

MADMOIZELLE

Feminism

## **Why today's feminists must rediscover the radical work of Monique Wittig Maëlle Le Corre 08 Jan 2023**

Activist and major lesbian thinker of the XXth century, Monique Wittig will be celebrated in 2023, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of her death. For her work is more alive than ever and her theories claimed by today's feminists.

"There are many girls who quote you, Wittig here, Wittig there, but the head of Wittig, it is less obvious!"

In one of her dream encounters with her lesbian and queer heroines, comedian Tahnee L'Autre finds herself face to face with theorist and activist Monique Wittig and shows her all her admiration. A tasty fan girl moment that also testifies to the renewed interest of young feminists for this iconic thinker.

Born in 1935, Monique Wittig has marked the feminist movement in France, but also beyond our borders. She died on January 3, 2003, and the year 2023 begins as a year of celebration of Wittigian thought, of its vitality, of its current echoes and of the need to give it the visibility it deserves.

Her name has long remained in the shadow of feminist history. However, in recent years, her work and reflections have taken an important place among feminists who are (re)discovering her writings. A welcome revival of interest for the doctoral student in literature and co-author of *Écrire à l'encre violette: Littératures lesbiennes en France de 1900 à nos jours* Aurore Turbiau :

"It's both because we are in the midst of a political effervescence - feminist, lesbian, queer, in particular! -It is because we need to return to radical texts that carry the desire for revolution, because we also want to read beautiful texts, which upset a little, which remain in memory and which nourish a long time.

### **The history of Monique Wittig**

To understand the impact of Monique Wittig and her work, we must already go back to the effervescence of the beginning of the feminist movement in France. On August 26, 1970, she was among a handful of feminists at the foot of the Arc

de Triomphe, who came with several banners reading "There is more unknown than the Soldier, it's his wife," as well as "One out of two men is a woman. They came to pay homage with a wreath of flowers to the wife of the Unknown Soldier, but were prevented from doing so by the police, under the eye of several journalists. It is the founding event of the Movement of Liberation of the Women, organization which is going to mobilize for the right of the women to have their body, in particular by fighting for the right to the abortion and the contraception.

With other lesbians, Monique Wittig militates within the MLF, but will also come up against its limits. "In France, the feminists did not want that we create lesbian groups, I was always the head of the Turk", she remembers in an interview for Libération.

Faced with the impossibility of questioning the heterosexual model and of politicizing lesbianism, Monique Wittig joined the Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action (FHAR) created in 1971, but there again she did not find herself in the militant speeches carried mainly by gay men. She then founded a more radical movement, the Red Dykes, with Christine Delphy, Marie-Jo Bonnet and others.

"She was one of the first to politicize heterosexuality," explains radio documentarian Clémence Allezard, who has worked on Monique Wittig and her legacy.

"With her, it's no longer "homosexuality, this painful problem" [reference to Ménie Grégoire's show in 1971, editor's note] it's heterosexuality, this painful problem, which is damn pleasing for lesbians, already. The problem is that it's stuck at the level of the feminist movement which is hetero, for whom the subject "woman" is by default "heterosexual woman" - and probably white, valid... - and for whom this theory that makes lesbianism a revolutionary position is inaudible.

Monique Wittig would eventually move to the United States, where she taught at several universities.

### **A tribute to Monique Wittig that makes community**

Why is there such an infatuation with Monique Wittig twenty years after her death? "She makes us a community," summarizes Clémence Allezard, who points out that on Tuesday, January 3, 2023, several generations were gathered around her grave at the Père Lachaise cemetery to honor her memory through a

reading: "She is an element of identity, claiming to be a Monique Wittig is to say something about oneself, what a feminist we are, what a lesbian we are."

The @Ami\_esWittig organized a reading at Monique Wittig's grave to commemorate the date of her death and it was beautiful and it was good  
[pic.twitter.com/Yiwx10tEpc](https://pic.twitter.com/Yiwx10tEpc)

- emma (@lampionmagique) January 3, 2023

An observation shared by Aurore Turbiau for whom this Wittig hype is proof that she touches and federates more strongly than ever: "It is the mark of a need for reference icons, on which to lean, that we can celebrate together, and whose work can nourish for a long time, because it is rich and complex."

### **Reading Wittig in 2023**

How to read Monique Wittig today? If at first glance, theoretical and philosophical works can be difficult to approach without a solid intellectual and militant background, these literary works can also constitute a first step. "Her political thought was also transmitted in literature," reminds Clémence Allezard. The question of overcoming gender categories is, for example, at the heart of *L'Opoponax*, her first novel, awarded the Prix Médicis in 1964, a troubling, childlike and complex story in "on", which questions and fascinates by its revolutionary form.

"Suzette Robichon recommends *Le voyage sans fin* [recently republished by Gallimard], which is quite short, simpler, with dialogues and a lot of humor. The text, a detour of *Don Quixote*, was actually presented on stage with Nadège Beausson-Diagne and Adèle Haenel in June 2022. Experimental text, *Le Corps Lesbien* also knows him a republication to the editions of Minuit in this literary re-entry of 2023.

In 2023, Monique Wittig's writings continue to shake up "There are very fragmented forms, characters that are not very clear, it can be difficult, but even if you don't understand all the references, it's not serious, you can read Wittig and let yourself be carried away by the flow, the language", assures Clémence Allezard.

"We don't read Wittig's work as a manual to be a good feminist, a good lesbian or a good writer," says Aurore Turbiau.

"One does not read it to find a kind of encyclopedia of all that it would be necessary to think, of all the subjects that it would be necessary to be able to approach, of all the terms which one could use. Those who have read *La Pensée* straight know that if it works, it is also because it is unstable,

insufficient, sometimes tense, clumsy or not always perfectly coherent; it is also because the poetic complements the political, sometimes we don't understand everything, but perhaps because the meaning simply remains open. Wittig was a very humble person, I don't think we should read her texts as authoritative treatises, her work has flaws and she doesn't shy away from them."

To go further on Monique Wittig

In the Sexy Wittig episode of the Camille podcast (Binge Audio), Camille Regache welcomes radio documentarian Clémence Allezard.

Why read Monique Wittig, the one who claimed that "lesbians are not women"? To be listened to again on France Culture with Natacha Chetcuti-Osorovitz.

Monique Wittig was not a woman, by Ilana Eloit in La Déferlante

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