

**‘J’écris femme : il faut que la femme écrive la femme. Et l’homme l’homme.’ (Cixous).
To what extent could *Le Pays* and *Les mots pour le dire* be considered to participate in a
project of écriture féminine?**

This essay will analyse the extent to which *Le Pays* and *Les mots pour le dire* participate in Hélène Cixous’ project of écriture féminine – an example of difference feminism which aspires for women to write in a different manner from men. For the purposes of this essay, Cixous’ écriture féminine will be defined as: a call for women to invent their own feminised language which goes against “cloisennements, classes et rhetoriques, ordonnances et codes”¹, and for women to write “à l’encre blanche”² – a metaphoric encouragement for women to reclaim their maternal and gestational bodies through writing. My analysis will therefore compare the extent to which *Le Pays* and *Les mots pour le dire* comply with these defined elements of Cixous’ ongoing ‘project’ of écriture féminine. To do this, the first part of the essay will consider *Le Pays*, which will be analysed in terms of Darrieussecq’s stylistic experimentation with language and the structure of the text which aligns with the protagonist’s pregnancy. The second part of this essay will analyse *Les mots pour le dire* using the same criteria: by analysing the protagonist’s reclamation of language deemed ‘inappropriate’ for women and the extent to which the text’s structure aligns with the protagonist’s metaphoric re-birth. The overall purpose of this essay is to investigate what Cixous’ project of écriture féminine might look like in practice, and to investigate whether such a difference feminist form of writing is attainable for women.

To begin the analysis of *Le Pays*, this text shows a degree of participation in Cixous’ project of écriture féminine in terms of Darrieussecq’s language experimentation which subverts French language rules. At the end of the text, when the protagonist’s daughter Épiphanie is born, the text reads “quelqu’un etait venu; si pliée et repliée encore.”³ Despite the fact that French language rules mean that the adjectives “plié” and “replié” should agree with the neutral “quelqu’un”, in this case Darrieussecq protests against this rule by adding feminine endings to the adjectives in order to represent the gender of her daughter. It is relevant to consider that Darrieussecq does not consider the word “quelqu’un” to be neutral, but rather masculine, as “il

¹ Hélène Cixous, *Le rire de la Méduse: et autres ironies* (Paris : Galilée, 2010), p.55.

² *Ibid.*, p.48.

³ *Ibid.*, p.247.

faut l'accorder au masculine."⁴ Therefore, Darrieussecq subverts male-centred French language rules by complying with Cixous' call for women writers "à tout casser, à mettre en pieces les bâtis des institutions, à faire sauter la loi en l'air"⁵ by adding female endings to the word "quelqu'un" as in this case, "quelqu'un" represents a female. As Helena Chadderton considers, Darrieussecq's "emphasis on the role of language in the formation of female identity suggests that she is in fact attacking the choices available to women and the way in which they are portrayed."⁶ Darrieussecq attempts to form a new language in *Le Pays* – one which feminises adjectives to represent the female gender of the subject. This correlates with Cixous' call for women to break rules and orders through language, to "inscrire dans la langue ton style de femme"⁷ and most significantly, to write in a way which differs from "il faut que la femme écrive la femme. Et l'homme l'homme."⁸ In support of this analysis, Shirley Jordan further discusses Darrieussecq's language experimentation as a way to "both highlight and subvert the artificiality of established conventions in the construction of words, sentences, and text"⁹ and as a "refusal of social code."¹⁰ Overall, the discussed evidence suggests that *Le Pays* does indeed participate in Cixous' project of écriture féminine to some extent due to Darrieussecq's stylistic language experimentation which rejects the rules of the masculinized French language.

However, despite *Le Pays*' apparent participation in a project of écriture féminine in terms of Darrieussecq's protest against male-focused French language rules, she still is shown to be held back by these very rules. When considering Collette Hall's discussion of Cixous' écriture féminine, a form of writing which is characterized by "une dislocation de la syntaxe, des jeux de mots constants"¹¹, the extent to which Darrieussecq's *Le Pays* wholeheartedly contributes to Cixous' project of écriture féminine is now brought into question, as the language experimentation and word play is not constant nor consistent throughout the text. For example, in the very sentence where Darrieussecq feminises the endings of the adjectives "plié" and "replié" to align with the female gender of the protagonist's daughter, Darrieussecq does not

⁴ Marie Darrieussecq, *Je est unE autre*, Rome 2007 < <https://mariedarrieussecq.com/sites/default/files/2018-01/confe%cc%81rence%20donne%cc%81e%20a%cc%80%20Rome%20a%cc%80%20un%20colloque%20sur%20l'autofiction.pdf> > [accessed 11 December 2022] p.9.

⁵ Cixous, p.59.

⁶ Helena Chadderton, 'Marie Darrieussecq: Controversy, Ambivalence, Innovation', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 98 (2012), pp.3-13 (p.7.)

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.49.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.40.

⁹ Shirley Jordan, 'Interfaces: Verbal/Visual Experiment in New Women's Writing in French', in *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: life as literature*, ed. by Amaleene Damlé and Gill Rye (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013) p.184.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.193.

¹¹ Colette Hall, *Marie Cardinal*, (Amsterdam; Atlanta, Ga: Rodopi, 1984), p.77.

feminise the word “venu”: “quelqu’un était venu: si pliée et repliée encore.”¹² If Darrieussecq were to remain consistent with her protest against the masculinisation of the neutral word “quelqu’un”, this should read “quelqu’un était venue” in order to feminise the word “quelqu’un.” Readers of *Le Pays* are now introduced to the sporadic and inconsistent nature of Darrieussecq’s experimentation with language.

This is considered by Darrieussecq herself in *Je est unE autre*, where she discusses how changing the word “un bébé” to “une bébé” would “faire violence à la langue.”¹³ Furthermore, despite her desire to change the word “quelqu’un” to “quelqu’une” to align with the gender of the protagonist’s daughter, she rejected this idea, as again, she did not want to “violenter la langue, et détourner l’attention du lecteur.”¹⁴ Instead, Darrieussecq chose to feminise the words “plié” et “replié” as this was a way to acknowledge the protagonist’s daughter’s gender “sans trop forcer la langue.”¹⁵ Evidently, the extent to which Darrieussecq experiments with feminising language has a limit, and that limit is defined by how much such an alteration would ‘hurt’ or strain the French language. Therefore, despite Cixous’ encouraging calls for women to “Écris, que nul ne te retienne, que rien ne t’arrête”¹⁶, Darrieussecq is indeed shown to be held back from writing as she pleases by the ingrained rules of the masculinised French language. Overall, whilst Darrieussecq’s protest against the masculine rules of the French language and brief attempt to feminise language must not be dismissed, the inconsistency of Darrieussecq’s feminisation of language does point to the internal difficulties faced by Darrieussecq when considering how to consistently feminise the language in *Le Pays*. Overall, however, *Le Pays* does briefly participate in Cixous’ call for the invention of a new feminised language.

As well as *Le Pays*’ partial participation in Cixous’ project of écriture féminine in terms of Darrieussecq’s stylistic language experimentation, the timeframe and structure of the text further aligns with Cixous’ calls for women to write “à l’encre blanche.”¹⁷ *Le Pays* is a text which follows the protagonist’s writing process for her novel, but also the process of gestation of her daughter: “Je laissais venir un livre et un enfant.”¹⁸ The text is therefore framed through the lens of a woman’s nine month pregnancy – a timeframe and experience unique to women.

¹² Darrieussecq, *Le Pays*, p.247.

¹³ Darrieussecq, *Je est unE autre*, Rome 2007, p.8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.9

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9.

¹⁶ Cixous, p.40.

¹⁷ Cixous, p.48.

¹⁸ Darrieussecq, *Le Pays*, p.129.

It is relevant here to consider the words of Marie Cardinal, who presents concerns about “ne pas avoir un seul mot pour écrire mon temps qui est bien différent de celui des hommes” as a woman’s sense of time is “régulé par ses règles, coupé en tranches par sa fécondité.”¹⁹ This view of characterising a woman’s sense of time by her natural cycles is also presented by feminist Julia Kristeva, who “characterizes women’s sense of time in terms of ‘cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm that conforms to that of nature.’”²⁰ The way in which *Le Pays* is structured around the protagonist’s pregnancy can therefore be interpreted as a way to represent woman’s unique sense of time, and a participation in Cixous’ project of écriture féminine, where women write “à l’encre blanche” as “le femme n’est jamais loin de la mère.”²¹ As the protagonist in *Le Pays* synonymously produces a novel and a baby, she is metaphorically writing her novel in white ink, as she unites the writing and gestational processes.

It must be considered, however, that *Le Pays* is not merely about the protagonist’s pregnancy, due to the protagonist’s experience of universal issues such as identity, nationality and belonging in an unfamiliar culture “Ma situation sur la planète m’échappait. “Où suis-je?”²² and with an unfamiliar language : “Je baragouinai lâchement les politesses yuoanguies que je connais.”²³ The content of *Le Pays* is therefore not merely about feminine experience; rather, the text covers universal issues which apply to men as well. Whilst this may lead to the view that the content of *Le Pays* does not contribute to Cixous’ project of écriture féminine as this may be considered as Cixous’ form of women’s writing “dont la facture ne se distingue en rien de l’écriture masculine”²⁴, the protagonist’s process of gestation is not solely a timeframe in which the narrative unfolds. Rather, it is an omnipresent process for the protagonist which is woven into the entire text and which forms a significant part of the protagonist’s identity. This can be identified at the beginning of the novel, when even though the protagonist is unaware of her pregnancy, the influence of her unborn child appears: “Une sensation clapotante me prit à l’estomac, une sorte de vide.”²⁵ Furthermore, the significance of the protagonist’s gestation can be identified by the way in which the protagonist consistently personifies her unborn child:

¹⁹ Marie Cardinal, Annie Leclerc, *Autrement dit*, (Paris : B. Grasset, 1977), p.96.

²⁰ Diana Holmes, *French women's writing, 1848-1994*, (London ; Atlantic Highlands, N.J: Athlone, 1996), p.225.

²¹ Cixous, p.48.

²² Darrieussecq, *Le Pays*, p.52.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.50.

²⁴ Cixous, p.43.

²⁵ Darrieussecq, *Le Pays*, p.17.

“Je calai Épiphanie entre la table et moi”²⁶, “Elle s’était installé sur mon côté gauche”²⁷, “Épiphanie nous intimait de nous presser, mais prudemment.”²⁸

Overall, whilst *Le Pays*’ universal themes of identity and belonging may not align with Cixous’ view that écriture féminine should inscribe feminine experience where “la femme écrit de la femme”²⁹, the female process of gestation is nevertheless an omnipresent element of the text. Not only does it provide the structure and timeframe for the protagonist’s writing process, but it is also a process which alters the self-identity of the protagonist: “Étions-nous déjà quatre en famille dans l’avion?”³⁰ In this example, the protagonist questions whether her family consisted of four people on their journey to Yuoangui, i.e., whether her unborn baby was already a part of her. The significance of the process of gestation and maternal role of the protagonist in *Le Pays* therefore aligns with Cixous’ view that écriture féminine is a form of writing where “le femme n’est jamais loin de la mère”³¹ and thus could be said to participate in a project of écriture féminine in this regard.

The analysis will now turn to the use of language in *Les mots pour le dire*, which sees a reclamation of language which has been deemed inappropriate for women. At the end of the text, the protagonist’s final element of self-discovery is that of using language to name parts of her body deemed ‘inappropriate’ in a Bourgeois patriarchal society: “La zone de mon entrejambe ne pouvait s’exprimer que par des mots honteux...Aucun mot ne contenait mon anus.”³² As she suddenly discovers the language to acknowledge her “trou de balle” and her “défécations”³³, and as she becomes able to “dire le mot ’merde’, de penser sans honte et sans dégoût”³⁴, the reader is introduced to the protagonist’s realisation of the importance of reclaiming these words in order to reject language as a mechanism for repressing women and their bodies. As Colette Hall discusses, “c’est la découverte centrale de la répression du corps féminin dans le langage qui alimente les réflexions de Cardinal.”³⁵

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.163.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.221.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.242.

²⁹ Cixous, p.37.

³⁰ Darrieussecq, *Le Pays*, p.57.

³¹³¹ Cixous, p.48.

³² Marie Cardinal, *Les mots pour le dire*, (Paris : Grasset, 1975), p.284.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.286.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.287.

³⁵ Hall, p.79.

Cardinal discusses the availability of language to women in *Autrement dit*, where she states that “je ne crois pas qu’il y ait une écriture féminine ou une écriture masculine.”³⁶ Unlike Cixous, who maintains that “il faut que la femme écrive la femme. Et l’homme l’homme”, Cardinal maintains a different view on écriture féminine. Cardinal presents concerns about a ‘difference feminist’ approach to écriture féminine which creates a new feminised language in fear of “créer une nouvelle aliénation” for women. What Cardinal wants for women’s language is “l’égalité, la justice, le partage.”³⁷ Taking this into account, we are now introduced to a different approach to écriture féminine: Cardinal’s equality feminist approach, which seeks for women to be able to use language in the same manner as men. This is displayed at the end of the text in *Les mots pour le dire* through the protagonist’s reclamation of language deemed inappropriate. The protagonist’s reclamation of language to describe all aspects of her body therefore may not be considered to participate in Cixous’ interpretation of a project of écriture féminine, as unlike Darrieussecq’s language experimentation in *Le Pays*, Cardinal’s text does not create a new feminised language; rather it reclaims existing language.

However, this is not to suggest that the protagonist’s use of language at the end of *Les mots pour le dire* does not contribute to a project of écriture féminine at all, merely it does not align with Cixous’ approach to écriture féminine specifically. Instead, the female protagonist’s use of language at the end of *Les mots pour le dire* represents a participation in Cardinal’s form of écriture féminine – one which strives for equality between men and women in the use of language.

Despite Cardinal’s apparent rejection of Cixous’ feminisation of language, *Les mots pour le dire* does exhibit one aspect of Cixous’ interpretation of écriture féminine – the support for women maintaining their association with gestation. The structure and timeframe of the text is not only “the trajectory of a seven-year psychoanalytic treatment”³⁸, but also the protagonist’s own metaphorical re-birth, which aligns closely with the previously discussed gestational structure of *Le Pays*. This is evidenced in the text’s acknowledgement which reads “Au docteur qui m’a aidée à naître.”³⁹ The protagonist states that “Je ne peux plus vivre”⁴⁰ upon meeting her psychoanalyst for the first time, indicating that she is not currently alive at this moment.

³⁶ Cardinal & Leclerc, p.82.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.96.

³⁸ Lucille Cairns, *Marie Cardinal: motherhood and creativity*, (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1992), p.104.

³⁹ Cardinal, p.5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.9.

The protagonist also considers the process of her forthcoming process of gestation herself : “à cette époque, je ne savais pas que je commençais à peine à naître et que je vivais les premiers instants d’une lente gestation de sept ans. Embryon gros de moi-même.”⁴¹ Furthermore, at the end of the text, the protagonist is reborn, as she tells her psychoanalyst “je me sens capable de vivre seule maintenant. Je me sens forte.”⁴² In support of this analysis, Lucille Cairns considers the protagonist’s journey as “no less than a re-birth”⁴³, and considers the imagery of the protagonist bleeding out in the bathroom on pages 16-17 with “arms squeezing knees tightly against chest, enveloped in bodily fluids” which “resembles nothing so much as a foetus curled up in the womb.”⁴⁴ Colette Hall also considers the gestational structure of *Les mots pour le dire*: “la narratrice des Mots pour le dire se donne naissance à elle-même.”⁴⁵ Overall, it is clear that at the beginning of the novel, the protagonist is metaphorically represented as an unconscious foetus, and after her long period of psychoanalysis, she is finally able to live as a complete woman at the end of the text.

The overall structure of *Les mots pour le dire* is therefore determined by the female protagonist’s own metaphorical gestation as she rebirths herself, which closely links to the discussed framing of *Le Pays*. We are presented with a second text in which the cycle of gestation frames the experiences of the female protagonist, again forming an alignment with Cixous’ notion that one of women’s real strengths is “la pulsion de gestation.”⁴⁶ In this regard, *Les mots pour le dire* could be said to participate in Cixous’ project of écriture féminine as it is a text which unites the female protagonist with her gestational body in a metaphorical sense.

This discussion has provided some insight into the attainability of such a ‘difference feminist’ form of writing for women. In particular, the obstacles faced by Darrieussecq in *Le Pays* when attempting to feminise language brings into question the viability of Cixous’ idealistic desire for women to create a feminised language which differs from men’s. On the contrary, both texts’ framing of a woman’s cycle of gestation suggests that participating in the gestational and maternal aspect of Cixous’ project of écriture féminine may be more attainable for women. This could be explained by the existing acceptance of women as maternal figures in a patriarchal society, so this aspect of Cixous’ écriture féminine is not exactly an act of

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.343.

⁴³ Cairns, p.77.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.98.

⁴⁵ Hall, p.78.

⁴⁶ Cixous, p.64.

subversion or protest. This is discussed by Ann Jones who states that “when she (Cixous) speaks of a drive toward gestation, I begin to hear echoes of the coercive glorification of motherhood that has plagued women for centuries.”⁴⁷ The essentialist nature of Cixous’ *écriture féminine* is also considered by Colette Guillaumin, who insists that “there is nothing liberatory...in women's claiming as virtues qualities that men have always found convenient.”⁴⁸

To conclude, this essay has analysed the extent to which *Le Pays* and *Les mots pour le dire* participate in Cixous’ project of *écriture féminine* in terms of the invention of a new feminised language which subverts existing rules, and the unity of women and their gestational bodies. *Le Pays* was shown to partially participate in Cixous’ call for the invention of a feminised subversive language through Darrieussecq’s language experimentation, and to fully participate in her vision for women to continue their association with their maternal and gestational bodies in writing. In *Les mots pour le dire*, it was shown that the protagonist’s reclamation of language removed from her by a Bourgeois patriarchal society was not a participation in Cixous’ project of *écriture féminine*, as the text did not offer new language experimentation and invention like *Le Pays*. Rather, *Les mots pour le dire* could be said to participate in Cardinal’s version of *écriture féminine* which seeks to bring equality to women rather than difference. The metaphorical rebirth structure of *Les mots pour le dire* was, however, shown to participate in Cixous’ call for women to connect themselves to their gestational bodies through writing. Using these findings, this essay has also provided some insight into how easily Cixous’ project of *écriture féminine* can be implemented by women writers. One might therefore consider that participation in such a project is perhaps more achievable when there exists an alignment with the essentialist expectations of women from a patriarchal society, whilst it may be more challenging for women to engage in Cixous’ *écriture féminine* in a subversive manner. This finding further highlights the male domination experienced by women in the literary field.

⁴⁷ Ann Rosalind Jones, ‘Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of "L'écriture Feminine"’, *Feminist Studies*, 7 (1981), pp. 247-263 (p.255.)

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.257.

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