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# « FAUT-IL ABOLIR LA FAMILLE » ? JANINE MASSARD'S VIEW OF WOMEN AND THE FAMILY

## Introduction

The supposed lack of political or social « engagement » on the part of writers in *Suisse romande* has been much commented upon<sup>1</sup>, but in recent decades women, perhaps agreeing with the view expressed by Anne Cuneo in 1971 that « l'urgence, ce sont les problèmes quotidiens [...] Je suis un miroir »<sup>2</sup>, have begun to write about issues which they feel directly concern them. Thus « ces milliers de femmes commencent [...] à trouver çà et là une voix qui parle en leur nom »<sup>3</sup> through writers such as Alice Rivaz (1901-1998), Yvette Z'Graggen (1920), Mireille Kuttel (1928), Anne Cuneo (1936), Monique Laederach (1938-2004), Amélie Plume (1943) and Anne-Lise Grobéty (1949). They have tackled issues with which women readers can identify, including coupledness, adultery, childbirth and motherhood, the difficulty of combining a professional and personal life, the desire for independence, female sexuality, separation and divorce, illness and ageing.

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<sup>1</sup> For a few examples amongst many, see Daniel de Roulet, « Éloge de mes grands-parents », *Écriture*, 51, printemps 1998, pp. 211-216 ; Françoise Fornerod, « Enseigner la littérature romande ? », *Études de lettres*, 1, 1988, pp. 35-40 (p. 38) ; Roger Francillon, « Dans le sérail helvétique. Le guerrier, l'ivrogne, le berger et l'eunuque », in *Filiations et filatures. Littérature et critique en Suisse romande*, Geneva, Zoé, 1991, pp. 11-88 (p. 78).

<sup>2</sup> In Franck Jotterand, *Pourquoi j'écris*, Lausanne, Gazette littéraire, 1971, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Roger-Louis Junod, « La critique de la société dans les lettres romandes du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle », *La Licorne*, edited by Peter André Bloch, Poitiers, UFR de langues et littératures, 1989, pp. 439-452 (p. 449).

Commenting on the family tree which accompanies her family saga *Les sept vies de Louise Croisier née Moraz*, Suzanne Derieux (1926) ironically informs the reader that « vous n'avez pas sous les yeux l'arbre généalogique authentique d'une famille vaudoise, puisque les femmes y figurent »<sup>4</sup>. In a similar way, Janine Massard (1939) has drawn women out of the shadows and made them visible and audible, by putting them very much at the centre of her « family trees » and focusing closely on the social injustice which they have traditionally borne, especially those with working-class roots. Massard thus depicts women's place within the family, from the postwar years through to the present day, placing her female characters in the wider context, giving us a severe « critique du fonctionnement de la société, une mise à nu des mécanismes de l'exclusion »<sup>5</sup>. Her critique of the family, which is sustained and comprehensive, covers the four main areas of money, children, the couple and female independence, each of which will be discussed in turn.

## Money

The constant refrain in Massard's stories is the chronic lack of money, families struggle « à longueur de journée, à longueur d'année, contre la misère »<sup>6</sup> even though men (in factories and workshops), women (through cleaning jobs or the washing and mending they take in) and children as soon as they are old enough, all contribute to the family income. Women in particular are « toute la journée en état d'urgence »<sup>7</sup> and inevitably quarrels break out about whose fault it is that the money earned is so soon spent. Many of Massard's characters

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<sup>4</sup> 2 volumes, Lausanne, l'Age d'Homme, 1991, I, p. 7 ; first published in Lausanne by the Éditions de l'Aire, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Isabelle Rüf, « Les écrivains romands et la politique : nostalgie, satire et engagement », in *Histoire de la littérature en Suisse romande*, edited by Roger Francillon, 4 volumes, Lausanne, Payot, 1999, IV, pp. 307-318 (p. 313).

<sup>6</sup> « Nuit d'enfance », in *Christine au dévaloir*, Geneva, Éditions Eliane Vernay, 1981, pp. 25-45 (p. 28).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

do not question the society in which they live and which is organised in such a way as to make life so difficult for them, and are thus unaware of or unwilling to claim their rights. They humbly accept that « la pauvreté, comme la fortune, se transmettait d'une génération à l'autre »<sup>8</sup>, question the utility of collective action such as the creation of unions and strikes and give thanks for their lives lived « à l'ombre de la reprise économique, protégés par la Paix du travail »<sup>9</sup>. However, Massard's ironic rejection of this idyllic view of strike-free postwar Swiss society is conveyed by characters such as the Socialist Uncle Paulo in *La petite monnaie des jours*, who contests the social context and the political circumstances which conspire to keep the proletariat in their place. He also talks with heavy irony about Switzerland's war effort, declaring that « l'ouvrier suisse [...] n'avait connu qu'une seule bataille pour la victoire totale, celle de la pomme de terre dans les jardins publics »<sup>10</sup> and pointing out somewhat disdainfully that it would be unseemly to « mettre côte à côte Stalingrad et le plan Wahlen »<sup>11</sup>. On her own level and in fairly naïve terms the young narrator of « Nuit d'enfance » also begins to question what she has always been told about Swiss prosperity and the country's role during the War :

[...] comment cela pouvait-il se passer dans un pays plein de gros bonnets satisfaits qui se tapaient à longueur de journée sur le ventre

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<sup>8</sup> *La petite monnaie des jours*, Lausanne, l'Age d'Homme, 1995, p. 62. First published in Lausanne by the Éditions d'En Bas, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 40. The « Paix du travail » or « Arbeitsfrieden » was the non-strike agreement of 1937 which formed the basis of Switzerland's reputation as a largely strike-free country ; see Jonathan Steinberg, *Why Switzerland ?* Second edition, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 61-2.

<sup>10</sup> *La petite monnaie des jours*, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125. The Plan Wahlen was the title given to wartime measures aimed at encouraging the Swiss to grow their own food. See Regina Wecker, « It wasn't War ! The Situation of Women in Switzerland 1939-1945 », in Joy Charnley and Malcolm Pender (eds.), *Switzerland and War*, Bern, Lang, « Occasional Papers in Swiss Studies », 1999, II, pp. 61-81 (p. 72).

parce qu'il n'y avait pas de misère chez nous, y-en-a point comme nous, qui avons su éviter la guerre ? (p. 28)

Themselves very often also unhappy, but for reasons which are unrelated to money<sup>12</sup>, the various representatives of the bourgeoisie who occupy positions of authority do their best to combat the emergence of any rebellious ideas and attempt to reinforce the notion that the poor simply have to accept their fate. Thus the pastor, described jokingly by Massard as being « sur sa chaire perché »<sup>13</sup>, is perceived as a distant character little interested in doing anything concrete for his flock apart from providing ludicrously inappropriate and inapplicable advice regarding their diet<sup>14</sup>. The Church preaches justice and equality but this discourse is not followed by positive action and the increasingly impatient narrator of « Nuit d'enfance », who eventually loses all faith in the Church, which in her eyes has done nothing but reinforce the status quo, cannot resist the temptation to rewrite the Lord's Prayer, intoning, « notre Père qui es aux cieux, pourquoi ne nous donnes-tu pas de pain et de gâteau aux pommes ? »<sup>15</sup>. The family doctor is similarly seen as a figure who cares little or nothing for the plight of those he visits, who are generally, and predictably, deemed responsible for their woes. In *La petite monnaie des jours* for example, the local doctor refuses to perform an abortion on Jennifer's mother Rolande, who cannot afford another child but does not have the « mille francs deux mois et demi de salaire sans compter le reste » for the operation either, and the child becomes for Jennifer, « celle que le bon docteur des pauvres n'avait pas voulu envoyer chez les anges »<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> In the middle-class family portrayed in *Ce qui reste de Katharina*, Vevey, l'Aire, 1997, for instance, there is money for Katharina to buy clothes and even a car, but in spite of this she remains unhappy and frustrated.

<sup>13</sup> « Nuit d'enfance », *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> One is reminded here of the bourgeois characters in Zola's *Germinal* (1885) and their absurd gifts to the starving miners.

<sup>15</sup> « Nuit d'enfance », *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Both from *La petite monnaie des jours*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

## Children

Given this serious lack of money, children are on the whole perceived as a source of expense rather than pleasure, for as has been noted, « in an industrialized society, children became an economic liability rather than an asset »<sup>17</sup>. They thus have to begin to earn their keep as soon as possible, like Marie in *La petite monnaie des jours* who is packed off to *Suisse alémanique* to work as soon as she leaves school, « tournant la clé de l'enfance »<sup>18</sup>. Her sister Jennifer's extended studies are something of a rarity and perceived by the community at large as a heavy burden on the family, since « le Collège c'était réservé aux riches »<sup>19</sup>. It is widely believed that girls do not need to be educated in order to carry out their duties as mothers and housewives, for it is boys who will be able to vote once adult and thus possess « tous les droits »<sup>20</sup>. Pregnancy and motherhood are generally accepted as inevitable for women, to be borne stoically and unquestioningly as an integral part of female destiny and this is reinforced in *La petite monnaie des jours* through the constant repetition of the words « destin » and « destinée » with reference to women's lives. Thus we are told, « il fallait que s'accomplisse la destinée »<sup>21</sup>, « voilà la destinée des femmes, personne n'y peut rien »<sup>22</sup> or « la destinée de la femme n'était pas une partie de plaisir [...] il fallait la subir comme l'homme devait se battre contre la grêle pour sauver la vendange »<sup>23</sup>. Some women combat this strongly-held

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<sup>17</sup> Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of their Own*, 2 volumes, London, Penguin, 1990, II, p. 242.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 34. Women were of course not able to vote in federal elections in Switzerland until 1971, although the Canton of Vaud, Massard's canton of origin and the region where her books are often set, was the first to accord them the cantonal vote, in 1959.

<sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 106.



belief, either by refusing the role of « reproductrice » and deliberately choosing not to have children – like Vladia in *L'avenir n'est pas pour demain*<sup>24</sup> or Christine in « Christine au dévaloir »<sup>25</sup> who avoids « pondeurs » and chooses lovers who are married with small children in order to be sure they will not want more babies ! – or by stressing that abortion is an option to be seriously considered. Henriette in *La petite monnaie des jours* for example takes an entirely pragmatic, unemotional stance, declaring baldly that « un enfant c'est d'abord une petite graine qu'on peut déloger »<sup>26</sup> and admitting freely that on one occasion during her youth « j'ai dû me débrouiller pour trouver un médecin »<sup>27</sup>.

In addition, children restrict women rather than bringing fulfilment and happiness : on her one attempt to run away from her failing marriage for example, Katharina in *Ce qui reste de Katharina* realises that she is already in the early stages of pregnancy and it is fear of the future that forces her back home<sup>28</sup>. Thus we may speculate that had it not been for her pregnancy she may well have effected her escape from the family and husband to whom she will be more tightly bound from now on :

[...] elle a eu peur. [...] Peur de vivre, en somme. Et puis ces nausées matinales combinées avec un retard de règles annoncent une germination. On ne prive pas un enfant de son père. Il fallait dire non avant. (p. 63)

Katharina subsequently forgets any further thoughts of escape and throws herself into motherhood in an effort to suppress her sense of failure, trying to console herself with the thought that « elle aura son propre enfant, elle sera une personne complète. Enfin »<sup>29</sup>. As is the

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<sup>24</sup> Lausanne, Éditions Clin d'Oeil, 1982, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> In *Christine au dévaloir*, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-122.

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Vevey, l'Aire, 1997.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

case with many of Massard's heroines, however, motherhood does not provide the fulfilment she hopes for and had tried to convince herself she would find.

Generally unwelcome because of the additional expense they represent, often born in spite of women's best efforts to procure an abortion, or alternatively encumbered with expectations they cannot possibly live up to, the children depicted by Massard live in families where communication is minimal and gender differences are strictly enforced. Girls are thus naturally expected to participate in domestic chores from which boys, who will later vote and play a role in public life, are exempt, and girls quickly learn that « l'homme était le maître de l'univers et la femme la maîtresse de la maison »<sup>30</sup>. Studies, which are difficult for the family to finance, may be just about acceptable for boys, « ces futurs citoyens »<sup>31</sup>, but certainly not for girls who need to be able to do little more than read recipes and concoct economical meals. Indeed, the fathers in these various families seem if anything to feel threatened by the prospect that their daughters may become more educated than them and even those who are politically active and strong defenders of workers' rights see no contradiction in supporting the status quo where girls are concerned :

Un fils d'ouvrier qui fait des études, quelle gloire pour la classe ouvrière en général, mais une fille – si elles s'y mettent aussi celles-ci où va-t-on ?<sup>32</sup>

The insistence that girls and women should be confined to a domestic role is however on occasions cleverly manipulated by some of Massard's heroines as for example in « L'Hiver de l'Épine Noire », where the narrator avoids going to political meetings with her father by pretending to be busy with domestic chores when in actual fact she has slipped off to the cinema. As she says, housework is a cast-

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<sup>30</sup> *La petite monnaie des jours*, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>31</sup> « Nuit d'enfance », op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>32</sup> « Suite sans fin » in *Christine au dévaloir*, op. cit., pp. 87-102 (p. 97).



iron excuse, since whatever else they may question « les hommes ne mettent jamais en doute les travaux du ménage »<sup>33</sup>.

Whether we consider girls or boys, biological children or step-children, living in working-class or bourgeois families, it is generally the case that communication between children and parents in Massard's families is poor. This may be because time and money are tight and there are too many children to be cared for, in which case showing affection becomes something of a luxury which cannot be afforded. Thus the heroines remark that « l'expression des sentiments me paraissait un luxe », « ils nous embrassaient rarement »<sup>34</sup>, « ne nous témoignaient aucune affection »<sup>35</sup>, mothers have « une voix aigre, jamais aimable, jamais caressante »<sup>36</sup> and separation, even death, appear to be accepted with minimal signs of distress (« L'Hiver de l'Épine Noire », « Les deux courbes », *La petite monnaie des jours*). In some families alcoholism has taken hold, making fruitful communication impossible and the heroine of « L'Hiver de l'Épine Noire » wonders if her mother « aurait moins bu si on avait pu causer toutes les deux »<sup>37</sup>. In middle-class families as well though, where there are no financial worries, a similar failure to communicate exists between children and parents : in « Les deux courbes »<sup>38</sup> it is only when her mother dies that Auréliana realises how little she knew about her and in *Ce qui reste de Katharina* the heroine alienates both her own children and the stepchildren she cares for, by stifling the former and failing woefully to defend the welfare of the latter against her sadistic mother Ulrike. The absence of intimacy and emotional closeness which are the norm throughout Massard's writing are here developed in a more sinister direction, with the family

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<sup>33</sup> « L'Hiver de l'Épine Noire », in *Christine au dévaloir*, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-24 (p. 14).

<sup>34</sup> Both from *La petite monnaie des jours*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>35</sup> « Christine au dévaloir », in *Christine au dévaloir*, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-122 (p. 108).

<sup>36</sup> « Nuit d'enfance », in *Christine au dévaloir*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>37</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> In *Christine au dévaloir*, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-64.

becoming not just a place of routine and sameness but one which may be positively harmful for both children and adults<sup>39</sup>.

In all the families described by Massard, silence and its consequence, the inability to really know and understand one another, is portrayed as being at the heart of parent-child relationships, none of which could truly be described as successful. Even the very few mothers who do feel close to their children (*Ce qui reste de Katharina*, « Suite sans fin ») are often trying to compensate for unsuccessful marriages and consequently the children « cherchent à se libérer [...] ils étouffent »<sup>40</sup>. Thus whether women have more children than they want or can cope with, or devote themselves to a single child, whether they have plenty of money or constantly struggle to make ends meet, the result always appears to be misunderstanding and failure.

## Couple

A similar sense of failure imbues Massard's portrayal of the couple, rarely if ever a successful undertaking for her heroines, even those who have accorded more importance to the couple than to childbearing, like Christine (in « Christine au dévaloir ») who has made a conscious decision not to marry or have children, or the heroine of « L'œillet à la boutonnière » who has apparently not been able to have any<sup>41</sup>. The latter, married to a man who « s'était mis à économiser ses mots, comme on économise ses sous »<sup>42</sup> pretends to be happy for « elle jouait à la femme heureuse », but has in fact

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<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein Myriam Cardinaux's autobiographical *Une petite fille en trop*, Lausanne, Éditions d'En Bas, 1995, is a searing account of the abuse suffered by the writer at the hands of her mother.

<sup>40</sup> « Suite sans fin », *op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>41</sup> In *Christine au dévaloir*, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-86. Suzanne, in « Dans les bras du soleil », in *Trois mariages*, Vevey, l'Aire, 1992, pp. 57-117, is an exception as she speaks of a close relationship with her husband, but she has not been able to have children either and tellingly her happiness is cut short since she is widowed at 40.

<sup>42</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

become very lonely since moving to a « banlieue élégante [...] où on ne parlait pas sa langue »<sup>43</sup> and where, in consequence, she cannot work. She is in many ways similar to Katharina (in *Ce qui reste de Katharina*) who has also moved, from Germany to French-speaking Switzerland, and also pretends to be happy, claiming absurdly of the husband whom her mother persuaded her to marry and whom she does not really love, « il est l'homme de sa vie, elle l'a épousé par choix »<sup>44</sup>. In addition she too is deprived of meaningful communication with her entourage and her « job » as mother and stepmother to five children keeps her confined to the domestic sphere. Again like the heroine of « L'œillet à la boutonnière » she lives in an atmosphere of non-communication and quickly realises that « elle est entrée dans un monde où tout se tait et se taira »<sup>45</sup>. Her husband's propensity for not talking about things (for example his son's sexual attack on his own sister, which is simply covered up and forgotten and the boy sent away) eventually reaches its logical conclusion when he suffers a stroke and can no longer speak at all.

Although conscious that her marriage was simply a convenient way of remaining in Switzerland rather than having to return to Germany just before the outbreak of war (and also an opportunity for her mother to negotiate a place for herself in the household), Katharina attempts to construct for herself and for others an unrealistically romantic vision of her relationship with Edouard. Even at the end of her life, having finally faced up to the fallacy of this belief, she is still not convinced that love was not entirely the answer and continues to dream of « un grand amour rayonnant qui lui aurait fait accepter tous les gestes répétitifs d'une vie de femme restée à la maison »<sup>46</sup>. She reluctantly recognises the failings of her marriage but cannot entirely give up on the concept of romantic love, preferring to believe that if not Edouard, surely someone else could have

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<sup>43</sup> Both from p. 65.

<sup>44</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>45</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>46</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 219.

made her happy (perhaps the aristocrat she met on the train on her one attempt to run away ?).

For Massard however, it is clear that romanticism is simply a smokescreen which serves to blind women to the reality of what awaits them and in « *Le berceau des ombres* » for example she gives an uncompromisingly frank vision of what women can expect from marriage, with the account of the less-than-perfect marriages of three generations in one family<sup>47</sup>. Edmée's marriage in 1937 is a low-key affair since her mother has recently died ; in 1957 her daughter Jacqueline, already distinctly unimpressed by her future husband, only marries because she is pregnant ; in 1982 at her son Léon's wedding the « happy couple » openly argue, both sets of parents are divorced, the bride's mother has come accompanied by her (female) lover and the bride's father, « père ventru, ex-mari, jeune marié et futur père »<sup>48</sup> is about to become a father again with his second wife. In addition, the « good old days » which three elderly aunts hark back to appear not to have been so good after all, but in fact characterised by hardship, drunkenness, domestic violence and blind obedience. Guardians of a cosy vision of the past, they would however rather not recognise the existence and gravity of such problems and attempt instead to emphasise qualities such as hard work, family harmony and respect for religion.

Young girls may dream of love which « *allait nous tirer de notre quotidien végétatif pour nous propulser dans un monde de rêves* »<sup>49</sup>, a vision intended to coax them into marriage, but according to Massard once married the rose-tinted glasses will immediately disappear. Financial problems, unplanned pregnancy, lack of time and energy to communicate with one's children and partner, disappointment that routine and boredom have quickly taken the place of the life dreamt of, would seem to be, for Massard, the elements which await women once married.

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<sup>47</sup> In *Trois mariages*, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-55.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>49</sup> *La petite monnaie des jours*, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

## Independence

Given this bleak outlook, should marriage and childbearing thus be avoided? Some of Massard's heroines certainly arrive at that conclusion, rejecting forcefully the notion that marriage has anything to do with romance. Some, like Christine (« Christine au dévaloir ») have such bad memories of their childhood and the « grouillement de marmaille dans un espace restreint »<sup>50</sup> in which they were brought up, that love and reproduction become inextricably linked and avoidance of their mothers' fate is their paramount concern. Others such as Vladia (in *L'avenir n'est pas pour demain*) take a more political view, for she argues not only that she does not wish to contribute to further generations of oppressed workers but also that « elle considèrait cela comme une victoire personnelle par rapport au dressage qu'elle avait subi dès l'enfance »<sup>51</sup>.

Independence and a childfree existence outside the family are thus postulated as possible, even desirable, or, as Christine bluntly declares, « rien ne vaut l'égoïsme »<sup>52</sup>. However, if Massard depicts young women starting out enthusiastically on a life of study and work (*La petite monnaie des jours*, « L'Hiver de l'Épine Noire ») she also clearly shows the resistance which comes from members of the family and wider community, who do not take kindly to this form of « breaking ranks ». In addition, once these young women have become adults leading independent lives where they make their own choices, they are consistently thwarted in their aspirations. Thus in « Les deux courbes » (where Auréliana finds a certain freedom after her mother's death), « Dans les bras du soleil » (where Suzanne attempts to reconstruct her life after the death of her husband) and « L'œillet à la boutonnière » (where the central character starts to realise how empty her marriage is) all three heroines, none of whom has children, meet men whose existence is surrounded with mystery

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<sup>50</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>51</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>52</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 103.



but with whom they find, or dream of finding, sexual fulfilment. However, these strange men, who initially bring a form of happiness, eventually lead all three women to their deaths and can perhaps be assumed to in fact symbolise Death itself, a suggestion which is made particularly explicit in « Les bras du soleil », where the mysterious young gardener speaks of using « la faux » (the Grim Reaper's traditional weapon) or « la débroussailleuse » to cut the long grass in Suzanne's overgrown garden<sup>53</sup>. Massard thus depicts attempts by women to live autonomously as doomed to failure, and the high « price » paid by each of these women is premature death.

The same scenario can be observed in action with Christine in « Christine au dévaloir », who claims the right not only to sexual freedom but also professional fulfilment and financial autonomy. Having rejected the traditional way of life, « entre un mari, des marmots et [des] casseroles »<sup>54</sup>, Christine has in the process lost the sympathy of her family, who do not understand her choice and condemn what they perceive as her excessive freedom. Thus, when she begins to receive anonymous death threats, is forced to change her habits in an attempt to save herself and finally dies, possibly by her own hand (since, it is implied, a woman alone without husband or children could not but be unhappy) she is accorded little sympathy and even less understanding and the diary in which she has recorded her life is thrown, along with her memory, « au dévaloir ».

## Conclusion

Massard's view of the working-class family is thus anything but romantic for as Gaston Cherpillod (1925) has said of her « elle ne s'abuse pas sur sa classe d'origine : elle n'en fait pas une cohorte d'archanges à cul rose »<sup>55</sup>. The families she depicts are not ones which are, as the cliché goes, « poor but happy », they are places

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<sup>53</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>54</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>55</sup> In the Preface to *La petite monnaie des jours*, *op. cit.*, 1995, pp. 7-9 (p. 9).



where hard work, lack of food and affection and rigid convention hold sway and from which, according to Massard, any young woman with an ounce of imagination or ambition would wish to escape. Even the few middle-class families which she portrays, riddled with tension and frustration, fail to escape her generally bleak view of this imperfect social unit.

If the traditional family is thus described as an unpalatable option for women and girls, it has to be said that for Massard any attempt at an existence outwith it, although to be encouraged, is highly dangerous. For as we have seen, all the characters who reject marriage and motherhood (« Christine au dévaloir », *L'avenir n'est pas pour demain*) or who attempt in any way to lead autonomous lives (« Les deux courbes », « L'œillet à la boutonnière », « Dans les bras du soleil ») eventually become psychologically unstable and die in unusual circumstances. Women, it seems, have very little room for manoeuvre, condemned to a life of drudgery and routine within the family, risking their lives and their sanity if they choose to remain outside it.

Women, very much at the centre of the families created by Massard, are also paradoxically often responsible for perpetuating the prejudices which oppress other women, and thus collaborate with the very forces that enslave them. In *La petite monnaie des jours* for example, it is women who are particularly vocal about the need for young girls to accept their fate and who are highly critical of those who try to do otherwise. Given this reality and the grim conclusion at which she seems to have arrived, Massard might perhaps be inclined to agree with the analysis proposed in the 1970s by feminists such as Ann Oakley, who declared that « women's domesticity is a circle of learnt deprivation and induced subjugation : a circle decisively centred on family life »<sup>56</sup> and who went on to propose the logical, radical solution :

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<sup>56</sup> Ann Oakley, *Housewife*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976, p. 233.

[...] the abolition of the housewife role requires the abolition of the family, and the substitution of more open and variable relationships [...] in a space that allows each to breathe and find her or his own separate identity<sup>57</sup>.

Reflecting on experiences of communal living in the 1970s, many women now recognise the flaws and failures of the ideal, and admit that their expectations were often disappointed. They sought indeed to abolish the family and « vivre autrement », hoping that this would provide a basis for a new social order but sadly « nous sécrétions nos propres normes et contraintes »<sup>58</sup>, and in spite of everyone's best efforts « très vite les anciens modèles conventionnels nous ratrapent »<sup>59</sup>.

Although these attempts to « casser le couple et la famille petite-bourgeoise »<sup>60</sup> were not ultimately successful, they perhaps at least point towards what might be achieved in a totally new kind of society in which women and men transformed their way of working, living together and bringing up children. Such a society would certainly offer brighter prospects for women, freed from what Massard appears to see as the oppression of domesticity, for her work clearly suggests that it is only through the abolition of those very families which women help to create and support, but which in turn enslave them, that the eradication of social injustice can begin and women can cease to be « instructed in their oppression [...] by other women »<sup>61</sup>. Thus, describing the world as she sees and experiences it, Massard is deeply pessimistic about women's place, whether it be within the family or in society at large, and her writing appears to lead inexorably towards the conclusion that indeed « il faut abolir la famille ». Failing the

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>58</sup> Maryelle Budry and Edmée Ollagnier (eds.), *Mais qu'est-ce qu'elles voulaient ? Histoires de vie du MLF à Genève*, Lausanne, Éditions d'En Bas, 1999, pp. 135-136.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>61</sup> Oakley, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

realisation of this utopian vision, not successfully achieved by the communes of the 1970s and doubtless highly unlikely in the near future, there would seem to be little hope, in Massard's eyes, of any serious improvement in social justice and women's rights, and her view of both society and the family remains decidedly sombre.

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