dares to say without bitterness that, like all human relations, motherhood can be undone at any given moment; what is more, motherhood can be made anew, with respect to other people, who are no longer young, who are not disarmed like children are and who aspire to it not because of gratitude or duty, but out of a feeling of tranquil and unburdened togetherness. A triple motherhood is ending, LA MÈRE says, before the closing of her life. A new one is starting, with respect to a young man, that seems open to happiness for a while and that she plans to interrupt before its degradation, through the terminal shot a doctor friend has promised to her:

MÈRE. Je vais l'adopter.

(Silence de granit.)

Il m'a donné six années. Il veut bien rester pour toutes les autres. On s'entend très bien. Je le fais rire. Nous passons des soirées à jouer aux cartes, aux échecs, aux dominos. Il a déjà une grande expérience, et la mienne commence un peu à me lasser. On s'est mis en tête de voyager. Il y a plein d'endroits dans le monde. Je sais bien qu'il y a quelqu'un, là-bas, sur la route, qui vient à ma rencontre. Je m'en occuperai plus tard. Pour l'instant, il y a toutes

ces légèretés qui font la vie, plus importantes pour moi que la gravité du monde.

(*Temps.*)

Vous avez remarqué comme les hommes posent peu de questions aux femmes durant leur vie, sauf ceux qui sont jaloux et qui en posent trop. Lui, sans cesse m'interroge sous la lampe, et moi je réponds comme une bonne écolière. Il sait même cuisiner. Je savais que j'aimais la vie, mais je ne savais pas que ça irait si loin.

Ainsi, vous voilà rassurés. Je ne mourrai pas seule. (*Passions* 43-44)

MÈRE. I'll adopt him.

(A stony silence.)

He gave me six years. He really wants to stay for all the others. We get along very well. I make him laugh. We spend whole evenings playing cards, chess, dominoes. He already has a great deal of experience, and I begin to grow weary of mine. We are thinking of travelling. There are plenty of spots in the world. I know that there is someone, there, on the road, who is coming towards me. I will deal with it later. For the moment, all these light things that make up life are more important to me than the world's seriousness.

(Pause.)

You noticed in life how men ask women few questions, except those who are jealous and those who ask too many. He ceaselessly interrogates me under the lamp and I answer like a good student. He even knows to cook. I knew I loved life, but I didn't know that it could go so far.

So, this puts an end to your worries. I will not die alone.

The remaining episodes of the play (entitled *Elle a toujours été une si bonne mère* 'She has always been such a good mother'—LILIANE's words—, *Comment faire pour être heureux?* 'What should one do to be happy?' and *Epilogue*) are devoted to the characters' attempt to understand the words of LA MÈRE: maternal independence and dignity refusing to surrender and being reborn in an act of bold existential repositioning.

Bonal's play raises a number of questions that belong to our times. Can one untie the inalienable link between mother and child, as the *divorce à l'amiable* 'amicable divorce' sometimes dissolves the link between wife and husband? Has the time come to accept the idea that it could be the old mother who leaves and not the child, as usual? Are we ready to think that an old woman has a future, distinct from that of her children, even if it is a very short one? Is our society ready to understand and empathize with mothers when they invent another way of spending their last years instead of letting their children put them in a nursing home?

The mother figure is presented from the psychological and social perspectives of six different characters. It would seem that time has gradually separated the daughters from their mother, although part of their indifference was there even during their childhood years. There exist, the author implies, mother-child relationships that are not graced by elective affinities and that do not survive beyond a (limited) level of decency. While MAXENCE and ROGER view LA MÈRE with a definite lack of consideration, VINCENT is, after her Canadian boarder Lionel (who does not appear in the play), the only one with whom LA MÈRE fully and happily communicates.

To remedy her situation, LA MÈRE adopts thirty-year old Lionel and thus implicitly annuls, at the level of everyday life, the human obligations of her daughters toward her. Her plan to spend the good remaining years of her life traveling with Lionel and to get a terminal shot once they are over is a quiet way of acknowledging that her biological motherhood is behind her and that a liberating, spiritual motherhood opens, with a new chance for happiness. There is no bitterness in LA MÈRE's lucid choice: mothers and children are not always in agreement; modern life strongly encourages deserting one's parents. Parents—in our case mothers—have to quietly find their own answers, which might prove useful for their children as well.

*

The fact that the mother figure is at the center of so many contemporary plays written by women allows us to illuminate an important emergent difference among current female authors. Some of them explore motherhood not only from a relational point of view, but also from a privileged, insider position. The reconstruction of

the great biological and spiritual drama of birthing in *Chair chaude*, the perception of the hidden estrangement that operates inside the family in *À cinquante ans elle découvrait la mer*, the understanding of the child's egoism by the daughter-become-mother in *De si tendres liens* could not have been written by a male author. They clearly emerge from female experience. On the other hand, while written by women, *Transat* and *Passions et prairie* are plays of reflecting upon motherhood (before entering it, in the former; when old age has almost erased it, in the latter) that do not require an authorial specialization and seem to propose social solutions that ignore or go beyond the primal biological bond. Can we imagine ways of mothering that extend to strangers and transform the relationship into benefic playful exchange? Are we gradually going toward at least episodes of inventive mothering in more and more women's lives at moments that are no longer confined to their reproductive years?

In looking at our plays, one can clearly see that they are not centered on a negative, rebellious vision of motherhood, even if critical accents are not missing.⁴ This might be explained thematically in terms of their insistence on the primal bond between mother and daughter, matrilineal heritage, transition from daughterhood to motherhood, and matrilineal bonds based on equality.⁵ There are also social and cultural explanations: on the one hand we now deal with second or third generations of women playwrights, and on the other, the cultural distance between mothers and daughters (children in general) was reduced considerably in the second part of the twentieth century. It may possibly be for the same reasons that we presently have a great number of detached female writers, who write, to use Allan P. Barr's (2001) formulation, "unself-conscious of [their] gendered position," conveying an egalitarian rather than a woman's sensibility.⁶

There were, in the selection of plays presented here, a number of formal innovations that deserve a longer analysis. Let me mention, among them, Chawaf's richly orchestrated *texte-pâte* 'dough-text,' *texte-pain* 'bread-text,' with its *pages charnues* 'fleshy pages,' *pages-mère* 'mother-pages,' and *pages-fille de la fiction* 'daughter-pages of fiction' that represent a linguistic revolution for the current theatrical language in France;⁷ her merging-and-separating trio of characters in the same play; the special punctuation by means of which

Chalem conveys the hiatus between the swift pace of the surface speech of the mother and the painful extraction of the approximate words by means of which she expresses what she could never articulate; the memorial echoing of motherly and daughterly speeches around which Bellon weaves the texture of her play. Together with the new themes invented by Laïk and Bonal, they contribute to a healthy renewal of current French theater.

Notes

1 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

2 As can be seen in the added brackets, I completed the translation and offered a variant in order to make evident the reason for the choice of *tu tintes* (as unexpected in French as is *you ring* in English, both used to refer to a loud sound, especially when repeated, continued or reverberated). The slight irony of the newborn daughter (which is also the authorial auto-irony of Chawaf), who gently censures LA MÈRE's exultation, would otherwise be lost in translation. Notice also that, for reasons of economy of space, in the translations, I reduced the name of the characters to an initial and marked the beginning of a new paragraph or speech by a slash directly following the end of the previous sentence.

3 This is a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the author's work in *ateliers* 'workshops' and *commandos d'écriture* 'writing commandos' with Paris children and adolescents.

4 My view (limited to French women playwrights writing about the mother figure) is thus quite different from the general conclusion of Barr (2001) who, it is true, operated at the level of European women's theater as a whole, with no national or thematic limitation. Barr wrote: "What does emerge as a difference is the frequently despairing attitude toward family life and domesticity, its hopelessness. Women writers, not surprisingly, show little interest in stories of war, political intrigue, and traditional heroism (those bastions of male experience) and a great deal of interest in family relationships and personal communication. It is striking how many of these plays are essentially bleak in their outlook [...] Each dramatization is distinct, but none finds the prospects of family life and nurturing very satisfying, reaffirming, or even tolerable" (3).

5 See Moss (1987) and Moss (1991).

6 See Barr (3).

7 See Chawaf (1976: 75, 82).

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