Abstract: Michel Contat, Sartre’s bibliographer and the foremost authority on his work, has pointed out that ‘[Sartre’s mother] was the most important woman in his life: it’s not Simone de Beauvoir, like people think – no, no, it was actually Mummy – he lived with Mummy, you know…’ In the same interview, citing Freud, Contat attributes Sartre’s ‘genius’ to the ‘love of a beautiful young mother’, the conviction that she ‘has a genius […] and the very strong relationship between mother and child’. There are those who might object to this succinct psychoanalysis that it is rather Simone de Beauvoir who was the key female figure of Sartre’s adult life, becoming the mentor and guardian of his mature genius.
Living with Mother: Sartre and the problem of Maternity

Benedicte O’Donohoe

Michel Contat, Sartre’s bibliographer and the foremost authority on his work, has pointed out that ‘[Sartre’s mother] was the most important woman in his life: it’s not Simone de Beauvoir, like people think – no, no, it was actually Mummy – he lived with Mummy, you know...’ In the same interview, citing Freud, Contat attributes Sartre’s ‘genius’ to the ‘love of a beautiful young mother’, the conviction that she ‘has a genius [...] and the very strong relationship between mother and child’. There are those who might object to this succinct psychoanalysis that it is rather Simone de Beauvoir who was the key female figure of Sartre’s adult life, becoming the mentor and guardian of his mature genius. Isabelle Grell, for example, in her fascinating genetic account of *Les Chemins de la liberté*, demonstrates, with persuasive textual support from Sartre’s letters and war diaries, his ‘intellectual dependency’ upon Beauvoir’s regular critical commentaries, without which (he declares) he would no longer ‘even have the energy to write’. By way of synthesising the diverse influences of Anne-Marie (the mother), and Simone (*le Castor*), Jean-Pierre Boulé’s recent study furnishes the telling insight that ‘Sartre is undoubtedly infantilised by Beauvoir on certain occasions [...] she] casts herself as a maternal figure.’ Sartre himself, in *Les Mots*, remembers his mother as an elder sister, whom he would grow up to marry. However, Anne-Marie reneged on their tacit contract when she married his late father’s former camarade de classe, Joseph Mancy,

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1 Michel Contat, interviewed on BBC Radio 3 for *The Man with the Golden Brain*, broadcast 22 May 2005.
two months short of Sartre’s twelfth birthday – a trauma which Contat describes as nothing less than ‘expulsion from paradise’.\(^5\) So, how many mothers had Sartre? One, two, or none?\(^6\)

I propose to consider the hypothesis that maternity was a problem for Sartre because he had no direct experience of it until he was forty-one years old!\(^7\) In October 1946, he moved into number 42 rue Bonaparte, overlooking the Place St Germain des Prés, with his mother who had bought the apartment as their new home – an arrangement made possible only by the death of Joseph Mancy in January 1945: ‘Ma mère, après la mort de mon beau-père, voulait que j’habite chez elle.’\(^8\) For the first time since 1920, when he left his family in La Rochelle to return to Paris as a boarder at the Lycée Henri IV, Sartre found himself living with mother. More importantly, for the first time since his mother’s remarriage in April 1917, he was able to do so without the intrusive and competitive presence of the second husband. This new ménage à deux – which would endure for sixteen years, until 1962 (and was only then disrupted by the explosive attentions of the OAS) – was remembered by the widow Sartre as a halcyon period: “C’est mon troisième mariage”, dit gaiement Madame Mancy’, according to Simone de Beauvoir.\(^9\)

So, in the late 1940s, and throughout the 1950s – the period of his greatest notoriety, when his name was synonymous with sex, drugs, jazz, existentialism, Soviet sympathising, corruption of

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\(^5\) Contat’s actual words are: ‘You have to remember what Freud says about what gives a genius: it’s the love of a beautiful young mother, the conviction that she has a genius, and the way she treats him – and the very strong relationship between mother and child, and the presence of a manly figure that gives the child an idea of his own value […]. So, he was in paradise [and] he was expelled from paradise by the remarriage of his mother’ (interview cited in note 1, above). Contat was possibly thinking, in particular, of the section in Les Mots beginning: ‘C’était le Paradis’ (op. cit., p. 30).

\(^6\) Sartre’s own commentary on the impact of his mother’s remarriage can be read in the transcript of Astruc and Contat’s film, Sartre par lui-même: ‘Je crois qu’une des choses importantes pour moi de ce mariage […] ça a été de me faire faire une rupture intérieure avec ma mère, […] Alors, j’ai conservé de l’affection pour ma mère toute ma vie, mais ce n’était plus la même. Ça s’est fait comme ça’ (Sartre, un film, réalisé par Alexandre Astruc et Michel Contat (Paris, Gallimard, 1977), p. 17). Isabelle Grell evokes this childhood trauma particularly affecting (see op. cit., p. 12).

\(^7\) Denis Bertholet makes much the same point in his excellent analytical biography: ‘Sartre a besoin d’une nounou: une femme qui veille sur les petites choses de la vie quotidienne et lui prodigue l’assurance qu’il pourra toujours compter sur elle. Pour cela, il a Mme Mancy. Le côté maternel de Beauvoir, fortement développé pendant les années de guerre, n’est plus nécessaire à son compagnon. Son appui intellectuel, en revanche, reste vital’ (Sartre (Paris, Plon, 2000), p. 315).


youth, and all manner of political agitation and moral decadence – Jean-Paul Sartre was living in well-ordered domestic conviviality with his impeccable twice-widowed mother, and her Alsatian maid, Eugénie. For maximum incongruity, this faithful family retainer addressed Sartre as ‘Monsieur Poulou’, thereby unwittingly marrying formal bourgeois respectability with the informal innocence of infancy. Jean Cau, Sartre’s secretary for many years, recalls his ‘tender astonishment’ at the rituals of familial harmony and filial duty that played themselves out in the modest apartment at number 42:

Il arrivait aussi que ‘ma petite maman’ et ‘mon petit Poulou’ prissent [...] le petit déjeuner ensemble. Ou, assez rarement, il arrivait aussi qu’ils déjeunassent en tête à tête. Ces jours-là, la joie de Mme Mancy était sans mélange et des ailes la portaient. Son ‘Poulou’ déjeunait avec elle! [...] Sartre avait une mère! [...] Sartre se comportait comme un fils affectueux et redevienait un enfant docile! Étrange. Doux et étrange. Ça ne collait pas avec son personnage.10

Jean-Pierre Boulé has ingeniously speculated that, in this period, Sartre was perhaps ‘fulfilling Poulou’s promise’ to be, when he grew up, what his mother ‘wanted him to be’, namely ‘her little boy’.11 Equally, of course, we could say that he was fulfilling his other promise to marry Mummy when he grew up.12

Be that as it may, Cau should not have been so amazed by the great man’s readiness to experiment with a renewed mother / son relationship, given that his first experience of it was so ambiguous, unsatisfactory and unresolved. Sartre records in Les Mots how his father’s terminal illness precipitated his premature weaning, prompted his own attempt to die (in emulation of his father and resentment against his mother), and produced the estrangement from his mother which cast her forever in a different role:

A la mort de mon père, Anne-Marie et moi, nous nous réveillâmes d’un cauchemar commun; je guéris. Mais nous étions victimes d’un malentendu: elle retrouvait avec amour un fils qu’elle n’avait jamais quitté vraiment; je reprenais connaissance sur les genoux d’une étrangère.13

The alternative role that Sartre assigned to his mother was that of elder sister, with whom he shared ‘la chambre des enfants’ in her parents’ apartment: ‘On me montre une jeune géante, on me dit que c’est ma mère. De moi-même, je la prendrais plutôt pour une sœur aînée. [...] “Les

11 See Boulé, p. 175, note 47.
12 See note 4, above.
13 Les Mots, p. 17.
enfants”, c’est nous: pareillement mineurs et pareillement entretenus.”¹⁴ The implication that there was ‘nothing Œdipal going on here’, becomes ironically explicit a few pages later: ‘En vérité, la prompte retraite de mon père m’avait gratifié d’un “Œdipe” fort incomplet: pas de Sur-moi, d’accord, mais point d’agressivité non plus. Ma mère était à moi, personne ne m’en contestait la tranquille possession.”¹⁵ Yet, just another few pages further on, Sartre speculates that if he had had a real sister, he would have been incestuous: ‘Ça me troublait: si l’on m’eût donné, par chance, une soeur, m’eût-elle été plus proche qu’Anne-Marie? Que Karlémami?¹⁶ Alors, c’eût été mon amante.”¹⁷ He also acknowledges that there are ‘des traces de ce fantasme’ to be found in his works, citing Oreste and Électre in *Les Mouches*, Boris and Ivich in *Les Chemins de la liberté*, and Frantz and Léni in *Les Séquestrés d’Altona.*¹⁸ What he is less expansive about – no doubt because his mother was still alive – is his persistent perplexity over the primordial myth of maternity. As Josette Pacaly has justly remarked in her psychoanalytical study of Sartre: ‘Tout, dans l’œuvre de Sartre, montre qu’il n’a jamais osé se familiariser avec cette représentation [de l’inceste avec la mère ou la sœur]. Aussi demeure-t-il à jamais prisonnier de l’image maternelle.”¹⁹

This obsession with the flawed and ambivalent maternal image is inscribed in a number of Sartre’s works, not least in his first two plays. *Bariona* is ostensibly a nativity play which necessarily problematizes maternity. Yet it is not so much the virgin birth that holds our attention, as the pregnancy of Sarah, the eponymous hero’s wife, whose instinctive drive towards motherhood runs counter to her husband’s decree of non-procreation, and provides the dramatic tension of the narrative. This contradiction is finally resolved in what we might call a ‘pro-life’ stance, for a complex blend of political and psychological reasons. In *Les Mouches*, the subtle undercurrent of latent incest between Oreste and Électre is overlaid by the violent antipathy between mother and daughter, and accompanied by the flirtatious repartee between mother and son. The rivalry between the two women for the respect, loyalty, affection and desire of the young stranger (son and brother), finds its consummation in matricide, on the one hand (Oreste’s sword plunging into Clytemnestre’s belly in a clear symbolisation of Œdipal rape), and in sibling estrangement, on the other (Électre finally repudiating her brother and assuming the mantle of her murdered mother). In the earlier play, maternity is vindicated, albeit in a modality of pure potential and a context of legendary idealisation. In the later play, motherhood is reviled in the

¹⁴ *Les Mots*, p. 20.
¹⁶ Anne-Marie’s and Poulou’s compound nickname for her father, Charles, and mother, Louise – an instructive indicator of their childlike complicity.
¹⁷ *Les Mots*, p. 46.
ultimate act of disrespect, and championed only in the most self-abasing gesture of filial
obedience (Électre’s eventual submission).²⁰

Indeed, the career of the mother is, to say the least, chequered throughout Sartre’s theatre.
The only mother in Huis clos, Estelle, is condemned to hell for, inter alia, infanticide –
Clytemnestre’s revenge, one might argue. The maternal avatar in Morts sans sépulture, Lucie,
consents to the silencing of her 15-year-old brother / son, François, with the soothing sentence:
‘Mon petit, mon pauvre petit, mon seul amour, pardonne-nous.’²¹ In La Putain respectueuse, the
counter-maternal figure of the prostitute – whose livelihood depends upon her having sex without
conceiving a child – is rewarded with a $100 bill by the mother of her sexual assailant for having
lied to save him from the law: a cynical gesture that places a pretty cheap price both on truth and
on maternal love.²² In Les Mains sales, the hapless hero, Hugo, has a prominent father, but no
mother – except for his devoted, but infantilising, Party comrade, Olga. Goetz, the hero of Le
Diable et le bon Dieu, the titular hero Kean, and Georges de Valera (Nekrassov), are all three
bastards and orphans who pride themselves upon their lack of social status, each in turn claiming
to be ‘fils de [ses] œuvres’. By contrast, Frantz von Gerlach, the motherless protagonist of Les
Séquestrés d’Altona, is tormented by his widowed father and incestuous sister, and manifestly
suffers for want of maternal care and affection. Equally, in Sartre’s last play, Les Troyennes, the
iconic mother-figure, Andromaque, incapable of extending protection to her son Astyanax, is
powerless to save him from murder by the Athenians. In short, mothers are either conspicuous by
their absence from Sartre’s plays, or – where present – are actively or passively inimical to the
welfare of their unfortunate offspring.

However, this mordant scepticism is not confined to Sartre’s theatre, and the work on which I
intend to focus here is L’Âge de raison, volume 1 of Les Chemins de la liberté, published in 1945²³
– coincidentally, the year of Sartre’s stepfather’s death, and one year before the establishment of
the intimate new household at number 42. The impetus of the narrative is the unplanned
pregnancy of Marcelle Duffet, the mistress of the central character, Mathieu Delarue, a 35-year-
old philosophy teacher who is a transparent and unsympathetic self-portrait of the author (except

²⁰ Possibly reflecting the lived experience of the playwright’s mother: Simone de Beauvoir notes that Anne-
Marie had been ‘oppressed’ by her own ‘authoritarian and selfish’ mother, and did not feel ‘vraiment
affranchie de sa mère’ until her eighty-fifth year, long after Louise Schweitzer’s death (see Tout compte fait,
²² Boulé astutely observes that the ‘concrete relation [of] maternal love’ is ‘relegated to a footnote’ in L’Être
et le néant (op. cit., p. 196).
²³ L’Âge de raison (Paris, Gallimard, 1945; coll. Folio, 1972). Page references (as AR) are to the Folio
dition.
that he is \textit{tall}).\textsuperscript{24} Marcelle – apparently, a housebound invalid – has had a seven-year relationship with Mathieu, and the action consists of his attempts to beg, borrow, or steal – he finally steals – 5000 francs to pay for an abortion by a competent practitioner. What he learns in the course of a decidedly hectic forty-eight hours is that it is perfectly possible – indeed, certain – that Marcelle would rather seize her chance for motherhood, than prolong her predictable and perfunctory liaison with Mathieu. It is his journey towards this realisation that brings Mathieu to the ‘age of reason’.

It is in Chapters I and III, especially, that maternity \textit{per se} becomes an issue and a narrative topos, and it is noteworthy how Sartre’s articulation of it betrays a measure of emotional and moral disequilibrium on his part. Before Marcelle breaks her news, Mathieu is struck by the exceptionally masculine quality both of her voice and of her facial expression (see \textit{AR}, 13, 14), although, at the same time, he glimpses ‘sa lourde poitrine’ (\textit{AR}, 12) and is evidently attracted to her ‘chair beurreuse’ (\textit{AR}, 16). Equally, once she has imparted the unwelcome tidings, he notes that: ‘Elle avait l’air dur, mais pas un air d’homme’ (\textit{AR}, 21), as though the two qualities – hard and manly – ought normally to be coterminous, but were not so in this case.\textsuperscript{25} Moments later, Marcelle’s voluptuous breasts are simultaneously objects of sexual desire, and deterrent reminders of her changed condition (see \textit{AR}, 24). From Mathieu’s perspective on this new situation, confusion reigns. In typically blundering male fashion, he tries to dispel that confusion by abruptly proposing the traditional solution, then dithering, only to be rebuked by Marcelle that it is ‘not his business to think about it’, because: ‘A présent, c’est une affaire de femme’ (\textit{AR}, 22). Nevertheless, before making a clumsy and inappropriate pass at the predictably unreceptive mother-to-be, he insists that he will vet the eventual abortionist.

Mathieu’s tentative decisiveness in this dilemma – ‘Eh bien, on... on le fait passer, non?’ (\textit{AR}, 21) – is in fact undermined by moral scruples which also express themselves in terms of gender identity contradictions. By paying an old lady to ‘[détruire] cette vie’ (\textit{AR}, 28), he would be putting money into the hands of a killer more like a man than a woman: ‘La vieille portait un pantalon

\textsuperscript{24} Mathieu is described as ‘un grand type un peu lourd qui enseignait la philosophie’ (\textit{AR}, 65), and as ‘un grand type avec des épaules comme ça’ (\textit{AR}, 113), whereas Sartre – who stood about five feet, two inches – was known to friends and associates throughout his adult life as ‘le Petit Homme’. In \textit{Les Mots}, he recounts with wit and pathos how his mother made a virtue of his diminutive stature: ‘cette grande et belle femme s’arrangeait fort bien de ma courte taille, elle n’y voyait rien que de naturel: les Schweitzer sont grands et les Sartre petits, je tenais de mon père, voilà tout. Elle aimait que je fusse, à huit ans, resté portatif et d’un maniement aisé: mon format réduit passait à ses yeux pour un premier âge prolongé. Mais, voyant que nul ne m’invitait à jouer, elle poussait l’amour jusqu’à deviner que je risquais de me prendre pour un nain – ce que je ne suis pas tout à fait – et d’en souffrir’ (\textit{Les Mots}, pp. 111–12). By contrast, his tall grandfather Charles Schweitzer ‘[le] trouvait minuscule et s’en désolait’ (\textit{Les Mots}, p. 191).

\textsuperscript{25} See Boulé, p. 95, on Sartre’s association of ‘hardness’ with ‘manliness’.
d’homme [...] les mains de la vieille. C’étaient des mains d’homme, d’étrangleur’ (AR, 28–29). Yet
this would-be ‘strangler’ refuses to deal with him precisely because he is a man: ‘Je ne veux pas
avoir affaire aux hommes, comprenez-vous? [...] C’est à elle seule que je veux avoir affaire’ (AR,
29). It appears not only that anything counter-maternal is associated with masculinity, but also
that maternity itself is incomprehensible to the male mind, from the very moment of the act that
sets the process in motion:

[...] En détruisant cette vie, pas plus qu’en la créant, je n’aurais su ce que je faisais.
[...] Et les autres? Ceux qui ont décidé gravement d’être pères [...] est-ce qu’ils
comprennent mieux que moi? [...] c’est du travail en chambre noire et dans la
gélatine, comme la photographie. Ça se fait sans eux. (AR, 28)

The unintentionality and unintelligibility of the original event possibly explain Mathieu’s
obtuseness with regard to Marcelle’s feelings, or that of any man in the same impasse: maleness
is banished from the maternal space.

In Chapter III, where Mathieu seeks Sarah’s help to find a ‘decent’ abortionist, the leitmotiv of
maternity plays beneath the dialogue in a subtler undertone, as breasts and children abound.
Entering her apartment, Mathieu sees Sarah’s ‘visage plat et disgracié, rongé par la bonté, et, au-
dessous, les gros seins mous, qui sortaient à demi du kimono’ (AR, 51): goodness and generous
breasts are subliminally associated. Contrasted with the stiff, self-righteous, and assertively
masculine presence of Brunet during the first few minutes of Mathieu’s visit, these moral and
physical tokens of maternal tenderness are complemented by the equally (if differently) imposing
presence of the child, Pablo: ‘Mathieu se sentit gêné, sans savoir pourquoi. Il avait l’impression
d’être englouti par les yeux de l’enfant. “Les mômes, pensa-t-il, c’est des petits voraces, tous leurs
sens sont des bouches”’ (ibid.). The sight of Pablo inevitably reminds him of the scandalous event
unfolding in Marcelle’s womb: ‘il n’y avait pas longtemps que le môme était sorti d’un ventre, et ça
se voyait; [...] dans une chambre rose, au fond d’un autre ventre, il y avait une cloque qui gonflait’
(AR, 57).26 His sense of shock is reinforced when Pablo tells him that he ‘dreamt he was a pen’:
“Ça pense!” se dit Mathieu’ (ibid.). This reflection in turn provokes a meditation on the reality of
abortion – ‘Une chair pensive qui crie et qui saigne quand on la tue. [...] Je vais empêcher un

26 Mathieu’s emphasis upon the corporeal aspect of the event as inherently repulsive is countervailed by
Marcelle’s intuition that this biological process – ‘eh bien, oui, il était fait pour la maternité, ce corps qui
s’épanouissait absurdement’ (AR, 87) – is the destiny of a ‘young mother’ predisposed to keep her child,
‘une vie absurde et superflue, comme la sienne’ (AR, 89), if only a word of encouragement had been
spoken (see AR, 88).

27 Surely a reflection of the young author’s ambition to become, like his ‘anciens pairs’ – Voltaire, Corneille,
Baudelaire, Flaubert – ‘(un) héros de la plume’ (Les Mots, p. 58).
enfant de naître’ \textit{(ibid.)} – and a touching evocation of ‘[ce] petit homme qui ne courrait jamais dans les rues, un pied sur le trottoir et l’autre dans le ruisseau’ \textit{(AR, 58).}

Paradoxically, however, these sentimental ruminations fail to alert Mathieu to the prospective joys of maternity, despite Sarah’s reaction to the news:

[Mathieu:] ‘Marcelle est enceinte.’

[Sarah:] ‘Oh!’ Sarah avait l’air plutôt réjouie. Elle demanda avec timidité:

– Alors... vous allez?...

– Non, non, dit vivement Mathieu, nous ne voulons pas de gosse.

– Ah! oui, dit-elle, je vois.’

Elle baissa la tête et garda le silence. Mathieu ne put supporter cette tristesse qui n’était même pas un reproche. \textit{(AR, 58–59)}

This exchange makes it clear that Sarah’s instinctive reaction is joyful, that of a mother who has, moreover, suffered the humiliation and remorse of an abortion insisted upon by her husband, Gomez:

C’était horrible! […] Je pensais au petit. Vous savez, c’était Gomez qui voulait. […] Mais c’était une horreur, jamais je... Il pourrait bien me supplier à deux genoux, à présent, je ne recommencerai pas... [...]. Mathieu, dit-elle, en lui serrant fortement le bras, vous ne savez pas ce que vous allez faire! \textit{(AR, 59, 60)}

This plea is misconstrued by Mathieu as an ethical appeal, as distinct from an emotional one, and makes him angry, so that Sarah has to clarify her meaning: ‘Non, mais je veux dire: vous ne savez pas ce que vous exigez de Marcelle; j’ai peur qu’elle ne vous haïsse plus tard’ \textit{(AR, 60).} In short, he has no conception of what it means to ask a woman to forego her prerogative of motherhood.\textsuperscript{29} Mathieu’s unconscious refusal to grasp the significance of this demand is symbolically represented by his aversion to the sight of Sarah’s ample bosom: ‘Le peignoir de

\textsuperscript{28} And surely another reflection of the ‘petit homme’ writing the novel.

\textsuperscript{29} Sarah’s spirited defence of the maternal privilege was due to be subverted by a scene in which she would kill Pablo, as Isabelle Grell has acutely observed. Although this scene was never included in \textit{Les Chemins de la liberté}, as intended, ‘cet acte meurtrier persistera avec une étrange véhémence dans l’imagination sartrienne’ (Grell, p. 60): it resurfaces in the scenario \textit{Résistance}, published in \textit{Les Temps modernes} \textit{(no. 609, July 2000)}, echoing the infanticidal aspect of the slaughter of François in \textit{Morts sans sépulture}, upon which we remarked above.
Sarah s'était largement ouvert sur ses énormes seins. Mathieu la plaqua contre lui, par tendresse et pour ne plus voir son corps’ (AR, 61). Try as he might, however, he cannot efface the tormenting image of Marcelle’s motherly breasts, which he imagines already exuding milk for the foetus swelling inexorably in her belly:

Ses beaux seins bruns et mauves s’étaient affaissés, des gouttelettes sourdaient autour de leurs pointes, blanches et salées comme des fleurs. Elle dort. […] la cloque, au fond de son ventre, ne dort pas, […] elle se nourrit et elle gonfle. (AR, 62)

As this primitive iconography of the maternal state projects its terrifying pictures onto Mathieu’s mental screen, he wanders into the Jardin du Luxembourg, which is alive with children (just as it was, of course, when ‘Poulou’ himself visited it with Anne-Marie): ‘Le Luxembourg, chaud et blanc, statues et pigeons, enfants. Les enfants courent, les pigeons s’envolent’ (ibid.). Appropriately, Mathieu’s reveries upon himself when young – first as a seven-year-old boy, then as a young man of sixteen and twenty-one – are interrupted by a little boy asking for his tennis ball back (see AR, 65). Suddenly, his life-long mottoes of freedom and autonomy ring hollow, as if the appearance of this flesh-and-blood child reminded him of the random contingency of our facticity: “Être libre. Être cause de soi, pouvoir dire: je suis parce que je le veux; être mon propre commencement.” C’étaient des mots vides et pompeux, des mots agaçants d’intellectuel’ (AR, 65).

In short, Mathieu’s encounters both with the prospect of maternity and with the living products of its consummation, have the unexpected effect of destabilising all his cherished precepts, without instructing him one jot about the nature of the mother / child relationship, or the psychology of the pregnant woman.

By contrast, Mathieu’s homosexual friend, Daniel, appears to be endowed with some insight into the meaning of motherhood. On one level, he effortlessly exerts a certain fascination over mothers and daughters, whether it be his concierge and her daughter, who is infatuated with him (see AR, 102–03); the child on the bus, mesmerised then terrified by him, and chided by her mother for her misbehaviour (see AR, 109–10); or, notably, Marcelle and Madame Duffet, both of whom idolise him and call him their ‘Archangel’ (see AR, 188, 201). On a different level, Daniel intervenes mischievously to exploit the female propensity towards motherhood as a means of thwarting Mathieu’s attempts to procure an abortion, and trapping him into marrying Marcelle against his better judgment:

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30 Do we detect here a phantasmatic nostalgia for the sustenance of which Sartre himself was deprived because of his premature weaning (see Les Mots, p.16)?

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Il se rappelait de quel air brusque et masculin, Marcelle lui avait jeté un jour, par-dessus son épaule: ‘Quand une femme est foutue, elle n’a qu’à se faire faire un gosse.’ Ça serait trop drôle s’ils n’étaient pas tout à fait du même avis sur la question, [si elle] sachait du désir d’avoir un enfant. [...] ‘Oh! s’il y a une chance, une seule chance qu’elle veuille avoir le gosse, je jure bien qu’il lui demandera de l’épouser demain soir.’ (AR, 184, 185)

Daniel’s plotting owes nothing to any special homosexual sensitivity, but rather evidences an understanding of how people can be manipulated by encouraging them in tendencies or desires which one knows them to have, but which they are themselves reluctant to acknowledge. In his dialogue with Marcelle, he works systematically and relentlessly towards his objective of making her admit that she wants to keep the child, whatever that might entail in practical terms: ‘J’ai gagné, elle meurt d’envie de pondre. [...] ‘Mais vous voulez l’enfant? [...] N’est-ce pas? Vous voulez l’enfant?’ [...] Marcelle:] – ‘Oui, je veux l’enfant’ (AR, 194, 195, 196). This virtual badgering of the witness bespeaks no tenderness for Marcelle – on the contrary, Daniel’s misogyny is to the fore in all his dealings with women – but rather an excess of spite towards Mathieu, and that same contempt frames his decision to propose to Marcelle. In other words, the mystery of maternity remains, in fact, as impregnable to Daniel as to Mathieu.

Further abuses of the parental paradigm are to be found in three other dysfunctional relationships. First, Mathieu’s arid, hopeless and unconsummated relationship with the virile and quasi-lesbian Ivich is that of an adult with a child, an aspect stressed in several places (see, for example, AR, 309, 348). Similarly, the ageing Lola is old enough to be Boris’s mother (see AR, 352), and expects him, therefore, to abuse her accordingly and, in short order, to abandon her altogether. Not least, Marcelle herself has a classically complex and ambiguous relationship with her own mother. These two women cherish and look after each other – Madame Duffet nurses her near-invalid daughter, who in turn tucks her mother up in bed like a baby every night – yet Marcelle is clearly dominated by her mother (compare Anne-Marie and Louise, again). For example, Mathieu has to creep around and whisper in Marcelle’s bedroom for fear of waking her mother (see AR, 16), with whom he is obviously persona non grata, unlike Daniel, whose dazzling visits and frivolous gifts are as much for Madame Duffet’s entertainment and delectation as for Marcelle’s. There is a mutual succour, but also tension and reciprocal animosity, implicit in Marcelle’s relationship with her mother: a capacity for explosive interventions, which she exploits to good effect when Mathieu finally makes her so angry that she fears she will scream if he does not leave: ‘Si tu ne t’en vas pas, j’appelle ma mère’ (AR, 344). This threat gets rid of him illico presto!
Finally it seems that, apart from Sarah, the only character with an intuition of the meaning of maternity is the expectant mother herself, Marcelle. This is well expressed in three places, the first being the brief but brilliant Chapter V, which is a stream of consciousness for Marcelle. Her cynical reflections upon Mathieu’s philosophy of life – ‘qu’est-ce que ça pourrait bien foutre qu’on soit libre?’ (AR, 85) – lead her to a sudden access of hatred for him, as she recalls his automatic recourse to abortion: ‘Et puis, tout d’un coup, elle revit le visage de Mathieu, son air naïf et convaincu, quand il avait dit: “On le fait passer, non?”’, et elle fut traversée d’un éclair de haine’ (ibid.). Her meditation upon the reality of that operation – ‘Dans ce ventre, une petite fraise de sang […] qu’on allait racler au bout d’un couteau’ (AR, 86–87) – highlights its perversity when perpetrated against a body destined for motherhood and impeded only by the interference of men: ‘Elle haussa les épaules: eh bien, oui, il était fait pour la maternité, ce corps, qui s’épanouissait abusivement. Mais les hommes en avaient décidé autrement’ (AR, 87). The consequence of this patriarchal manipulation of the maternal destiny is that the natural desire to keep the child – ‘Toute la journée de la veille, […] elle aurait voulu lui dire: “Et si on le gardait?”’ (AR, 88) – is repressed and criminalised: ‘Elle pensa soudain avec passion: “Il aurait été à moi. […]” Mais ce désir secret, cet obscur serment étaient tellement solitaires, tellement inavouables, […] qu’elle se sentit brusquement coupable et elle eut horreur d’elle-même’ (AR, 89). Marcelle’s thinking aloud in this way reveals a sensitive insight on Sartre’s part – possibly with a steer from Beauvoir, given her influence on the character’s creation – into the affective peregrinations of a mother-to-be.31

Arguably, that insight takes a more sentimental, even romanticised, turn in two short scenes towards the end of the novel. The first takes place while Marcelle awaits Daniel’s phone call to report on his meeting with Mathieu. In the course of her self-reproach, she imagines herself as guilty and making amends by ‘killing the child’ in order to appease Mathieu (see AR, 292). But once Daniel informs her that Mathieu had taken rather well the news of their secret assignations, her burden of guilt is lifted, and her self-loathing is transformed as she looks out on the street below: ‘Une jeune femme courait au milieu de la chaussée, elle portait son enfant dans ses bras, elle lui parlait en courant, tout essoufflée, et lui riait dans la figure’ (AR, 294). This vision of maternal joy encourages Marcelle to look at herself in the mirror and put a rose in her hair: ‘Elle ouvrit les paupières, se regarda dans la glace, tapota sa chevelure et se sourit avec confusion’

31 Simone de Beauvoir told Sartre to rewrite Marcelle, a chore which he found tedious and irritating, resulting in a less ‘truthful’ version of this character whom he had conceived as ‘un clin d’œil taquin au Castor telle que Sartre l’aimait’ (Grell, pp. 65–66). According to Grell, Beauvoir’s failure to ‘get the joke’ obliged him to ‘mentir faux’ in respect of Marcelle, so that she contains more and greater inconsistencies than Sartre had intended.
Perhaps a mother can also be beautiful, as Sartre’s own mother discovered too late in life, according to his account.32

The second such scene prolongs this theme: Marcelle receives Mathieu – expecting that he will propose marriage instead of abortion – still wearing a flower in her hair, but also perfumed and seductive. Mathieu notes that she is beautiful and happy; her breasts are again in evidence, but this time as much sexual as maternal emblems: ‘Marcelle était nue sous sa robe de chambre, il vit ses beaux seins et il eut un goût de sucre dans la bouche. Elle lui prit la main et l’entraîna vers le lit: – Viens t’asseoir près de moi’ (AR, 336). However, it is then the maternal aspect of this encounter that develops strongly, as Marcelle tenderly re-dresses the festering wound to Mathieu’s hand, self-inflicted in order to impress Ivich. While he desires her diaphanously veiled flesh, she gently chastises him like the foolish little boy he has been: ‘Alors, Boris t’a lancé un défi? Et tu t’es massacré la main? Quel grand gosse! Est-ce qu’il s’en est fait autant? […] Il t’a bien eu!’ (AR, 338). This putative Œdipal scenario evaporates suddenly, however, when Mathieu produces the 5000 francs with a flourish, tacitly disclosing that he has never seriously considered whether Marcelle might wish to keep the child.33 Indeed, this entire performance – of a beautiful, desirable, yet thoroughly motherly woman – has been completely wasted on Mathieu. As we have seen, Marcelle, in her rage, invokes the threat of her own mother in order to evict the reluctant and insensitive father.

Much as in Bariona, I suggest, we witness a triumph of the maternal instinct in L’Âge de raison, inasmuch as the pregnant mother fulfils her wish to retain her baby, despite the social and personal pressures weighing upon her to do otherwise. However, in both cases, the victory is Pyrrhic. Bariona’s son will be, like Sartre himself, fatherless. Mathieu’s child – again, like Sartre – will have a stepfather, Daniel, the sometime friend of his natural father, and a tortured homosexual whose motives owe more to ill-will and self-loathing than to any affection for Marcelle or sympathy for Mathieu. Perhaps, by attributing to Marcelle all the conventional maternal tendencies and to Mathieu the destructive proclivities of the traditional male, Sartre was exonerating his mother by obliquely blaming himself for the ‘rupture’ that fractured his life when he was eleven years old: ‘Ça a été plutôt une rupture qui a été faite, en somme, vers onze ans. Et là, il y a eu quelque chose. Je n’ai jamais imaginé quelque chose de sexuel, […] mais j’ai rompu quand même.’34 Published at a date when Sartre was about to embark on a new life with his

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32 ‘Cinquante ans plus tard, en feuilletant un album de famille, Anne-Marie s’aperçut qu’elle avait été belle’ (Les Mots, p. 15).
33 In fact, there is one such moment – ‘Et si elle voulait l’enfant?’ (AR, 136) – when Mathieu briefly entertained the thought, but then, recalling her scathing remarks about pregnant friends, dismissed it abruptly: ‘ça ne pouvait pas être vrai, […] ça serait un abus de confiance’ (AR, 137).
34 Sartre, un film, pp. 17–18.
recently re-widowed mother, this first volume of *Les Chemins de la liberté* bespeaks the author’s intense interest in, and profound puzzlement with, the nature of motherhood.