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**Feminine and Textual Identity in  
Anne Hébert’s Novels**

**Summary**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### I. Introduction

I.1. Anne Hébert and the Canadian Francophone novel...	2
I.2. The hébertian universe - women's world .....	9
I.3. In favour of an analytical approach .....	13
I.3.1. Identity, a key concept of the hébertian oeuvre.....	14
I.3.2. The <i>self</i> on its way to become <i>another</i> .....	15
I.3.3. How can the <i>self</i> birth <i>otherness</i> ?.....	17
I.3.4. A common vision on the feminine and the textual	18

### II. Feminine Identity

II.1. Women in couple relationships.....	22
II.1.1. The marriage as solitary confinement.....	23
II.1.2. In favor of a feminine virility .....	26
II.1.3. Towards a corporal identity .....	29
II.1.4. The external fascination .....	33
II.1.5. Partial conclusions.....	37
II. 2. Women and maturity .....	39
II.2.1. Fertile therefore passive.....	40
II.2.2. The absent mother.....	43
II.2.3. The cruel mother.....	46

II.2.4. Mother and daughter.....	49
II.2.5. Partial conclusions.....	51
II.3. The dream and the deep self .....	53
II.3.1. The dream as self-descent .....	55
II.3.2. Latent contents and manifested contents .....	61
II.3.3. Partial conclusions .....	76
II.4. Witchcraft and identity “transmutation”.....	78
II.4.1. Witchcraft and femininity.....	79
II.4.2. The Witch, Medea’s daughter.....	87
II.4.3. The witches, founders of a counter-society.....	90
II.4.4. Witchcraft, an anti-Christian religion.....	92
II.4.5. The players of the liturgy.....	94
II.4.6. The witches’ Sabath .....	98
II.4.7. The devil in the monastery.....	102
II.4.8. Partial conclusions.....	105
II.5. Acting and identity “multiplication” .....	108
II.5.1. From Pierrette Paul to Flora Fontanges .....	108
II.5.2. Theatrical identity .....	111
II.5.3. Identity and character .....	112
II.5.4. Identity and conflict .....	118
II.5.5. Mimesis or imagination .....	119
II.5.6. <i>Another</i> in spite of my will.....	122
II.5.7. Partial conclusions.....	128

<b>III. <u>Textual identity</u></b>	
<b>III.1. Fragmented writing</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>III.1.1. Partial conclusions</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>III.2. The polyphonic construct</b>	<b>144</b>
<b>III.2.1. An echo of voices in <i>Les Fous de Bassan</i></b>	<b>145</b>
<b>III.2.2. <i>Kamouraska</i> – the voices of madness</b>	<b>154</b>
<b>III.2.3 <i>Les Enfants du Sabbat</i> – a trinitarian narrative</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>III.2.4. Feminine voices/masculine voices</b>	<b>161</b>
<b>III.2.5. Partial conclusions</b>	<b>166</b>
<b>III.3. Narrative temporality and discontinuity</b>	<b>168</b>
<b>III.3.1 The frailty of the present and the reversibility of the past</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>III.3.2. Length and rhythm</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>III.3.3. Partial conclusions</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>III.4. Intertextuality</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>III.4.1. The universal literature - “forged” hébertian novel</b>	<b>184</b>
<b>III.4.2. Novel discourse, a rewriting of the sacred texts</b>	<b>191</b>
<b>III.4.3. An intertextual reading of <i>Les Enfants du Sabbat</i></b>	<b>195</b>
<b>III.4.4. Partial conclusions</b>	<b>204</b>
<b>IV. <u>Final conclusions</u></b>	<b>206</b>

My research focuses on the novels of Anne Hébert (1916-2000), one of the most prestigious and well-known writers in the Canadian French-speaking literary world. Due to the themes she tackles and to their area of spreading, her writings have earned world-wide fame. Anne Hébert's work, consisting of poems, short stories, novels and plays, imposed itself as subversive writing and as a challenge to traditional literature. It is Anne Hébert's merit to have secured new standards in the evolution of Canadian Francophone literature, and to have marked, along with her contemporaries' writings, the transition from a historical, traditional literature to a modern, Quebecian one.

Having mesmerized both readers and researchers by its originality, Hébert's *oeuvre* grew to become the object of a great amount of research and still remains an inexhaustible source of topics and analysis tracks.

From among the topical richness of the Hebertian writings, two aspects retained our attention and have drawn the direction of our research, namely the fashioning of feminine identity on one hand, and the textual construct on the other.

The following novels make up the corpus subjected to research: *Les Chambres de bois* (1958), *Kamouraska* (1970),

*Les Enfants du Sabbat* (1975), *Héloïse* (1980), *Les Fous de Bassan* (1982) and *Le Premier Jardin* (1988).

The leading idea behind our research is the structural proximity between the fashioning of the feminine identity and the textual construct, which become parallel systems in Anne Hébert, grounded in the same principle of deconstruction, discontinuity, and dispersion. The duality or the plurality of the self predisposed to “swing” any moment into “another” is consistent with the fragmentation and the multiplication at the textual level. To a nonlinear discontinuous feminine identity, marked by numerous reformulations, corresponds a discontinuous or fragmentary text.

The thesis has two main parts. The first part deals with the problem of feminine identity, which is fashioned by the means of a fierce rejection of the roles that place women in a position of inferiority - such as that of wife and mother, perceived by the traditional society, which is governed by a patriarchal mindset, as *the only* feminine functions – and by choosing a negative identity in joining the practice of magic or acting. In the second part, our attention shifts from the fashioning of feminine identity towards the scriptural side of the oeuvre, designed in the same innovative spirit like the feminine identity, maintaining its division and broken unity.

The significant position granted to the feminine character and the peculiar way in which the author chooses to build her characters have led us to an examination of feminine identity. In the Hebertian novel feminine identity shows up as a never-ending reinvention of the self, which makes it not a fixed and unalterable entity, but a „becoming”, i.e. a perpetual process.

It is fashioned through a series of identifications with internal objects, rendered by various instances of identity from the past, or with external objects, rendered by historical or imaginary models of identity which make the self into a stratified, heterogeneous construct where each identification becomes the meaningful identity of the moment.

By placing at the heart of her novels challenging characters like Elisabeth Rolland, Julie de la Trinité, Héloïse or Flora Fontanges, Anne Hébert helps create a different perspective on women's condition and shakes the “world order” of patriarchal societies where women were looked down upon.

The new type of femininity proposed in Hébert's writings marks a clear separation from its traditional depiction as an opposite of masculinity or as the reverse of virtue and morals.

Anne Hébert endows her characters with a virile and voracious femininity, one that is forged in rebellion and by the rejection of the tamed, passive „white cat” type, drawing rather near to the witch type.

Through her peculiar way of developing characters the writer contributes significantly to the rehabilitation of women’s condition. For Anne Hébert, feminine identity is a perpetual fight, waged both on the individual and the collective level, an anguishing process that implies exhausting reformulations which, in turn, entail ruptures in the character’s identity evolution and often trigger irreparable conflicts between divergent instances of identity.

After putting up a bitter fight against the oppressive society and the male domination, the Hebertian woman regains her autonomy and identity through the appropriation of her own body and voice.

The transcending of the ‘wooden chambers’ walls allows for the woman to transpose herself *elsewhere* in the real life and to reinvent herself thanks to the uncensored memory or the imaginary.

The “identity swing” concept taken from Jean-Claude Kaufmann has helped us define the identity “transmutation”,



experienced by the feminine characters as a self-reinvention or passing from one identity instance to another.

For Anne Hébert, the feminine identity is fashioned in close connection with *otherness*, this dark instance of identity, the shadow „slayer” by reason, which lies by for invading the conscious. The feminine self is fashioned through a perpetual incorporation of the shadow, a discharged side without which the individual is undone.

In the context of reinventing the feminine self, *the dreams, witchcraft and acting* seemed to us the three main ways that lead to an identity reconfiguration.

A mere analysis of conscious experiences provides a rather poor selfimage which is why, oftentimes, in order to access superior knowledge the individual must transcend the physical space and explore the unconscious. The unconscious, this gloomy area, the seat of the deep self or the shadow, remains hidden from physical eyes and rejects direct observation.

The Hébertian characters are often denied access to the deep self image, which contrasts the social self, a *persona* fashioned rather through the actions of the super-ego than through dreams. The dream appears to be, therefore, a way of self-descent and an internal mirror which allows the

observation of the internal self. In the herbertian novel, the dream develops into a realm of identity labor and escape which facilitates the encounter between the conscious self and the discharged one.

The “Elisabeth Rolland” conscious identity is threatened by the existence of some latent identities which compete with the conscious self. Elisabeth’s dream takes the shape of a discovery journey whose goal is the transmutation of the character to another identity. The self-descent is, in Elisabeth’s case, a gradual process marked by numerous returns to the conscious state. However, once the unconscious threshold is crossed, the main character gives herself up to the winding paths of the dream in order to encounter the self in the end.

An anguishing journey which implies a confrontation with the ghosts of the past, the dream proves to finally be a journey towards spiritual freedom.

Just like Narcissus at the edge of the fountain, Elisabeth Rolland can’t carry on with her old life after seeing her own image in the mirror-dream. Once returned to the conscious state, she is a different person.

The woman buried alive and then unburied in the end of the *Kamouraska* novel is a symbol of the „resurrection” of the „dark” woman by the means of the dream and the

acceptance by women of the darksome side of their femininity, made of instincts and violence.

Alongside the dream, witchcraft seems to be another means which allows women to reinvent themselves and escape to a magical “reality”, one that is superior to the physical. Because witchcraft is perceived to be anti-order, anti-society and anti-Christianity, being designed as a mockery of the social establishment and the Christian religion, it enables women to attain the *active subject* status. It is a practice that allows the identity “transmutation” of the character which, by joining witchcraft, becomes someone else.

While Christianity, founded on phallogocratic precepts, sentences women to submission and silence, in the new social and religious establishment represented by witchcraft women play an important part. Witchcraft, organized according to the norms of the upside-down world, replaces the dominant masculine principle in Christianity with the feminine principle. Women, the opposite of men in patriarchal society, become through magic goddesses worthy of their followers’ adoration.

They are both the altar and the bread, able to provide magical food and drink to those hungry and thirsty, and to bring deliverance and relief to the souls of the „children of Sabath”.

Endowing her characters with the image of the witch, Anne Hébert arms them with “magical” powers and with a transgressive attitude. Both of these are perceived in the author-issued context, just as during witch-hunting times, as diabolical features.

The writer plays on the myth of the Medieval witch in order to depict the feminine rebellion which led to the explosion of the confined space of the “wooden chambers” and to the invasion of the liberating external space by women. The feeling of suffocation produced by imprisonment in the family home or in a monastery is opposed by the freedom provided by the wild nature which shelters the witches’ nocturnal meetings.

While in *Les Chambres de bois* and in *Kamouraska* witchcraft is only alluded to, in *Les Enfants du sabbat* the writer paints a full picture of the demonic witchcraft practiced in Medieval Europe.

It is through its ability to favor identity “multiplication” and to provide women with the liberty to choose their own embodiments that acting is related to dreams and the witchcraft.

In the chapter on the “identity swing” by the means of acting, built around the Flora Fontanges character (*Le Premier Jardin*), I have drawn a boundary line between the objective

side of identity – which regards the biographical data of the character – and the subjective side related to the socio-professional context. I have also drawn a clear distinction between the characters played by Flora and those born in the actress's imagination, each role providing a punctual identity and ensuring the unity and coherence of the identity at a certain point.

Flora Fontagnes' identity is not reduced to the present state, but is rather defined as a identification process with identity instances from her own past, such as Pierrette Paul or Marie Eventurel or other imaginary characters. Acting is chosen as a form of voluntary exile because of an identity crisis and because of an imbalance between the deep self and the one on the surface. The unfulfilment of the much limited daily self determines the character to break away and exile itself among chimeras and other potential or imaginary identities.

Identification with imaginary characters - on the strength of memory and own imagination or under the guidance of a scenographer, played during some shows or in private contexts – benefits personal satisfaction, each punctual or momentary identity contributing considerably to the expansion of the self.

Imaginary embodiments often surface as substitutes of a real dissatisfying life or as compensatory identities which allow the actress to enrich her life with plenty other ones. Spontaneous identification with emblematic figures in history emerges as a disguise of the deep desire for advancement. Lacking personal identity, Flora lives in the image of Barbe Abadie, Marie Rollet, Guillemette Thibault or by the Daughters of the king. Embodying Marie Rollet or Eve, Flora rewrites the story of Genesis, becoming the mother of a whole nation. Her main purpose, though, is no to provide a mimetic depiction of history, but to reinvent it, granting women a different destiny than the present one, and thereby abolishing the myth of an inferior birth or that of the original sin.

Identity mutations emerge as a biographical renewal and as the embodiment of a multitude of imaginary identities. Reinventing herself through acting is an anguishing experience for Flora, as acting allows for alienation or escaping the self on one hand, but draws her toward herself and toward peace with the identity instances of the past on the other.

The same structural explosion, defining for the building of the character, is easily detectable in the novel. In the second part of the thesis, I have presented the Hebertian novel both as a fragmentary, polyphonic construct, in which space and time

are shattered, and as a merger of several texts into one, accomplished through intertextuality.

The first chapter in the second part of the thesis introduces the novel as a fragmentary construct, whose structure is predetermined by a textual carving into narrative sequences of variable length, circumscribed by numerous blank spaces. It is through this fragment-based textual framing that the narrative lines up with poetry. According to the author, prose is but another way to write poetry. Thereby the novel becomes a “book of fragments” or a jigsaw of microtexts, each sequence posing its own unity and logic and being perfectly capable to live on its own.

In addition to the division of the text in small fragments, Anne Hébert’s propensity for “light texts” can be seen in the small number of pages in which her plot develops – not more than two hundred per novel. This textual minimalism is especially grounded in the concrete language she uses to build her novels.

The weaving of the text in black and white - the text being conceived as a “canvas” of speech and silence – is exemplified by the use of the chessboard metaphor, ubiquitous in the Hebertian oeuvre. Textual nesting is also implied by the

carpet/tapestry metaphor, the weaving of the threads reminding of that of sequences, narrative levels and temporal axes.

The practically loose jointing of sequences which mingle with each other, defying any temporal or spatial sense, gives a powerful impression of clutter. The Hebertian narrative is a nonlinear one, which permits the overlay of microtexts, topoi and distinct temporal axes.

Because of her transgressive way of developing novels as fragmentary works, Anne Hébert is among those who disapprove of classical canons. The special manner in which she builds both her characters and her narrative shows the authors' desire to set women free from men's dominion on one hand, and the text from restraining canons on the other.

The Hebertian text comes out as a crumbled structure or as broken writing, which is, in Cioran's vision, the only kind of writing capable to exemplify our modern personal identity's propensity for despair and discontinuity.

The textual architecture's specific outburst is followed up by a dispersion at the narrative voices level, so that the Hebertian text commands itself as a polyphonic construct. The Hebertian novel stands out from the traditional, linear one by abolishing the idea of unitary narrative, and replaces the



canonical novel's all-knowing voice with a wild playing of intertwined voices.

The polyphony effect is achieved in two ways: on one hand, through the intertwining of distinct voices belonging to different narrators, and on the other through the multiplication of ranges at the level of the same narrative voice. Narrative voices in Anne Hébert are in perfect agreement with the characters' identity swings. "Self-reference in the third person" enables narrative characters to acquire the necessary distance from the reported events. Nevertheless, these are most often overridden by events of the past, at which particular moment the storyteller identifies himself with the character and intervenes in the diegesis by assuming his self-narrative "self". Hence, the first person personal pronoun emerges as an extremely rich grammatical category, designating multiple instances of the same character in the same narrative.

In *Les Fous de Bassan* the plurality of voices arises on one hand from a plurality of narratives, and on the other from the identity and articulatory multiplication of the characters turned storytellers. The narrators' propensity for dissociation is added to the multiple narrative which develops as concatenation of five distinct voices. In order to write their story, Nicolas Jones and Olivia Atkins use double or triple

voices, stepping in the narrative both as first-person and as third-person storytellers.

The *Kamouraska* novel possesses the same kind of horizontal vocal plurality, however its complexity arises especially from the vertical intertwining of the voices, because of main storyteller Elisabeth Rolland's intervention in the narrative at multiple levels. Because she uses pronominal forms such as *I*, *she*, and *we*, her presence is felt throughout the story both at the first-person and the third-person level.

*Les Enfants du Sabbat* emerges as a "trinitarian narrative" where, in spite of an seemingly objective and omniscient voice, most of the story is told by tripartite Julie. The narrative's "Self" is related to the three instances which frame the character's identity: "Julie the Child", "Julie the Witch" and "Julie the Nun".

One of the main factors for discontinuity and textual chipping in the Hebertian novel is the organization of narrative voices as a plurality. Besides the novel framework distinguished as an overlay of microtexts and plurality of voices, it is the temporal structure that amplifies the effect of discontinuity.

The Hebertian novel proposes a complex temporal structure, forged in the permanent overlay of distinct temporal

positions. Each novel's plot develops at two distinct but intertwining narrative levels and temporal axes, leading to the merging of separate moments. It is a discontinuous temporality, emanant from a never-ending communication between the present and the past, between *now* and *another time*. The present emerges as a fragile reality intended for desintegration and susceptible to "swinging" anytime back to the past. Frequent eruptions of the past into the present cause ruptures on the present's axis. Never-ending transmutations to *ailleurs* are generated by identity crises which draw the characters to this *elsewhere* of the true life. The present is perceived as a time of unfulfillment, while the past is presented as true living – a mythical time of childhood that transposes the character near his/her mother, a time of earthly paradise and happiness.

Alongside the overlay of space and time planes with narrative voices, intertextuality emerges in the Hebertian novel as another important factor for narrative discontinuity. This can be seen both in the direct relation that connects one work with another, and in the relation Laurent Jenny called *intertextuality proper* – by means of allusions, termed *weak intertextuality* by the theorist, and by means of *self-textuality*.

The Hebertian novel thus becomes a space of meeting or dialogue between texts. In approaching universal themes and

motifs such as love, violence, death or water, the author engages in a dialogue with the great ever-writing Text.

Using the image of the cat for the universal model of feminine identity and appealing to formulae or citations, Anne Hébert weaves a difficult to notice web between her work and that of important writers in universal literature.

In addition to the dialogue the Hebertian text conducts with eternal texts like those belonging to Charles Baudelaire, Shakespeare, Andersen, Hélène Cixous, Henri Troyat or George Boucher de Boucherville, the internal intertextual dialogue or *self-textuality* also has an important role in the making of the novel. The image of *the wooden chamber* - which serves as the title of a novel, of a poem, but also as a motif throughout the hebertian oeuvre- counts as a cardinal element of this internal dialogue. The self-textual game is carried on by the writer through the frequent insertion of her own poetry in the novels.

Aside a self-textuality birthed circular vision on the oeuvre, the insertion of poetic lines into prose brings about a crossbreeding of the text and a disestablishment of gender boundaries. Anne Hébert places the lines “Le monde est en ordre / Les morts dessous / Les vivants dessus”, from the poem

“En guise de fête”, as a motto for the *Héloïse* novel, only to use them again in the very same novel, as well as in *Kamouraska*.

Biblical intertextuality plays an important role in the extensive intertextual dialogue which connects the Hebertian text to others. Using the intertextual method, the author rewrites the sacred texts by taking over some biblical themes or characters. In her novels, Anne Hébert reiterates the essential events of world history, such as the genesis, the falling into sin or the apocalypse. She revives the very first woman in the image of Flora Fontagnes or that of Nora Arkins, while the first man, Adam, is embodied by Raphael or Nicolas Jones.

While in *Les Fous de Bassan* the insertion of the source-text is done in an explicit manner, in *Les Enfants du Sabbat* the discovery of the intertextual grids is encumbered by the free insertion of the biblical text in the Hebertian hypertext, without it being marked by italics or quotation marks.

The novel *Les Enfants du Sabbat* is built in a constant dialogue with the Bible. To insert the biblical hypotext in her own text the author uses the method of reversal, thus effecting changes at the level of the speaker, the context, and the message.

Besides the allusions to the Sacred Texts and the citations inserted in their original form or modified through several methods, *Les Enfants du Sabbat* also fosters a dialogue with a series of Latin or French italics-emphasized fragments, excerpted from Catholic prayers and chants.

Whether freely inserted or used as a citation or alluded to, the biblical intertextual fragments are far from serving a purely argumentative purpose ; they are rather a mockery or even a sacrilegious use of the biblical text.

All these intertextual networks, created by inserting other people's words into one's own text and establishing external or internal links, produce a crossbreeding of the text. Thus the Hebertian novel becomes a space for the merging of several texts into one. This ongoing search for the text which "feeds" on other people's texts is analogous to the identity efforts and struggles of the characters. The multiple, hybrid text, fashioned by other people's words, becomes a mirror image of the multiple and diverse feminine identity.

Due to the themes valued, as well as to the character and text building methods, the Hebertian ouvre emerges as a transgressive writing which breaks free from the patterns of the traditional Quebecian novel, defining the wild spirit of its author.

Just like two mirrored structures, feminine identity and text construction are marked by decentralization and violent dispersal as the ruptures and the discontinuity of the feminine self are being found at the textual level in the sequence-based narrative discourse.