

Monique Wittig: poetry, sex, love and politics

"Dans l'arène ennemie", a collection of texts and interviews with the writer and feminist activist.

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The memory remained astonishingly vivid. Monique Wittig is 12 years old. She was making her solemn communion. As she was asked to affirm her faith as an adult, she tried to project herself into the next stage of her life, hesitated, and then made up her mind: "That day (...) I made the decision never to marry," she recalled in a 1979 interview. I wouldn't have the life of a woman who serves a man, who has no life of her own. The birth of a feminist, in the very nave of the church.

For this interview alone, published for the first time in its unabridged version, the collection of rare or previously unpublished texts and various interventions published under the title *Dans l'arène ennemie* is well worth a look. Monique Wittig (1935-2003) is not yet the feminist and lesbian icon, the revered statue of today. Simply a woman writing, acting, groping, "breaking into" a world she intended to shake up.

Her first breakthrough came with the publication of a novel with a puzzling title, *L'OpoPONax* (Minuit, 1964). It tells of a love affair between two little girls. Readers focus on childhood, so well recreated. No one notices the feminism of the text or its lesbian aspect. Wittig, who was looking for a Trojan horse to launch herself "into the enemy arena" and "get something across", has succeeded. and "get something across". She wins the Prix Médicis.

All the more reason for her to go on. Throughout the texts, the novelist talks about Godard, Flaubert and her idol Nathalie Sarraute (1900-1999). But above all, she uses

her words to transform language itself, to wrest it from male domination. Long before the debates on inclusive writing, she played with pronames to avoid the falsely neutral masculine and offer a "feminine counter-text". The "on" of L'Opoponax is followed by the "elles" of Les Guérillères (Minuit, 1969) and the torn "j/e" of Le Corps lesbien (Minuit, 1973). In a text published anonymously by the monthly Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF), Le torchon brûle, in 1973, and with her signature in the in the magazine Minuit, a very feminine "moie" also appears: "Donne moie ton moie que j/e m//y noie."

Among the most radical

Poetry, sex, love and politics inextricably intertwined: this collection offers an invigorating immersion in the feminist ferment of the 1970s. Co-founder of the MLF, Monique Wittig was one of the most radical activists. "We women are truly the servants of history", "the oldest oppressed class", she raged in 1970. But she was quick to question the very notion a social construct in her eyes. She focused her attention on lesbians, the oppressed among the oppressed, invisible, stifled.

This position brought her into conflict with certain leaders of the MLF, in particular Antoinette Fouque (1936- 2014). War was declared between lesbians and other feminists, and Wittig returned blow for blow. "In the end, the situation was so bad that I had to leave France," she recounts in 1980. Feminists often "ignored the existence" of lesbians "while reproaching them for taking themselves for the elite of feminism", she regrets two years later, so hurt that she then blurts out: "'Feminism' for me is suspect." An unexpected phrase from her mouth. But with her, the unexpected and the radical have always been the rule.

Dans l'arène ennemie.

Texts and interviews. 1966-1999,

by Monique Wittig,

edited by Sara Garbagnoli and Théo Manton,

Minuit, 358 p., 22€, digital 26€.

Also by **Monique Wittig, Virgile, non**, Minuit,

"Double", 144 p., €9.