

I, Mother: Strategies of (Auto) representation of Maternity in Contemporary Catalan Theatre

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Abstract

This article explores a set of plays written by women that premiered on Catalan stages over the last few years, which address maternity as an explicit theme from a critical perspective. The corpus presented is symptomatic of the effects that the progressive inclusion of women in creative roles and the impact of feminism have had on Catalan theatre, and is a potentially destabilising factor in the generally marked distribution between creation and reproduction. The analysis explores how, through texts and paratexts, the plays reflect both the desire to transfer maternity to the stage and the negotiation with a potentially (de)legitimising reception for reasons of gender and theatrical context.

The following plays are analysed: *Llibert* (2013) by Gemma Brió, *Santa nit, una història de Nadal* (2014) by Cristina Genebat, *Conillet* (2015) by Marta Galán, *Fes-me una perduda* (2017) by Mercè Sarrias, *La noia de la làmpada* (2017) by Marta Aran, *Converses amb el meu úter i altres interlocutors* (2019) by Núria Planes Llull and, particularly in depth, *Una gossa en un descampat* (2018) by Clàudia Cedó.

Keywords: catalan theatre, maternity, autorepresentation, autobiography, women playwrights, feminisms, care, perinatal death, Clàudia Cedó

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Since the 1990s, Catalan theatre has undergone a fundamental demographic transformation with the progressive rise in female playwrights and directors (Ragué Arias, 1996, 2000). This is a change that involves a dual break with the role of women as reproducers: firstly, because it is part of the progressive inclusion of women in the labour market from the 1980s, which is beginning to reverse female confinement to the domestic sphere and reproductive activity (Millán Vázquez de la Torre et al., 2015). And, secondly, because in the theatre industry women have been tolerated above all as actresses and, therefore, have occupied a role of *reproducing* alien discourses, mostly male. Both in the social and theatrical spheres, the movement towards *productive* positions opposes the historical identification of the female gender with the reproductive function and, in turn, with what is corporeal and animal, which has made it possible to deny women's capacity to create intellectual and artistic discourses and, consequently, to become subjects with a public voice (Beard, 2017).

Within this framework, and also taking into account the invisibility that maternity as an experience has suffered in cultural representation (Rich, 1995), I consider the appearance, in the last decade, of a growing group of plays by women that explicitly address maternity as a subject to be significant. These are pieces that eschew the hegemonic narrative that has conceived women as producers of life in an equation that puts them all on the level of the restrictive and homogenising figure of the Mother (Lozano Estivalis, 2006). On the one hand, all the plays share the (auto)representational character, since they translate experiences in many autobiographical cases and prioritise the first person narrative or the role of women and mothers, unlike what has been done by traditional narratives (Lozano Estivalis, 2006).¹ And, on the other, they address different aspects denigrated or made invisible by the dominant narrative of maternity:

1. I have chosen not to use the term 'autofiction' as it does not seem functional to embrace the wide range of procedures that the selected plays carry out in relation to autobiographical inspiration, and which range from non-fiction to fiction without autobiographical paratexts, including fictional doubles.

Aspects such as female rejection of maternity, infertility, menopause, maternal negligence in the care of children or the very image of the mother as a sexed being and with individual desires are systematically removed from the dominant representation of maternity or are categorised negatively in a constant that is maintained throughout the centuries (Lozano Estivalis, 2006: 107).

Maternity continues to be a major social issue due to the much greater impact it still has on women's lives, in aspects ranging from social expectations about parenting to the effective distribution of tasks, and including the possibility of suffering obstetric violence or penalisation in the labour market (Ajenjo Cosp et al., 2011; Arciniega Cáceres, 2019; Vallespín, 2018). The field of theatre is not excluded from this reality, because among other reasons women becoming mothers has a high professional cost, given the threat it poses to the continuity of their presence on the stage (Gázquez, 2015; Juanico, 2018). The corpus analysed in this article critically brings the reproductive task socially attributed to women into the public agora of theatre, and in so doing it contributes to the deconstruction between the personal and the political inherent in all feminist activity (Spivak, 1996). As we will see, the procedure shows the tensions created by crossing this line, especially when it comes to explicitly (auto)representative narratives.

Theatrical (Auto)representation of Maternity and Its Context

As Dee Heddon explains, the theatrical expression of autobiographical content by women is historically linked to the feminist movement and, more specifically, to the maxim that epitomises the postulates of the Second Wave: “the personal is political”. In the context in which the feminist autobiographical performance was born, the theatrical expression of autobiographical content had a great political charge, among other reasons because “women were revealing previously hidden or silenced female experiences” (Heddon, 2006: 134). Half a century later, the use of the same format by commercial comedy and the proliferation of personal narratives on social media do not allow us to affirm that the autobiographical performance has the same political dimension as then.² In addition, in Catalan – and European – theatre, the writings on the self have proliferated since the 1990s and still do so today (Gázquez, 2015; Gomila, 2021).

Thus, on the one hand, it is not accurate to infer a political potential from the use of any material of a personal nature, since, as Gerry Harris points out, “not all of the personal is political in exactly the same way and to the same effect” (1999: 167). On the other hand, it is worth remembering the historical importance of feminisms in the introduction of autobiographical narratives to the stage, since “it is easy to forget, in the midst of the overwhelming deployment of the seemingly ‘personal experience’ in contemporary mass media, that prior to the feminist movement of the 1970s the ‘personal’ remained firmly private” (Heddon, 2006: 134). This is why, in the analysis of the theatrical

2. As an example, the doctoral thesis of Ricard Gázquez (2015) studies the staging of the self by female performers, most of whom, in the context of the early 21st century, distanced themselves from feminist heritage.

treatment of the maternal experience, we must take into account the public assessment of feminisms, which in recent Catalan theatre can be divided into two major periods: firstly, a period marked by a post-feminist climate — that is, which considers that feminism has served its goals and is therefore a defunct movement (Tasker and Negra, 2007) — that spans from the 1990s to the early 2010s. Secondly, a period of the emergence of feminist plays and demands that began around 2016 (Nicolau Jiménez, 2021a).

At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of the non-determining, yet decisive, role played by gender of authorship in the treatment of the maternal experience. That the exceptions to the hegemonic depiction of maternity in the Catalan theatrical tradition come from female writers — I am thinking of cases like *La Infanticida* by Caterina Albert or *L'huracà* by Carme Montoriol — reaffirms this, as does the comparison of theatre with other spheres of contemporary Catalan culture that experienced a progressive normalisation of female authorship in previous decades. In the literary field, for example, since the 1970s we find writers such as Montserrat Roig, Maria-Mercè Marçal, Carme Riera, Isabel-Clara Simó and Maria-Antònia Oliver, who address issues that would take decades to appear in the theatrical field. Among others, these writers portray the social conditions that determine maternity, deal with miscarriages and gestational losses, and address doubts about whether or not to have children, as well as ambiguous feelings towards offspring.³

Thus, the corpus I present constitutes a significant phenomenon as a whole, both in number and in terms of shared characteristics, while the political power of each of the pieces, as we will see, is heterogeneous and depends on multiple intersecting factors, among which the (potential) reception of the plays occupies more than a negligible role. This reception depends, within the framework of the theatrical field, on the different political involvements of the various theatrical spaces and languages. Not because certain languages intrinsically have more political power than others, but because the audience's horizon of expectations is not the same when faced with a classical piece or a post-dramatic monologue, or in the Teatre Lliure, La Villarroel or the Antic Teatre. In terms of gender, on the other hand, the plays studied intersect several factors that can act as delegitimisers: female authorship, which has also been looked down upon especially when dealing with intimate or private issues; and depicting an activity, that of maternity, subjected to all kinds of social judgments.

Firstly, as Joanna Russ's classic study shows, the quality of plays with autobiographical content is subject to a double standard that has tended to interpret plays by women as confessional, inadequate and of minor artistic value, given the undervaluation of the female experience in the social sphere. For this reason, plays that thematicise issues closely linked to female physiology and experience, such as maternity, run the risk of provoking a reception that considers "that what has been written is *not art* [...]" and that such

3. In this respect, it is significant that some unusual visions of the maternal experience that appeared in the 1990s were written by women: for example, in *Al tren* (1995) by Mercè Sarriàs, the protagonist is a woman who has just abandoned her role as a wife and mother of five children. Among others, this production has been analysed by Nichols (2011) and Mira (2022).

writing is *shameful and too personal*" (2018: 29). Thus, it is not surprising that, in theatre, critics have observed the tendency of women playwrights to avoid themes strongly marked as feminine or to be explicitly linked to feminisms, as a strategy to avoid a delegitimising reception – both in the Anglo-Saxon (Goodman, 1993; Aston and Harris, 2006; Aston, 2010) and Catalan spheres (Ragué Arias, 2013, 1998; Garbayo Maeztu, 2017; Madariaga, 2019).

Secondly, the prevalence of the hegemonic account of maternity implies that all behaviours that deviate from it are received by a social judgment from spheres such as contemporary manuals on parenting, the media (Hays, 1996; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998), personal environments or mothers themselves, who tend to blame themselves for their children's limitations or shortcomings (Warner, 2005). Therefore, the depiction of one's maternal experience or activity implies a substantial risk of receiving negative judgments, especially when dealing with experiences that escape the dominant narrative. As Lena Šimić points out, the depiction of one's maternal experience or activity in stage discourses exposes the mothers/creators "to criticism and to being condoned or judged in their private roles as (m)others" (2018: 412).

All the factors mentioned concur in a negotiation of the plays – implicit or explicit, present in the pieces or paratexts that accompany them – with a potentially (de)legitimising reception. For this reason, they all testify to a desire to *speak about* the experience of maternity, to bring it to the stage in a way that was infrequent and scarce until a few years ago, and at the same time they reveal a tension between explaining and not explaining; that is to say, between the clarification and ambiguity of both the personal nature of the material and perspectives that depart from hegemonic narratives. The plays studied destabilise the producer/reproducer opposition by bringing the (private) experience of maternity into the (public) realm of the stage: in so doing, they encounter taboos, norms and expectations that vary according to the different theatrical and gender contexts and the level of expectations that derives from them. Considering these variations will help us keep in mind that the political potential of theatre is not distributed homogeneously and will allow us to elucidate, to borrow the words of Gerry Harris, which instances of the personal are political, in what way and with what effects.

The plays I examine here are those that seem to me to most clearly make up this group: *Llibert* (2013) by Gemma Brió, *Santa nit, una història de Nadal* (2014) by Cristina Genebat, *Conillet* (2015) by Marta Galán, *Fes-me una perduda* (2017) by Mercè Sarrias, *La noia de la làmpada* (2017) by Marta Aran, *Una gossa en un descampat* (2018) by Clàudia Cedó and *Converses amb el meu úter i altres interlocutors* (2019) by Núria Planes Lull.⁴ The analysis is divided into a first section on an overall vision, and a second section about *Una gossa en un descampat*, a play that provides a particularly significant case study.

4. The list could be expanded to other plays, such as *ESTIGMES* (2019) by Concha Milla (see Nicolau Jiménez, 2023), *Madres, tetas y nanas* (2009), *Els diners, el desig, els drets* (2019) and *Accions de resistència* (2019) by Marta Galán, *Frankenstein* (2019) by Clàudia Cedó (within the cycle "Clàssics desgenerats"), *A les set em llevo* (not performed) by Mercè Sarrias, *Mujer embarazada con hoja en blanco* (2010) by Constanza Brnčić, *Moviments polítics* (2012) by Sònia Gómez, as well as others that critically explore maternity without putting it at the centre: *Només sexe* (2008) by Daniela Feixas, *Andrea Pixelada* (2019) by Cristina Clemente or *Amor mundi* (2019) by Victoria Szpunberg.

Theatrical Strategies of (Auto)representation of Maternity

Llibert (2013), by Gemma Brió, is perhaps the first contemporary Catalan play that puts maternity at the centre and at the same time achieves notable repercussion. With this play, the actress makes the leap to authorship with by her partner, Norbert Martínez, as director. Both seek to explain the experience of the death of their child who, due to complications in pregnancy, would have been thrown into a life marked by severe cerebral palsy and whose parents, together with the medical team, decided to let him die. The play opened in 2013 at the Teatre Almeria and was therefore produced in a post-feminist context: the experience is not approached from an explicitly feminist viewpoint, while in the text and paratexts there is an explicit call of a political nature for quality public healthcare. On the other hand, the play has a non-textual element that is unusual and therefore significant in this context: an all-female cast, comprising Brió, who plays the lead role; a friend — the actress Tàtels Pérez — and a rock singer and guitarist — Mar Orfila, aka Mürfila.

The triad of female characters — which becomes much more common in later years — seems to embody an emphasis on the female perspective and, at the same time, translates the playwright's experience into a dialogue that, although populated by multiple characters, is led by two female voices, Ada and Etna. The play, therefore, does not choose to focus on the exchange between the heterosexual couple of *Llibert*'s parents — as a realistic narrative could have done — but revolves around a conversation closer to what has been established as female sociability: as if, in some way, this conversation was more suited to translating the lived experience. This is why Ada designates Etna as “the one who has always been by my side and without whom my words would not come out” (Brió, 2018). As this description points out, the possibility of coming to *speak* about the lived experience is a crucial aspect of the play, since it addresses a deeply taboo issue, which brings out feelings of guilt — “Bad mother! Any mother should be happy that her child lived!!!” (Ibid.: 62) — and it is at the limit of what can be expressed socially: “I have finally found a way to express it... an ethical way... I have found the social expression of wanting my son to die” (Ibid.: 52). In fact, the cultural reference that goes through the characters' minds to encrypt the situation they live in is clearly negative: “Vicent, I'm Medea... I could kill him right now. [...] Yes, I would do it too...” (Ibid.: 66). And, although the protagonist's performance is never presented as aberrant with respect to the normative model of maternity, since her actions are always guided by compassion, from the very beginning she departs from the image of the woman sacrificed at all costs when she remembers the mothers with children with cerebral palsy that she knows and makes it very clear that she does not want to be like them.

The autobiographical inspiration of the experience depicted is clear in the various promotional appearances of Brió and Martínez, as well as in the paratexts of the publication. As for the production, intimate and with the audience close to the actresses, the fact that the playwright plays the protagonist lends a certain ambiguity with respect to the degree of fictionality

of the narrative, generating the impression of a confessional story told in the first person. This ambiguity contrasts with the statements of Brió and Martínez, who always separate the theatrical creation from the more intimate and personal experience of the events. Questioned by the journalist Júlia Bertran about the possible therapeutic effects of the play, both respond with a sharp negative and completely disassociate the artistic process from that of personal improvement (Brió and Martínez, 2014a), something they also do in TV3's *Els matins* (Brió and Martínez, 2014b). Tàtels Pérez makes a similar distinction between the spheres, and only Mar Orfila acknowledges: “the first time we created the last scene was very emotional because we all broke down a lot” (Brió and Martínez, 2014a). In the context of the creation of the play, these statements are not banal: the discourse of Brió, Martínez and Pérez could seek to avoid a reading of the piece that would delegitimise it due to its confessional or overly personal nature (Russ, 2018), as well as the identification with the emotional, traditionally considered typical of women and which has been used to argue their inability to reason (Ahmed, 2014).

Santa nit. Una història de Nadal, by Cristina Genebat, premiered a year after *Llibert* and is similar to it in more ways than one: like Brió, Genebat makes the leap to writing with this play – in fact, it is the only play written entirely by the actress and translator – and, like the author of *Llibert*, Genebat plays the protagonist. Produced by Bitò Produccions and La Brutal, *Santa nit...* could be seen at Christmas 2014 at Club Capitol, and is therefore also a play prior to the outbreak of the feminisms that began around 2016. Another feature of the play helps explain its moderate demands: it is a production performed in a commercial theatre that does not break with the primary goal of entertainment characteristic of this genre. The play is presented as a contemporary re-writing of *Els pastorets* by Josep Maria Folch i Torres and has a fluid narrative with plenty of humorous touches. It is in this framework that two significant elements are inserted: on the one hand, a reinterpretation of the birth of Jesus – with, as the most prominent feature, the contemporary Mary of Genebat giving birth to a girl – and, on the other, a critique of obstetric violence.

Indeed, the journey that Maria and her partner go through to give birth in a hospital on the night of 25 December, when all the staff would like to have a party, allows criticism of the unnecessary use of caesarean sections to fit the rhythm of childbirth around the working hours of health staff, as well as the lack of respect for women's decisions and the verbal abuse they may suffer from professionals. The scene in which Maria, screaming and angry, makes the decision to leave the hospital to give birth at home captures the core of the play's approach: “Aren't you celebrating a fucking birth? Isn't it Christmas? Isn't Christmas about birth” (Genebat, 2014). Asked out of anger, this rhetorical question also points to the distance between a religious and cultural tradition that revolves around a birth and the lack of visibility of the female experience of childbirth: unlike Genebat's play, in the piece by Folch and Torres and in the biblical texts the part of Mary is omitted.⁵

5. Only two of the Gospels speak explicitly about the birth of Jesus: Matthew and Luke. Luke mentions the moment of the birth, without going into specifics: “While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no

However, this plot is one more among the various subplots that make up the story, which are not linked to this complaint and avoid explicit tones of denunciation. Maria's anger is also tempered by the fact that both she and Josep are laughable characters and, although the birth ends up being natural as she wished, it is resolved in an outlandish way. These nuances are echoed in the relative silence that emanates from the paratexts about the question: the possible autobiographical or autorepresentative aspect of the play is not made explicit at any point and, in the synopsis, the allusion to the story "of a mother who gives birth and who wants to do so with dignity" (unknown author, 2014) is mixed with many other facets of the play. Thus, on the one hand, we can infer the (auto)representative dimension of the play from the fact that it is Genebat's only written piece, as if the experience of maternity had generated a desire to *speak*, to transfer a lived experience to the stage. On the other, this desire to *speak* clashes with a possible negative reception, since women's anger has been interpreted as an indicator of the low reliability of female or feminist demands, following the belief that emotions prevent proper use of reason (Ahmed, 2014). That is why the light tone of the play and the lack of explicitness of the possible autobiographical nature can be understood as a way not only of containing the protagonist's anger but also of protecting her legitimacy, while distancing the character from the authorial figure, distancing possible interpretations of the play as confessional or campaigning. *Santa nit*, then, is a case of interest because of the tension it testifies to in the — pioneering — representation of obstetric violence and the relative exceptionality of feminist demands within the framework of so-called commercial theatre (Nicolau Jiménez, 2021b).⁶

Premiered at the Festival Temporada Alta a year after Genebat's play, *Conillet*, by Marta Galán, had an unprecedented impact on the director's career, largely linked to the actress chosen to perform the monologue, the popular Clara Segura. The play arose from the request, by Marc Martínez, to direct a text by Galán written in 2006: when Galán received it, she had become a mother — an event that had kept her away from the stage since 2011 — and she agreed on the condition of rewriting it. Thus, Galán transformed a piece with existential tones into a monologue focused on criticising the social conditions that make maternity an exhausting experience. Although the play does not contain any autobiographical markers, when questioned on this point Galán answers: "This woman is me, of course, [...] and then she says all this. She is able to say all this."⁷ So it is a play that also emerges from

guest room available for them" (Luke. 2:6-7, *New International Version*). Matthew comments on the specifics of Jesus' conception and then moves on to the visit of the Kings, mentioning only in passing the birth of Mary's son, but not the circumstances. In the text by Josep Maria Folch i Torres, the birth does not appear on stage, and the shepherds are reunited with the Holy Family once the baby Jesus has already been born. The most direct mention of the birth is made by the archangel Gabriel when he announces the news to the shepherds who are the protagonists of the play.

6. The limited number of times this subject has been dealt with on Catalan stages — with specific exceptions such *Part* (2021) by Tanit Plana — can be explained by the still disputed and recent recognition of obstetric violence on the social level. As an example, the amendment of Act 5/2008, on the right of women to eradicate gender-based violence, which it includes among types of violence in the section "Obstetric violence and violation of sexual and reproductive rights", is Act 17/2020, which was processed in 2019 and passed on 22 December 2020.

7. Both this and the following statement come from the unpublished interview conducted with Marta Galán on 25 May 2017.

the desire to *speak* created by maternity — and that in the case of Galán can be found in other plays, such as *La bellesa*, *Accions de resistència* or *Els diners, el desig, els drets*.

This desire to speak finds a limit in Martínez's adaptation of the text, which unifies and lends coherence to Galán's text, moving it away from post-dramatic theatre and bringing it closer to a conventional monologue — and therefore with greater possibilities of commercial success. At the same time, the adaptation also cuts passages in which, for example, the protagonist talks about the desire to have sexual relations with many different men and criticises the monogamous model that limits relationships and raising children to a single person.⁸ In general terms, Martínez's version eliminates the aspects more distanced from the hegemonic representation of maternity and lowers the deconstructive dimension of the text, as Galán points out: "Marc [...] told me: 'no, this woman cannot leave'. I think that he needed to pay tribute to his mother [...] I think that he was also interested in this more idealised figure, this more almighty female profile, and clearly, with some fragments of the text I was questioning a little."

On the one hand, the stage version maintains what is perhaps the most transgressive idea of the play, abandoning maternal responsibility. Indeed, at the climax of the play the protagonist threatens to renounce all the responsibilities acquired if social structures are not provided to support the work of care, in an openly political proposal that draws from sources such as Silvia Federici (2012) and Jean Baudrillard (1976). On the other hand, in the production this climax is followed by Clara Segura's final meeting with the audience, when she goes out to have a lentil stew in allusion to her own work as a cook. The action recalls the festive endings of other plays by Galán but, placed at the end of *Conillet*, it seems to diminish the radical and confrontational nature of the protagonist's decision to stop providing care. In short, the play is one of the most explicit cases of the fury and weariness of mothers in contemporary Catalan theatre, with passages such as the long list of care tasks that the protagonist performs every day, but its political dimension is noticeably diminished in Martínez's adaptation. It is also worth noting that Galán's authorship is not put to the fore in the promotion of the play, in favour of the more media-oriented Segura and Martínez, which at the same time seems to disassociate, in the eyes of public opinion, the desire to express the maternal fatigue and fury of the female authorship of the play.

Conillet shares with *Fes-me una perduda* by Mercè Sarrias, which was performed in 2017 at the Teatre Eòlia, the approach to the practical and emotional difficulty of combining maternity with other aspects of life in a context of lack of time and overload of responsibilities. In the form of a musical comedy, Sarrias' play shares with Galán's the desire to give a priority space to the mother's subjectivity, materialised in the three-faceted multiplication of her self. This split (Nicolau Jiménez, 2021a) is presented as a critique of

8. You can download the text that Galán wrote for Martínez from the playwright's own website: <http://www.marta-galan.com>. For a more extensive consideration of the text, see Nicolau Jiménez (2017).

the myth of the superwoman, since the splitting of the protagonist has occurred due to the tension between the maternal, work and female aspects she desires — Mònica Glaenzel, Eli Iranzo and Maria Pau Pigem, respectively. Thus, the play seems to pick up the concept of double work for women who hold down a paid job in addition to performing care tasks at home (Hochschild and Machung, 1989), while underlining that the desire to fulfil oneself on multiple levels is incompatible with the requirements of the categories of woman and mother.

As in *Llibert*, the autobiographical element does not appear in the fiction but is explained in the paratexts, in this case by Sarrias herself in a video released on a promotional Facebook page. According to the playwright, the piece seeks to reflect the immense workload of many mothers, based on real experiences: “This play is like a kind of self-therapy. It is a collective biography after many years of going to the park a lot, of picking up children at school [...]. They are all anecdotes and stories that have happened to me or that have happened around me” (Sarrias, 2017b). Unlike Brió’s and Martínez’s comments, this 2017 statement does not deny the reparative potential — on the emotional and political side — of moving an experience that is not socially valued into the public agora that is the stage. The more advantageous context for feminist demands may have fostered not only this comment, but also the programming of the play itself, since it is from 2014 and was not performed in Catalonia until 2017.

Premiered the same year as *Fes-me una perduda* at the Sala Flyhard, *La noia de la làmpada* by Marta Aran shares with Sarrias’ play the desire to condense multiple testimonies into a single fictional plot. Indeed, in order to write about unwanted maternity, Aran “drew on interviews with pregnant women” who provided her with some keys to the plot, such as the absolute rest that some high-risk pregnancies require, the desire of losing a child in order not to miss an important job opportunity or the case of a woman who during maternity leave was replaced by her partner at work (Ginart, 2017). In this respect, the play does not start from an autorepresentative will, although it originally arose from a personal questioning of maternity by the playwright, faced with the realisation that society assumes the sacrificing of work by women to be mothers as natural and desirable, and that in the case of actresses it is particularly high (Aran, 2017b).

Aran’s fiction, with melodramatic tones, addresses the penalisation of maternity in the labour market through the story of Alba — Lara Díez —, an art gallery owner who, at a decisive stage in her own career, decides to go ahead with a pregnancy to meet the demands of her partner and, when she returns to work, discovers that he has usurped her place in the gallery (Aran, 2017a). Once she has given birth, therefore, she chooses to leave, entrusting the new-born son to her sister, in an ambiguous ending that makes it possible to imagine that Alba takes her own life, after seeing all the paths that she was excited about cut off, or that she is going to study abroad, as she had planned to do before she got pregnant. This ending, very much inspired by Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (personal conversation with the playwright, 07/10/2020), raises a very taboo issue, that of maternal abandonment (Gómez

Urzaiz, 2022). Despite the ambiguity of the approach, this is more explicit than *Conillet*'s, where the possibility of renunciation is raised only poetically. The fundamental difference between the two plays is, of course, that maternity in *Conillet* is desired, although the conditions of invisibility and neglect of care by society make it difficult to bear.

Aran's implicit questioning of maternity is thematicised in the monologue *Converses amb el meu úter i altres interlocutors* (2019) by Núria Planes Lull, a piece of "autodocumentary theatre" (unknown author, 2019) that explores the doubts of the creator and actress about whether to be a mother or not, all the while making the desire for autorepresentation explicit from the beginning. Throughout the piece, elements such as her mother's opinions on maternity – heard in voice-over – highlight the pressure exerted by the social discourse, which is supposedly based on free choice and in reality leads women to choose a normative life: "You can't wait forever. You have to make the decision. I think you would enjoy it. If you don't have it, you won't know" (Planes Lull, 2019, 26:54). This social pressure is contrasted, among others, with the dark humour of a song that the protagonist imagines, thus answering the question "why don't you have children":

When they ask me: why don't you have children? I would love to tell them that nothing would make me happier, that I've been trying for a while [...] that I'm going to the psychologist and that I'm spending all my savings on in vitro fertilisation [...] that I've already had three miscarriages [...] that I had a son and he died [...] (Planes Lull, 2019, 38:47).

The increasingly extreme escalation of responses suggests that, for some people, it is preferable to imagine that women pursue maternity at all costs before acknowledging that, for some, maternity may be an undesirable choice. The fact that *Converses amb el meu úter* is the first play that raises the question of maternity in a central way seems to confirm that, in a certain sense, the lack of maternal desire remains unspeakable, and perhaps it is not entirely coincidental that this discourse appears for the first time in an fringe venue such as the Antic Teatre. The leaflet handed out to the audience also underlines that this is not an individual matter, since it is closely related to the social treatment of care, as stated in the "MANIFIESTO DE LAS FUTURAS MADRES EN POTENCIA" (Planes Lull, 2019b). In a dilemma similar to the strike threatened by the protagonist of *Conillet*, the manifesto states that, if a national conciliation plan is not established that changes the negative experience described by the majority of mothers today, potential future mothers may not have children.

In short, the plays analysed critically thematicise different facets of maternity, testify to a desire – heterogeneous and complex – to represent the maternal experience on stage, and reveal a negotiation with a potentially delegitimising reception that varies depending on the theatrical and historical context. They are plays that exemplify the political potential of (auto)representation of maternity, with multiple variants, on stage as shown by the allusions that many of them make to broader groups and structural problems.

Thus, the mother in *Conillet*, who has no name, seems to embody many other mothers in her proposed strike, and becomes a threat to the foundations of society: “It is very dangerous for me to stop. / IT’S THE END OF THE WORLD. / THE END OF OUR WORLD” (Galán and Martínez, 2015: n.p.); and the protagonists of *Fes-me una perduda* conclude their adventure like this: “And this is where the story ends / of a woman who is three / but could be all / fighting in a cruel world” (Sarrias, 2017a: 45). In the same vein, *Santa nit* explores the obstetric violence that women suffer through the figure of Maria, representative of all women in Christian culture; and *Converses amb el meu úter*, through the manifesto, conveys the problem of the protagonist to an entire generation. As we will see, *Una gossa en un descampat* also points to a broad representativeness and to the political dimension involved in transferring the experience of perinatal death to the public space of the stage.

A Case Study: *Una gossa en un descampat* by Clàudia Cedó

Una gossa en un descampat, by Clàudia Cedó, is a case study that encourages detailed attention to the phenomenon I describe here, due to its resignification and assessment of an invisible issue such as perinatal death, the negotiation with the reception is made clear by the paratexts and its repercussion, closely linked to the context of the premiere. The piece is paradigmatic of a desire to write plays around one’s own maternal experience that call for and legitimise the inclusion of certain experiences in the theatrical canon, in a way that in itself is a renewal of the Catalan theatrical imaginary.

The story of the creation of *Una gossa en un descampat* is the story of an unforeseen event that becomes a driving force for writing: Clàudia Cedó, resident playwright at the Sala Beckett during the 2017-2018 season, considers writing about another issue when, at the start of the season, she suffers the perinatal death of what should have been her first child. This is how she explains it in the play’s promotional video: “In September, I was five months pregnant, and I lost him; then, in those circumstances, I spoke to the Sala Beckett and asked [...] can I write about this?” (Cedó and Belbel, 2018). What gives rise to the desire to write in Cedó is, therefore, not the expected unfolding of events – what is described by the hegemonic narrative of maternity – but its truncation. In other words, the helplessness that comes with encountering an experience for which there is no guide because it is not part of cultural representation:

And I was very afraid, and I think that if I had read something about it, or seen a film, or a play on this subject, then it would have been something else. And that’s why I also think we should talk about it, shouldn’t we? Because it’s a taboo, it doesn’t seem to happen, or it doesn’t happen much, and it happens more than we think [...], maybe it’s a more feminine issue [...] I don’t know, it seems to have been rendered a little invisible, doesn’t it? (Cedó and Belbel, 2018).

As or more significant than this comment is the very fact that it is made clear at the outset that the play is based on an autobiographical, and very

recent, inspiration,. This is expressed not only in the play's promotional video but in the various appearances of the playwright in the media, and resembles that of the creators of *Llibert* in terms of the recognition of the autorepresentative origin of the story. It is dissimilar, however, in Cedó's emphasis on the link between lived experience and the urge to write — "I wrote this play somewhat instinctively [...], simply, I had this need to write about this" (Cedó and Belbel, 2018) —, as well as for the clarification of the both remedial and political nature of the idea. Indeed, Cedó claims to have chosen to approach the experience to subvert the cultural silence that surrounds it: "Goodness, really, there are many people it has happened to and who can talk about it, and the fact of talking about it helps you and can help other people too. Yes, it's something like breaking the taboo" (Cedó and Belbel, 2018).

Several concomitant causes can be considered for the release of a promotional video that so explicitly refers to the autobiographical inspiration of the play and does not deny its potential therapeutic capacity. The fact that *Una gossa...* is a fiction that does not contain in itself an explicit acknowledgment of its own autobiographical origin could be one of these causes, along with the increase in autofictional plays. But perhaps the most important is the context of creation: *Una gossa...* premiered at the Festival Grec in 2018, at the height of feminisms in Catalan theatre and, therefore, in a climate of greater acceptance of feminisms and themes considered feminine.

Nevertheless, in the play's promotional video the assumption of autobiographical experience as a source of inspiration is not presented without nuances: alongside the explicit aim to shed light on this issue, there is a concern that the autobiographical inspiration and theme may put off the audience or be seen as a demerit. As for the playwright, she anticipates and protects herself from this type of reception, noting that the autobiographical inspiration of the play is not detrimental to its artistic dimension: "I have the feeling of having done a dramaturgy, of having done theatre and having taken advantage of all these things that had occurred to me at first to make a fiction" (Cedó and Belbel, 2018). As for Belbel, she explains that, when Toni Casares proposed that he direct Cedó's play, he immediately accepted because of his interest in it and because, with his partner, he had had a similar experience. In parallel, the director paradoxically implies a certain rejection of the theme of perinatal death, since it can help "little to encourage the audience to come" (Cedó and Belbel, 2018). Although the comment can be attributed to several factors — including the shift Belbel has made in recent years towards a theatre of entertainment, which can come into contradiction with the treatment of 'difficult' subjects — without a doubt it can be linked to the idea that, being a subject connected with female physiology, it may seem of less interest to some of the audience, either due to prejudice or ignorance. That is why the comparison with a great (male) referent of the Western theatrical canon — "without realising it she has written nothing less than a female *Hamlet*" (Cedó and Belbel, 2018) — can be understood as a mechanism, conscious or not, to legitimise the play in the eyes of the audience.

Although in the promotional video Belbel explains that the play does not have a political dimension, the core of the dramatic conflict establishes

a direct relationship between the experience that Cedó relates in the video and the vicissitudes of the protagonist. Cedó's heroine, Júlia, is a pregnant woman who goes into the hospital five months into her pregnancy because she has lost her amniotic fluid. This complication leads her to confront a double decision — whether or not to terminate the pregnancy, and whether or not to see the dead child once it is born — clearly aggravated by her ignorance of the experience, since she does not know the protocols in use, including the wisdom of going through labour and saying goodbye to the child. The causal relationship between the lack of cultural representation of certain aspects of maternity and the way in which the playwright, and by extension the protagonist, experience the events of the play is shown in a programmatic allusion to the need to expand stage representations of gestational loss. The allusion appears in Júlia's conversation with the hospital psychologist, when she comments that her perinatal death “[is] a topic that doesn't come up anywhere. If you saw it in the movies or in books or whatever, in...” In that moment, in a parallel meta-theatrical plot, a character holding a different conversation asks: “Here?” (Cedó, 2018a: 49). Thus, what happens on stage can be read at the same time as a fiction and as a commentary by the playwright about her own experience as a symbolic reclamation.

This reclaiming dimension becomes more apparent if we take into account that the precedents of women who have publicly dealt with gestational losses are central for Cedó to consider the possibility of *speaking* about this experience. In the promotional video, the playwright explains that she realised she could talk about the experience in a bereavement group managed by the hospital where she met the journalist Bàrbara Julbé, author of *On em portin les ametllers* (2017), a novel about a similar experience. Moreover, when Cedó's play was premiered, it had been five years since *Llibert* (2013) was seen; the graphic novel *40 semanas: Crónica de un embarazo* (2014), by Glòria Vives Xiol, had been published; and the painter Paula Bonet had announced on social media the experience of a second miscarriage in a single year (Vivas, 2019). In different interviews (Cedó, 2018b; Blanco, 2018), Cedó states that the precedent of cases like these encouraged her to make the decision to write about her own experience. We must not forget, once again, that many of these narratives were made public at the height of a wave of feminist awareness that brought to the fore the discourses that questioned traditional maternity and offered alternative visions, including a range of plays about infertility.

Therefore, it is likely that the audience that went to see a performance of *Una gossa en un descampat* in 2018 would be able to read the play politically, that is to say, that they would take into account its renewing capacity, as a narrative that stands against a cultural taboo. It is a possibility that it is not based only on the autobiographical origin of the piece, but on the various mechanisms deployed by the text to legitimise the theatrical treatment of perinatal death. The first and most obvious is the splitting of the protagonist into Júlia, a “pregnant girl who loses her child. She is a teacher in a school”, and Júlia 2, a character defined both as an “inner voice” and “Júlia's invisible friend” (Cedó, 2018a: 11). The two Júlias share memories, the waste ground, which allows the realistic plot of the days in hospital to be expanded

with priority attention to the subjectivity of the protagonist, so that the negative effects of the prevailing narrative about maternity on the experience of women who are mothers occupy the foreground. At the same time, the motive for the split makes it possible to question uniqueness, one of the fundamental features of the modern subject model. In fact, the prominence of a pregnant woman puts other features of the Cartesian model in crisis, such as the lack of vulnerability linked to the obliteration of the body and rationality understood as independent of the physiological and the emotional. Hence, the play points to the need to create new subject models and to expand the imaginaries of the dramatic protagonist.

The second mechanism to affirm the legitimacy of addressing gestational loss in theatre is the comparison of Júlia's ordeal to other processes of overcoming adversity. This association is made through the repeated use of epic and warlike metaphors that bring the story closer to the most recognised codes of heroic stories: Júlia is a "champion" (Ibid.: 61) and "brave" (Ibid.: 60), she and Pau are "heroes" (Ibid.: 25), and the couple's son is "[like] an armed army towards the enemy line" (Ibid.: 85). Júlia's emotional connection with different referents is also important, ranging from her own ancestors to broader groups such as "humanity" and "people" (Ibid.: 103). In addition, the introduction of a parallel meta-theatrical plot about the questions about life of a director and a theatre actress equates the experience of the protagonist with other processes of searching for meaning in order to understand and assimilate different difficulties in life. These are resources that point to the similarity of a concealed experience closely linked to female physiology with other traditionally more valued experiences, perceived as neutral because they are masculine. Through this comparison, the play encourages the whole audience's identification with the heroine — and not only the female audience or the audience that has experienced similar cases.

This set of strategies legitimises perinatal death as a theatrical theme and positions Júlia as a subject of broad representativeness, while at the same time testifying to a need to shield the proposal with respect to the perception that the theme takes away interest from it, as the director's statements seem to suggest. Perhaps this legitimising will is responsible, in part, for the critical and public success of *Una gossa...*, which we can also relate to other factors beyond the interest of the play itself. Sergi Belbel, one of the most central names in the Catalan theatre scene, possibly acts as a legitimising agent for a playwright who was until then little known, and for a theme that had not been explored on stage, with the exception of *Llibert*. On the other hand, the explicitly autobiographical inspiration and realistic narrative of the days in hospital may attract attendance, not only from the general public but also from people who have gone through similar experiences — in some cases as members of bereavement groups — and health staff. All this was in the framework of a period of public support for feminisms, responsible at the same time for Cedó's experience being *spoken* and reaching the media and social sphere.

Indeed, the success of *Una gossa...* is not limited to the theatrical world, but the play achieves a rare milestone: a theatrical piece having influence

in the social sphere. Cedó's play served as a catalyst for the production of "Sense batec", an edition of the TV3 programme *30 minuts* about gestational loss, which focused on the creation of the play and was broadcast in prime time on Catalan public television months after the premiere. Even more significantly, as the writer and Anna Barrachina (2019) explain, the play led to the Doctor Josep Trueta hospital in Girona changing one of its clinical care protocols to improve the treatment received by patients with complications similar to that of the protagonist. In short, it is a paradigmatic example of the extent to which bringing the experience of maternity to the stage can take on a political dimension and become transformative, if it occurs in a sufficiently favourable context.

Conclusions

The growing corpus of plays that (auto)represent maternity from critical perspectives or that shed light on taboo aspects reaffirms the existence of an interest of Catalan theatre written by women in enriching and problematising stage representations of maternity. In the words of Deirdre Heddon, we can affirm that these works update "the immense potential" of the narratives of underrepresented subjects and experiences, in which the (auto)biography "might be an act of reclamation, reinvention, transformation or survival" (Heddon, 2006: 133). In so doing, they destabilise the generally-marked distribution between creation and reproduction, and at the same time reveal the extent to which the context of production determines the freedom to speak about silenced aspects of maternal experience. This is why it is essential to understand this set of plays in relation to the multiple threads that cross the theatre field, and in particular with respect to the emergence of feminisms experienced by Catalan theatre since 2016 and the progressive increase of female playwrights since the 1990s.

Indeed, the normalisation of female authorship and certain themes has been essential to subvert the tendency to isolate female playwrights, who historically have been co-opted by the canon one by one, as exceptions to their own gender, and have not been able to "become, thus, authorial models from which other women can imagine and (re)think themselves as writers" (Pérez Fontdevila, 2019: 43). The paradigmatic case of *Una gossa en un descampat* shows that there has been a certain reversal of this historical trend, but that the negotiation with reception continues to be very present, even in periods favourable to feminist demands. Even so, the plays I have commented on already constitute, by themselves, a present-day renewal of the Catalan theatre imaginary, a very significant symptom of the Copernican transformations entailed by the incorporation of female creators and the influence of feminisms, and a statement that, from the stages the maternal experience can be more extensively considered, explored and auto(represented).



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