

## Coming out Fighting: The Warrior Girls of Monique Wittig's *L'Opoponax*

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*The demolition power of a new work constitutes its primary value. To pulverize, to explode existing structures and even the most fecund inventions of the past is thus its major goal. Monique Wittig, "The Trojan Horse".*

By stripping the *Bildungsroman* of its traditional male associations and employing the stylistic patterns of the Nouveau Roman, Monique Wittig achieved in *L'Opoponax* a reputation of literary innovation and infused a marked feminist element into these genres. In this novel about the evolution of young women, Wittig carved out progressive ideological terrain by suggesting same-sex intimacy among young schoolgirls, thus "outing" the characters of her first novel against the backdrop of the sexist/heterosexist society of the early 1960s. Wittig accomplished in this novel the important task of identifying and valorizing gay women in literature through her unapologetic depictions of lesbian romance and fledgling eroticism, but the circumstances into which she released her characters were hostile. Although Simone de Beauvoir's recounting of the torture of Djamilia Boupacha had raised consciousness about the abuse of women in France during this era, being lesbian in the anti-lesbian milieu of the early 1960s was nonetheless still dangerous: in July, 1960, homosexuality was declared a "social plague" in France (Robinson 4), and until political solidarity within the gay community arose in the late sixties and early seventies, most discussions of homosexuality were either rife with homophobic dysphemism or heterocentric explanations of gayness: for example, in 1973, a member of the women's group 'Psychanalyse et Politique' offered this interpretation: "l'homosexualité primaire des femmes devrait n'être qu'un passage vers une hétérosexualité retrouvée et vraiment libre" (Muchnik 64). Logically, given this environment of antagonism, Wittig's subsequent narrative projects began to battle the structures that had facilitated the establishment of homophobic/sexist hegemony, and beginning with *Les Guérillères*, violence became a central theme in her novels. However, as Hélène Vivienne Wenzel notes, "The serious reader of Wittig would quickly discover that already germinal in *L'Opoponax* are all the elements of feminist ideology which are developed further in her later works" (Wenzel 265). Consequently, it is precisely through the treatment of violence and bellicosity in this novel that Wittig first actuates a subversive undermining and deconstruction of sexism and homophobia.

*L'Opoponax* is the story of the growth and maturity of a young protagonist named Catherine Legrand who attends a Catholic girls school. Although novels about youth are commonplace in literature, the particular power with which Wittig narrates the developmental processes that children undergo prompted Claude Simon to issue a unique proclamation upon reading the novel for the first time: "Je ne suis plus moi, je ne suis pas non plus une certaine petite fille: je *deviens* l'enfance" (Simon 71). Simon's affirmation of the universal childlike aspect of the novel invites a reference to Wittig's closing statement in her essay "The Trojan Horse": "It is the attempted universalization of the point of view that turns or does not turn a literary work into a war machine" (*The Straight Mind* 75). Leah Hewitt writes, "Already in *The Opoponax*, Wittig manages to

‘universalize the particular,’ creating a new form of autobiography in which the voice of one becomes that of anybody, thereby rendering the little girl’s perspective paradigmatic of childhood perception” (Hewitt 136).

However, both Hewitt and Simon overstate the purview of Wittig’s project. Wittig does not seek to universalize childhood, but rather, *girlhood* itself specifically. When Wittig challenges narratological convention by using the third person subject pronoun “on” to present the first person perspective of the protagonist Catherine Legrand instead of the expected “je,” this innovation demands the recognition of confluence and simultaneity in the narrative: Catherine Legrand is herself, but “on” stretches her voice beyond the self and engulfs and includes the perspectives of the other girl protagonists in the text and, by extension, represents a concomitant chorus of the utterances of all *jeunes filles*. Therefore, rather than observing simply that Wittig has written in *L’Opoanax* a seminal novel about childhood, it is more appropriate to remark that she has penned a novel of *girlhood*. *L’enfance* in this novel is not an umbrella term that refers to all children, but more precisely a specific subset of that term: the childhood of *girls*. Again, Claude Simon had written, “Je ne suis pas non plus une certaine *petite fille*” in reference to *L’Opoanax*, not the gender unspecific term “*enfant*.” Although *L’Opoanax* does contain male characters, Wittig’s novel focuses primarily on the girl protagonists who eschew subservience and obedience to the patriarchal authority of the church and the male-tainted matriarchal authority of the nuns, becoming warriors and examining the problems of gender and power relationships in a common pedagogical environment where battles on the playground serve as direct metaphors for problems in adult gender dynamics. *L’Opoanax* is thus imbued with great responsibility as a novel and can be read as Wittig’s first textual “war machine.”

Traditionally, the childhood of girls had included the absorption of “proper” behaviors, repressive social compartments, myths of male hegemony, religious beliefs that affirmed the inferior status of women, and exposure to repeated phallogocentric representations of women. In *L’Opoanax*, these institutions collide with protagonists whose development reveals the deleterious effects of traditional girlhood. As Wittig challenges established misogyny with violence, she annihilates the social structures and codes that foment the oppression of women, thereby making *L’Opoanax* a universal text for inchoate girls, women, feminists and lesbians.

The first eruption of violence in *L’Opoanax* heralds a series of happenstances in the novel that examine how little girls’ deviations from propriety and standard order are greeted with brutal punishment by the nuns in order to produce “good girls”:

On se met à cheval sur le banc et on chante, maman les petits bateaux qui vont sur l’eau, en se penchant l’un vers l’autre pour faire le bateau. C’est comme ça qu’on ne voit pas déboucher ma sœur qui vient de donner le signal de la fin de la récréation et qu’on reçoit une gifle de chaque côté de la figure, ça résonne et la tête brimbale (*L’Opoanax* 11).

The game of the schoolchildren is interrupted by the nun’s violent slaps, a seemingly incongruent response to the girls’ frolic, but contrary to expectations, the nuns’ inflictions of pain serve ultimately not to rectify improper behavior, but instead to acclimatize the girl protagonists to violence. As Erika Ostrovsky writes, “The stereotyped view of children—innocent, pure...is in *L’Opoanax* instantly demolished” (Ostrovsky 15). In its stead, Wittig extols agency and abjures sanctitude in the girls. The “bad girl” is altered by corporal discipline, but rather than reinforcing the heterosexist ideals of the

Catholic Church, repeated exposures to violence have the desirable effect under Wittig's value system of hardening the girls into nascent warriors. Truculence transpires after deviation from patriarchal/matriarchal institution of the church:

Les doigts de la petite fille qui s'appelle Josiane Fourmont se touchent presque. Dis donc que tu n'aimes pas toi ta mère. Pas beaucoup. Ma sœur descend de l'estrade en sautant. Sa robe vole d'un seul coup derrière elle. Elle marche en deux pas dans toute la classe. Ma sœur tire Josiane Fourmont par l'oreille et la force à se mettre debout hors du banc, la main de ma sœur continue de secouer l'oreille. Quand elle a fini l'oreille est à côté de la tête toute froissée et violette (*L'Opoponax* 23).

This violence is reprised again after rules of "proper" behavior for girls are broken:

On sait que mademoiselle Doullier a du mal à digérer. A un moment donné Nicole Marre lui demande, pourquoi est-ce que vous rotez tout le temps. Alors on entend dans la classe les cris de mademoiselle Doullier qui tire Nicole Marre hors du banc qui la jette par terre qui lui bourre le ventre de coups de pied avec ses souliers à talons. (*L'Opoponax* 223)

In these passages, Nicole Marre commits the minor social sin of mentioning Mademoiselle's burps publicly and Josiane Fourmont refuses a core tenet of male-dominated Christianity. In order for the girls to liberate themselves from repressive social codes and behavioral requirements that the sisters in the Catholic girls school impose and to free themselves from the regimentation of the male-dominated church, Catherine Legrand and her peers must metaphorically acquire as much strength and as much prowess in violence as that which the nuns exhibit, the girls themselves matching the violent intensity with which this punishment had been delivered in order to prove themselves capable of mastering it. In a radical shift away from the historic sexist institutions in which girls are taught to reject violence as incongruous with the feminine ethos, the *petites filles* of *L'Opoponax* take their punches and incorporate them into a normative paradigm. Violence is reappropriated as a positive by Wittig: the girls are exposed repeatedly to violence for random reasons so as not to un-learn it. They thus become progressively more skilled in the art of war:

Josiane Fourmont Denise Baume Catherine Legrand Reine Dieu avancent de front, chacune portant un pieu [...] Reine Dieu pousse un hurlement, tous les pieux sont lancés. Celui de Reine Dieu passe par-dessus la tête de Mademoiselle et se fiche en terre devant elle. Mademoiselle sursaute se retourne en criant vers les quatre petites filles. On voudrait récupérer les pieux dont on a eu du mal de tailler les bouts (*L'Opoponax* 69).

Since "the theme of apprenticeship—whether physical, ideological, practical, or moral—is the linch-pin of Wittig's *œuvre*" (Duffy 214), this particular notion of autodidacticism in war that Wittig develops extensively throughout the remainder of *L'Opoponax* is of paramount importance. As the making of the stick-spears whittled by the little girls indicates, the novel directs substantial focus on the gradual training that the girls receive in fighting and warcraft, and the playground becomes dominated by the harshness of militaristic pedagogy. Wittig clearly indicates that the idle time of youth will not be spent in the indoctrination of young girls into the ethics of sexism and second-class status; they instead replicate the structures of typically male war games. Trading dolls for soldiers, they acquire prowess in war that matches that of their male counterparts. For example, recess is not an enterprise of hopscotch and jump ropes for the girls: "On marche deux par deux. Il faut traverser toute la ville. [...] On a appris à marcher dans la cour de

récréation pendant la gymnastique, on sait tourner à angle droit, on rattrape un pas comme si de rien n'était" (*L'Opoponax* 160).

This regimentation is indicative of the military aspect of the Catholic girls school. As their martial education unfolds, the girls frequently commit acts of violence unto other girls, ultimately allowing the "victim" to acquire some new proficiency in war craft. Furthermore, all places within the school itself become potential loci of instruction for combat skills, even the sanctuary:

Reine Dieu se glisse d'abord sous le banc de devant et elle se déplace entre les jambes de Pascale Delaroché et de Jacqueline Marchand, et on entend qu'elle rend des coups de poing pour des coups de pied [...] Elle y va en douceur. Personne ne se rend compte qu'elle est là, ce qui fait qu'elle évite les coups de pied (*L'Opoponax* 84).

Any sort of provocation is absent in this passage, yet as Reine Dieu invades the girls' space, they respond to this intrusion with kicks and punches. In this passage, Wittig is beginning to elaborate one of her crucial themes in *L'Opoponax*: building the foundation for the defense of women's bodies, but of equal importance in this excerpt is the development of the art of stealth, an essential skill in warfare. Wittig's girl protagonists learn additional lessons through the violence of other girls that hone their aptitude for battle. For example, Josiane Fourmont is a simpering, sycophantic girl who embraces propriety and emulates the traditional social behavior of a "good girl," adhering religiously to the teachings of the nuns and to their interpretation of women's social roles. As a result of this flagrant association with the enemy,

Reine Dieu lance des poignées de cailloux sur Josiane Fourmont...Reine Dieu donne des coups de poing à la porte. [...]Reine Dieu continue de donner des coups d'épaule contre la porte de toutes ses forces...A la fin la gâche se tord, elle cède ce qui fait que la porte s'ouvre tout d'un coup et que Reine Dieu projetée par son élan au lieu d'atterrir avec l'épaule contre la porte se cogne brutalement à Josiane Fourmont. Josiane Fourmont bascule au-dessus de la tinette dans laquelle une de ses jambes s'enfonce jusqu'au mollet. Elle retire de là un pied enduit d'un liquide marron épais qui glisse entre les lacets de la chaussure et imbibe la socquette de laine blanche. C'est nauséabond. C'est de la merde mélangée à de l'eau et à de l'urine (*L'Opoponax* 64-66).

Reine Dieu's attack on Josiane Fourmont imparts the clear message that the result of espousing such dehumanizing (dewomanizing) conventions is a step toward regression, hence the foot in excrement. This passage plainly emphasizes the importance of not betraying the ethic of allegiance to the girls' subversive battle against traditional womanhood, a lesson driven home by exposure to violence. The development of solidarity among the young girls is essential for military cohesion.

Education for the *jeunes filles* thus becomes a dual enterprise. As they acquire knowledge of spelling and history within the restrictive environment of the classroom, they are concurrently developing amongst themselves awareness of combat techniques that will be useful in war, both in and out of school. Just as violence permeates childhood intersubjectivity, so too does it invade all facets of learning. Rather than promoting the virtues of sharing and harmony, the children's games become infused with aggression. War games predominate in the text as the recreational ventures of the children, and Catherine Legrand and her companions cultivate skills in the art of weapon-making, acquiring familiarity with an eclectic arsenal:

Sur le dessus des fours on fait fondre tout le plomb qu'on a récolté sur le toit des poudrières. Quand la température est suffisamment élevée il s'étaie. [...] on le recueille

avec des pinces avec des cuillers on essaie de faire les formes dedans on le met dans l'herbe pour qu'il refroidisse. [...] On veut s'en faire des armes [...] on peut en faire des projectiles. Des sortes de boulets de canon ou des espèces de grenades. [...] C'est comme ça qu'on commence la guerre. Chacun a le choix des armes. Les deux armées se rencontrent dans la plaine. [...] On hurle, on piétine sur la route, on se tourne autour pour voir si tout va bien, on regarde de près l'arme que chacun a choisie, on fait des critiques. [...] On s'emmêle on se tombe dessus on se débat on se demande au profit de qui ça va se terminer. (*L'Opoponax* 118-19).

Wittig thus imbues her protagonists with war knowledge in childhood to ensure that they will possess the wherewithal to wage war as women. Given the title of her second novel, one may suppose that *L'Opoponax* thus serves as a thematic boot camp for the women who wage war against the male hegemony in *Les Guérillères*: "Among the children there are a number of play battles, filled with fitting terminology, and ...as a matter of fact, many of the latter (the girls) could be considered future 'guérillères'" (Ostrovsky 28). The girls' awareness of fighting practices in *L'Opoponax* is incongruent with the simplicity of children's games, thus the intense cognizance of inflicting pain and attacking the enemy logically foreshadows greater wars to come:

On se met à se guetter. On a à ses pieds ou à côté de soi si on est accroupi les boules ou grenades qu'on a faites avec la terre rouge...On en prépare une au bout d'un bâton on en met dans les poches le plus possible le reste est par terre. Quand on voit un ennemi passer tout près on lui envoie une grenade paf en pleine figure ça écrase l'argile et on en emmanche une autre au bout du bâton avant que l'ennemi ait le temps de rouvrir les yeux. [...] On se bat à l'aveuglette. Christiane Gibrol renforce les grenades avec des cailloux. On les bourre dedans comme ça quand l'ennemi reçoit ça sur la figure ça lui fait encore plus mal (*L'Opoponax* 159-60).

Wittig's language in the previous passage indicates that the lexicon of war is not softened in any manner because of youth, but instead contains sophisticated references to weaponry and the procedures involved in exacerbating pain. The children do not pretend to stage war as many children do; they are instead driven by motives of conquest through injury. Clay bullets and grenades acquire the metaphorical power of the actual "adult" counterpart weapons and this aggressive tutelage in increasing pain destroys the benign aspect of the children's play.

As the girls mature throughout the novel, battle lines become more clearly delineated and organize themselves along the axis of gender. Although many of the girl protagonists spend ample time growing and learning with several of their boy friends, certain conflagrations between the sexes begin to acquire far more ominous aspects, as the potential of death in combat actually threads itself into their "play":

il y a [...] des garçons qui les attendent et qui leur sautent dessus avec des orties au moment où elles passent. Il faut se battre avec eux pour les leur arracher des mains autrement ils tapent avec ça sur les jambes et les cuisses de Véronique Legrand de Catherine Legrand laissées nues par les culottes courtes...C'est pour ça qu'on s'achète des couteaux de poche...ils attendent de l'autre côté cachés derrière un mur on peut arriver par derrière sans bruit et les attaquer à coups de couteau. Véronique Legrand et Catherine Legrand ont les couteaux ouverts dans les paumes des mains (*L'Opoponax* 114).

The use of knives illustrates the graveness of the girls' intent and underscores the seriousness of the conflict between the sexes. Unlike the fragile projectiles referenced previously, knives are capable of killing, and the Legrand sisters show themselves

prepared to escalate conflict to an ultimate end. Of particular importance in this passage is the manner in which the girls are dressed. Their “culottes courtes,” those decidedly feminine articles of clothing, are the products of sex-based difference. As such, the girls are ready prey for their male antagonists because of their bare legs, and the boys take advantage of this weakness. The boys are better prepared for war since they do not wear these inferior garments that have been assigned to the girls as a result of what society dictates traditionally to women. It is precisely because the bare legs are the focus of the boys’ offensive that the girls respond so hyperbolically to this antagonism. Catherine and Véronique Legrand are attacked because they are girls, and the sexist traditions that gave rise to their apparel cripple them as warriors. This shortcoming is anathema to their budding revolutionary character, and the initial affront thus becomes an ontological challenge. They must be prepared to defend themselves to the extreme of death, lest their lack of action relegate them to the traditional status of women as inferiors. They thus become defenders of womanhood, metaphorically raising their *culottes* atop a pole for use as their battle pennant, and the grave implication of what is at stake in this war justifies their choice of knives as weapons.

Gender war in *L’OpoPONax* does not always possess the same sort of intensity evoked in the *culotte* incident, but Wittig maintains symbolic tensions throughout the text that suggest violence even in the midst of harmony. One of Catherine Legrand’s boy friends is Vincent Parme, a child who is frequently her collaborator in mischief, often another of her tormenters, but nonetheless a significant acquaintance with whom she matures. In one particularly bucolic episode, Wittig underscores the anxiety of heterosociality even under the rubric of friendship: “Quand elles rentreront elles diront qu’elles ont vu Vincent Parme et Catherine Legrand couchés de chaque côté du fusil dans le champ” (*L’OpoPONax* 106). The gun lying between the boy and girl is a symbol that asserts that an inherent violence divides the genders. Even though both children are asleep and at rest together, this seeming surface calm is a poor representation of the dynamic between them, for the quintessential instrument of violence and death separates girl from boy and suggests that any peace between the sexes is illusory. Given this intrinsic violence that bleeds into female-male liaisons, all institutions founded upon hegemonic heterosocial and male premises become unstable environments for the girls, and violence is a product of their exposure to these establishments, Catholicism in particular: “The antagonism between [...] established religion (Catholicism) and the world of childhood is paramount” (Ostrovsky 15). For example, it is within the edifices of the patriarchal Catholic church that Reine Dieu receives a pummeling by her girl peers:

Reine Dieu regarde devant elle. Elle fait tomber son chapelet sous le banc. Elle a du mal à l’attraper parce qu’il est sous le troisième banc derrière. Elle se glisse à reculons sous les bancs. Les élèves des classes supérieures lui donnent des coups de pied, des coups de genou et des coups de poing (*L’OpoPONax* 100).

Within the Holy Trinity of the Christian tradition, two thirds of the components of that triad are directly identified as male: Jesus and God the Father. Male figures dominate in the hierarchy of the Catholic religion, thereby making the faith an enterprise in which both genders do not hold equal representation. In response to these gender inequities, Wittig attacks the serene atmosphere of the sanctuary and replaces the austerity of worship with the brawls of young girls. This chaos in the church heralds the beginning of

the destruction of religion in *L'Opoponax*, an operation that is inextricably linked to the development and training of Wittig's warrior girls. In order to erase the influences of Catholicism, Wittig first razes the foundation of the Judeochristian ethic, then superimposes a feminist mythology upon the girls' belief systems in its stead. Wittig juxtaposes tranquility with violence chillingly in order to eliminate the patriarchal holy order, murdering a Jesus figure after an innocent girl game:

On joue à la reine. Marie-José Venant est sacrée reine. Elle est à genoux. On lui pose une couronne de marguerites sur la tête. On la tient par la main pour l'accompagner à son trône sur la taupinière. Marie-José Venant s'assied tout raide comme il convient à une reine et aussi pour ménager le maintien de sa couronne (*L'Opoponax* 58).

Inès et Denise Joubert font de grands gestes dans le champ. Quand on approche elles disent que Marie-José Venant est morte (*L'Opoponax* 60-61).

The death of Marie-José Venant is strongly symbolic, in that the two portions of her hyphenated name represents the parents of Jesus Christ, Mary and Joseph. Through the fusion of these two component entities in a single proper name, Marie-José herself thus embodies both the masculine and feminine elements associated with the lineage of Christ and can be seen thus as the product of her moniker, Christ herself. Through the double-entendre of the present participle of the verb "venir," the last name augurs a coming or arrival. Considering the implication of two portions of the name together, "Jesus Christ coming," this particular appellation symbolically transfers to Marie-José Venant the impending role of soon-to-be redeemer of humankind, a girl Jesus. However, Marie-José Venant is dead.

Since Wittig symbolically emasculates and eliminates a feminine representation of the Christ figure, she succeeds in driving the Christian ethic completely from her text. Since a Jesus figure is dead, the destruction of this character undermines the very foundation of Christianity itself. At the very least, the Jesus as savior construct is completely impure and imperfect for women because of its protracted association with the male hegemony throughout history; the icon cannot even be redeemed even when feminized. In accordance with this theme, Wittig begins to cast aspersions on the validity of Christianity as an institution for women at a very early point in the novel:

On demande à ma sœur, où il est ton mari. Elle dit là-haut avec le doigt vers le haut. On regarde le ciel. On ne voit rien. On dit à ma sœur, on ne le voit pas ton mari. Ma sœur ne veut pas répondre. Quand on insiste elle dit que ça ne l'étonne pas vraiment. Il y a trop de nuages (*L'Opoponax* 13-14).

This inadequate response to the ponderings of a young girl suggests that Christianity is in truth a nihilistic venture, and the eventual elimination of the Christ figure in *L'Opoponax* confirms these early ruminations. However, before discussing this complete *renversement* of belief systems in *L'Opoponax*, it is first necessary to examine another facet of myth representation in the text that is demolished as a compliment to the razing of Christianity. The nuns in the school attempt to inculcate woman's inferiority into the girls through the creation of elaborate legends:

Mademoiselle s'oppose à ce que Catherine Legrand aille seule dans la forêt la nuit. Catherine Legrand dit, j'irai avec Reine Dieu, on connaît le chemin... Mademoiselle dit qu'il y a un fantôme dans la forêt, que c'est complètement idiot d'y aller maintenant parce qu'il est là-bas la nuit et que si Reine Dieu et Catherine Legrand y vont elles vont mourir... (Mademoiselle) dit que c'est un mort qui sort de sa tombe...qu'il attend les gens pour leur sucer le sang à la gorge. [...] Elle dit qu'un monsieur qu'elle connaît l'a vu.

Mais alors le fantôme ne l'a pas sucé à la gorge? Non, il a eu le temps de se sauver parce que c'est un homme et qu'il n'a pas perdu son sang-froid (*L'Opoponax* 90-91).

In this excerpt, the nun attempts to control the behavior of Reine Dieu and Catherine Legrand to ensure that the little girls do not violate the axioms of standard propriety, preaching indirectly that it is improper for girls to go out at night by themselves. This edict robs the girls of autonomy and avows that there is a fundamental gender-related weakness that makes such ventures dangerous for girls. However, the nun also affirms that there is some inherent property that men possess that allows them to circumvent the perils of the forest: "il a eu le temps de se sauver parce que c'est un homme." The nun disallows and invalidates the girls' justifications for the expedition by inventing violent myths grounded in alterity. This particular passage delineates a hierarchy of power in which women occupy the lowest place on the echelon: men have ascendancy over the supernatural; the supernatural in turn dominates women. It is this ordering that Wittig works to invert in *L'Opoponax*, destroying the ancient power paradigm by which men and myths (those of the Christian religion) have subjugated women throughout history, and thus the task of her protagonists will be "to demythify and explode illusion perpetuated by authority" (Duffy 298). With the foundation of Christianity thus annihilated and the absolute power of men thus made suspect, Wittig begins implementing an elaborate system of women's myths in her novel that replace these institutions and inculcate feminist precepts.

Since Wittig's aim is to mold her girl protagonists into warriors, she begins the process of myth *renversement* by addressing the predominance of male warrior figures in history and literature. Since time monumentalizes battle legends of old and imbues tales of conquest with mythic proportions, Wittig ensures that the education of Catherine Legrand and her circle of friends includes exposure to a legend in which women are prominent, *La Chanson de Guillaume d'Orange*:

Catherine Legrand essaie de dessiner Guibourc avec le haubert le heaume et l'épée en se demandant s'il faut faire sortir la robe au bas du haubert pour montrer que c'est une dame. [...] Ma mère de l'enfant Jésus demande à Marielle Balland de résumer le passage qu'on vient de lire. [...] Marielle Balland dit comment Guibourc et les dames d'Orange ont défendu la ville contre les Sarrasins, lassus fu grans et ruste la mellée les dames ont mainte piere jetée maint Sarrasin ont la teste quassée ki gisent mort sovain geule baée. Orange n'est pas prise [...] Guilbourc repousse le heaume qui lui tombe sur les yeux (*L'Opoponax* 154-55).

In this passage, Wittig disempowers the myth of male superiority in battle by introducing Catherine Legrand to a historical instance in which women emerge from gender conflict as the vanquishers. Furthermore, by bolstering her own account of battle with excerpts from medieval texts, Wittig also affirms the historical existence of women warriors in literature. This dual procedure subverts the hegemonic representation of warriors as an exclusively male sect and allows the young girls to deify and venerate women warrior figures from antiquity instead of men. This knowledge will serve as the foundation for legend, a nascent war mythology for women. By being able to invoke the memory of Guibourc and others in combat, the girls will develop a collective understanding of a women's battle ethic and spirit that transcends history.

Wittig's training for her girl warriors also requires the recounting of legend in order to make them accustomed to the spectacle of war itself and to all the accompanying scenes of turmoil and gore that accompany combat. By incorporating the graphic



violence of Guibourc's legendary battles into the girls' history lessons, Wittig affirms the prowess of women in conflict and toughens her protagonists to the horrors of bloodshed:

On voit Ermengart à cheval toute encombrée du haubert du heaume de l'écu de l'épée de la lance on se demande comment elle tient sur le cheval on voit comment c'est Azincourt avec tout ça des chevaux sur le dos, des tibias dans des bandelettes d'acier, des grandes carcasses d'hommes, des armures cassées avec des membres dans tous les sens avec les écus les lances et les épées, on voit des armées en marche des cavaliers rigides et quand les casques sont retirés les cheveux se déroulent d'un seul coup c'est Guibourc c'est Ermengart...(L'*Opoponax* 162-63).

One reading of this education in warfare is that the characters ultimately become “schoolgirls who resist social feminization to discover their sexuality and their love for each other” (Lindsay 49), made emblematic by Valérie Borge's love gift of three bullets to Catherine Legrand (Ostrovsky 117). This interpretation treats *L'Opoponax* as a self-contained microcosm in which the purpose of battle is to raze heterosexist and sexist institutions to create a social tabula rasa on which Catherine Legrand can express her budding lesbian feelings for Valérie Borge. Another complementary reading is that if Wittig's works do constitute a series of thematic evolutions towards an ideal radical feminism, then the instruction the girls receive in warcraft can also be read as a segue into the full-fledged gender warfare that occurs in her next work, *Les Guérillères*. In accordance with this aim, Wittig shows through metaphor that her protagonists are the full equals of men in battle in *L'Opoponax*. The girls prove through a theater game that they can take the place of the male warrior figures in one of history's most famous war epics:

...c'est l'arrivée d'Ulysse à Ithaque. On dit que Catherine Legrand fait le lecteur, que Valérie Borge est Pénélope qu'Ulysse est une fille d'une grande classe Frédérique Darse dont on admire la stature haute les épaules la tête léonine. On dit qu'Eumée est fait par Gabrielle Murteau, que Suzanne Prat Nathalie Deleu Anne Gerlier sont des prétendants. On dit que Télémaque est Paule Falou la fille qui lit Virgile à livre ouvert (*L'Opoponax* 265).

It is clear in this passage that Wittig is again rewriting mythology, this time inverting the gender of certain epic figures by choosing girls to represent them rather than emphasizing the importance of archetypal female warriors as she had done previously. In this homosocial representation of the *Odyssey*, the fact that two girls can portray the hypermasculine roles of Ulysses and Telemachus indicates that a transitive relationship has been established for the epic hero/heroine. Either sex is capable of being warriors, and this particular reassignment of gender in the text indicates that a parity of military potential has been achieved.

Having conferred to her girl protagonists knowledge about death, experience in war games, instruction in the use of weapons, knowledge of male enemies and thorough awareness of their tactics, a detailed understanding of the reasons for which war is being waged, an imperviousness to the dehumanizing conventions of sexism, a set of legends that affirms women's prowess in battle, and psychological tenacity in the midst of bloodshed, Wittig thus unleashes her warrior girls, fully prepared for combat, to battle gender inequities and to destroy heterosexist hegemony.

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