'Des nœuds que l'amour ne rompt point'? Sisters and friendship in seventeenth-century French tragedy and tragi-comedy

This article grew out of a desire to investigate the commonly held theory that female friendship is under-represented in literature. Notwithstanding recent research (chiefly on nineteenth and twentieth century English-language fiction) which has nuanced Virginia Woolf's famous lamentation of the absence of literary representations of female friends,[1] the idea that female friendship is a rare literary phenomenon appears to persist.[2] My theory was that its would-be rarity was due in no small part to the rarity of research concerning it: were we just not looking? More specifically, my interest lay in the representation of blood sisters, having come to this subject through the work of seventeenth-century female dramatist Catherine Bernard, and the representation of the sisters in *Laodamie*. Despite growing interest in familial relations in the early modern period, it remains a relatively unexplored area: to the best of my knowledge, no historical or literary study of early modern (blood) sisters has appeared to date.[3] Now, if female friendship has been *dismembered* as Janice Raymond maintains,[4] it is clear that blood sisters have been given even worse press. Despite the fact that the blood sister relationship has provided the model for non-kinship bonds of mutual affection and / or solidarity between women (in the commonly evoked notion of *sisterhood*),[5] the dominant image of sisters in the myths and fairytales of Western literature (such as Cinderella or Psyché) is one of jealous arch-rivals, often with homicidal tendencies. Discounting comedies, my quest led me to eighteen plays (eight tragedies and ten tragi-comedies), where the relationship between the sisters varies on the one hand from bitter jealousy (usually experienced by one sister, to the blithe ignorance of the other) to, on the other hand, selfless devotion, where one sister would sacrifice her life for the other. Leaving the more common representation of sisters as jealous rivals aside – the 'simplified, conventionalised' representations of female relationships which Woolf bemoaned[6] – the aim of this article is to examine a number of other models of sisterhood and of female friendship with which the dramatists provide us, and hence to analyse how sisterhood is

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[1] In chapter 5 of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf wrote: ' 'Chloe liked Olivia', I read. And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature. … And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends'.

[2] See the comments made by Alberta Contarello and Chiara Volpato, 'Images of friendship. Literary depictions through the ages', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 8 (1991), 49-75, p. 72. For recent studies concerning female friendship in literature see the work of Nina Auerbach, Janet Todd, Tess Cosslett and Elizabeth Abel.

[3] Two articles in the volume *La Rochefoucauld*, Mithridate, *Frères et sœurs, Les Muses sœurs*, sous la dir. de Claire Carlin, coll. Biblio 17, 111 (Tübingen: Narr, 1998) are devoted to sisters: one to Phèdre and Ariane, and one to sisters-in-law Sabine and Camille in Corneille's *Horace*.

[4] See below, n. 14.

[5] See, for example, Carol Lasser, ' "Let us be sisters forever": the sororal model of nineteenth-century female friendship', *Signs*, 14.1 (1988), 158-81.

[6] *A Room of One's Own*, ch. 5.

configured in this element of early modern literature. Focus will be on four of the eighteen plays.[7]

By way of introduction, a number of theoretical concerns concerning friendship need to be addressed. Firstly, it is important to bear in mind that the concept of friendship / *amitié* is polyvalent, and varies considerably depending on historical period and context.[8] Even within the context of French seventeenth-century writings, that polyvalence is evident. The definitions of lexicographers and of moral philosophers vary considerably. For Furetière, for example, *amitié* can be defined as: 'affection qu'on a pour quelqu'un, soit qu'elle soit seulement d'un costé, soit qu'elle soit reciproque. Les devoirs de l'*amitié* obligent à se servir l'un l'autre. […] Signifie encore, plaisir, bon office.' The *Académie française* emphasises reciprocity as an important, although not always necessary, criterion in its definition of *amitié* and then goes on to define *ami(e)* as: 'celuy, celle qui a de l'affection pour quelque personne, & se porte à luy rendre toutes sortes de bons offices'. For Richelet, it is 'affection reciproque'. He adds, '[c]e qui peut faire naître l'amitié, c'est d'obliger, & de faire du bien'. Within these broad definitions of *amitié* as *affection*, issues of reciprocity and mutual benefaction are thrown into relief. Rochefort's comments, on the other hand, which draw more explicitly on a tradition of moral philosophy, emphasise different elements:

> C'est le plus doux, & le plus agreable fruit de la vie humaine, que de pouvoir joüir de quelqu'un à qui l'on puisse confier ses plus importans secrets, & les amertumes de son cœur. […] L'amitié est une naturelle correspondence d'affections entre deux personnes de mesme humeur, qui ont pour guide la raison, & la vertu. […] La veritable amitié paroist dans la sympathie des volontez.[9]

While the evocation of intimacy implicit in exchanged confidences is important, the key word here is *vertu*, central to the Aristotelian tripartite distinction between friendship based on pleasure, on utility and on virtue.[10] Dupleix had earlier expressed a similar view:

> L'amitié est une conformité des volontez entre deux ou plusieurs personnes, laquelle procedant de la mutuelle cognoissance qu'ils ont de leur vertu et integrité des mœurs les conjoint à une vie honneste.[11]

Within this framework, where *amitié* connotes considerably more than mere affection, the sole true friendship of Aristotle's three types is that based on virtue – *l'amitié parfaite*,

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[7] This article is part of a larger study devoted to early modern blood sisters, currently in preparation.

[8] See Contarello and Volpato, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70. See also Nicolas Schapira, 'Les intermittences de l'amitié dans le *Dictionnaire universel* de Furetière, *Littératures classiques*, 47 (2003), 217-24, p. 217.

[9] Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* (1691); *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694); Pierre Richelet, *Dictionnaire françois* (1681); César de Rochefort, *Dictionnaire general et curieux* (1685). For Descartes' distinction between *amitié* and *affection*, see *Les Passions de l'âme*, article 83.

[10] *Nichomachean Ethics* (Book 8).

[11] Scipion Dupleix, *L'Ethique ou philosophie morale* (1610), cited in Ullrich Langer, 'Théorie et représentation de l'amitié à la Renaissance', in *L'amitié*, sous la dir. de Jean-Christophe Merle et Bernard N. Schumacher (Paris: PUF, 2005), pp. 47-62, p. 49.

honneste.[12] The diversity in these definitions begs the question as to whether the dramatists, in their use of the term *amitié* in these plays, simply mean affection or are implying a relationship redolent with philosophical connotations. Obviously, there is no one answer to that question, nor should we try to impose one. Suffice to say that the aim of this article is to examine the extent to which women in these plays are represented as sharing a relationship based on reciprocal affection, mutual support, intimacy, trust – characteristics implicit both in the broad seventeenth-century definitions and in modern definitons of *amitié*. We will also examine whether the relationship is ever one of *l'amitié parfaite*, based on virtue.

Another difficulty in defining *amitié* in relation to these women is quite simply the fact that they are women. Traditionally in Western philosophy, essentialisms concerning women's 'nature' result in their exclusion from theories of friendship. According to Montaigne: 'leur ame ne semble assez ferme pour soustenir l'estreinte d'un nœud si pressé et si durable'.[13] Rochefort reproduces this comment in his *Dictionnaire*, together with the remark: 'le panchant qu'elles ont naturellement au changement fait que l'on trouve rarement de la belle amitié parmy ce Sexe'. The weight of this traditional discourse, based on constructions of women as weak, fickle, and subject to the ravages of erotic passion, may explain the apparent scarcity of representations of female friendships in literature. It is, of course, contravened by the historical reality of female friendship. As Janice Raymond puts it:

> Women have been friends for millenia. Women have been each other's best friends, relatives, stable companions, emotional and economic supporters, and faithful lovers. But this tradition of female friendship, like much else in women's lives, has been distorted, dismantled, destroyed – in summary, to use Mary Daly's term, *dismembered*.[14]

In fact, both the exclusionist theoretical discourse and the under-representation in literature (if under-representation there is) may be read as part of that (unwitting?) dismemberment.[15] This article aims to complement the research carried out concerning the English-language novel, and to provide another piece of this dismembered tapestry.[16]

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[12] Langer, *op. cit.,* p. 51. See also Arnaud d'Andilly's remarks as quoted in Jean Lafond, 'L'amitié selon Arnaud D'Andilly', in *L'Homme et son image. Morale et littérature de Montaigne à Mandeville* (Paris: Champion, 1996), p. 278. For a slightly different conception of friendship, see François de Sales, *Introduction à la vie dévote* (1608), III partie, ch. 17-22.

[13] Michel de Montaigne, 'De l'amitié', *Essais*, éd. Albert Thibaudet et Maurice Rat, coll. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), pp. 181-93 (p. 185).

[14] Janice Raymond, *A Passion for Friends. Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (London: The Women's Press, 1986), p. 4. On female friendship, see also Élaine Audet, *Le Cœur pensant: courtepoint de l'amitié entre femmes* (Québec: Le Loup de Gouttière, 2000); Marilyn Friedman, *What are Friends For? Feminist Perspectives on Personal Relationships and Moral Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), and Pat O'Connor, *Friendships Between Women. A Critical View* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

[15] See also Derrida's questioning of the equation of friendship and fraternity which excludes women. Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), p. 310.

[16] For a select bibliography of work concerning female friendship in early modern France, see Derval Conroy, 'The displacement of disorder: gynæcocracy and friendship in Catherine Bernard's *Laodamie*', *PFSCL*, 67 (2007), 443-64, n. 45. A session at the 2006 SE17 international conference was also devoted to the area, and articles from this session are forthcoming in *Cahiers du Dix-Septième*.

The third theoretical issue is that these women are sisters, and considerable disagreement exists in philosophies of friendship regarding the extent to which *amitié* can be used to refer to ties between family members. (While Aristotle allows for it in his elaboration of *philia*, Montaigne argues that the sibling bond is distinct from *amitié*. Both are, of course, referring to the relationship between brothers). Since, for the purposes of this article, our definition of *amitié* goes beyond that of the philosophers to include a wide range of affective ties, and since the dramatists concerned use the term to describe the sisters' relation, the question is redundant. While blood sisterhood remains less examined than its metaphorical counterpart, the last fifteen years have seen the appearance of a number of studies concerning natal sisters, chiefly devoted, once again, to the representation of the relationship in nineteenth- and twentieth-century (often female-authored) English-language fiction.[17] Although immense differences – in terms of plot construction, character development and generic conventions, not to mention the historical and cultural contexts which produced them – separate those novels from the (male-authored) early modern plays under examination here, a number of key recurrent ideas in these studies are relevant also to our corpus. One common idea is that the sister relationship is 'distinguished by a complex tension between similarity and difference, closeness and separation, friendship and rivalry',[18] and hence has what Brown calls a 'peculiar fascination' for writers and artists: 'Sisters have both an individual and a collective identity: variety and contrast are given special significance and piquancy by the ballast of shared heredity and upbringing; divergences are more pointed when they emerge from a single source'.[19] As Levin puts it, in novels 'sisters generate plot'.[20] Does the same apply to seventeenth-century drama? Do these dramatists invite us to choose between sisters? How central are issues of identification and differentiation, 'polarization and interdependence'[21] for these sisters? A second recurrent idea is that the traditional patriarchal 'sister plot' tends to sacrifice the sisters' relationship to one based on erotic love.[22] Put another way, the common representation of sisters as rivals could be seen as part of Raymond's larger *dismemberment*. How true is this of seventeenth-century drama? How is the conflict between heterosexual *amour* and homosocial (sibling) *amitié* played out? *Is* that the central conflict in these plays, or are other models of sisterhood presented? These are some of the questions which will be analysed here. I take as my *point de départ* for this article Ulrich Langer's idea that literary representations of friendship often jar

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[17] Amy K. Levin, *The Suppressed Sister. A Relationship in Novels by Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Women* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992); Michael Cohen, *Sisters: Relation and Rescue in Nineteenth-Century British Novels and Paintings* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1995); Masako Hirai, *Sisters in Literature: Female Sexuality in* Antigone, Middlemarch, Howard's End *and* Women in Love (London: Macmillan, 1998); Diana Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals in British Women's Fiction, 1914-39* (London: Macmillan, 2000); Leila S. May, *Disorderly Sisters. Sibling Relations and Sororal Resistance in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2001); Sarah Annes Brown, *Devoted Sisters. Representations of the Sister Relationship in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate. 2003).
[18] Wallace, *op. cit.,* p.7.
[19] Brown, *op. cit*., p. 2.
[20] Levin, *op. cit*., p. 19.
[21] *Ibid*., p. 37.
[22] See *ibid*., pp. 24-25.

with, and are unsettling for, the theories and philosophies of friendship.[23] To what extent is that the case for these literary representations of sisters?

Love v sisterhood: Amour v amitié

Three tragedies late in the century which dramatise sisters' love triangles, presenting us with a situation where the eponymous heroine and her sister are both in love with the same man, are Thomas Corneille's *Ariane* (1672), Louis Ferrier's *Anne de Bretagne* (1678) and Catherine Bernard's *Laodamie* (1689). In each of these plays, the dramatists delve into the conflict between love and sisterly friendship to varying degrees, and examine the central issues of trust and betrayal. In a move away from the critical polarity (both common and inadequate) which tends to posit sisters as rivals rather than friends, I would like to suggest that they are, or were, both.

Of the eighteen plays examined to date, one of the most complex portraits of sisters can be found in Thomas Corneille's *Ariane*. Judging by the *dénouement* alone, Ariane would appear to be the unfortunate victim of Phèdre's and Thésée's duplicity, as the latter breaks his word to her and flees with her younger sister, leaving the eponymous heroine betrayed, spurned and suicidal. An alternative reading, proposed by Richard E. Goodkin, presents Ariane as 'a presumptuous, domineering older sister', Phèdre's betrayal as 'a kind of retribution for her sister's treatment of her', and Phèdre's and Thésée's love as 'a revolt on the part of both members of the couple against their respective duties towards Ariane'.[24] Both of these readings present Phèdre in a negative light, and, to my mind, fail to take adequate account of her emotional conflict and her resistance to Thésée.[25] While it is clear that Ariane is domineering throughout and that she is ultimately spurned, I would argue that their relationship is not one of victim-hood or domination, but a more complex sibling bond based on an reciprocal affection. This *tendresse*, to which they both refer – as do Nérine (1533-4), and, repeatedly, Thésée and Pirithoüs – is coupled, for Phèdre, with an awareness of the responsibility and trust which that bond entails, and for Ariane with a blind (if somewhat self-obsessed) faith in her sister's love and loyalty. It is this which makes Phèdre's betrayal so difficult for her to undertake, and in turn so difficult for Ariane to accept.

This bond is evoked early in the play, before we meet either sister, by a rather petulant Thésée, who clearly resents the hold it has over his beloved Phèdre. To his friend Pirithoüs' question, 'Elle vous aime?', he replies:

> Autant que je le puis attendre
> Dans l'intérêt du sang qu'une sœur lui fait prendre.
> Comme depuis longtemps l'amitié qui les joint
> Forme entre elles des nœuds que l'amour ne rompt point,
> Elle a quelquefois peine à contraindre son âme

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[23] Langer, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

[24] Richard E. Goodkin, 'Thomas Corneille's *Ariane* and Racine's *Phèdre*: The Older Sister Strikes Back', *L'Esprit créateur*, 38.2 (1998), 60-71 (pp. 61, 62, 63). Helen L. Harrison also analyses Ariane's insistence on the obligation owed to her in the article 'A tragedy of gratitude: Thomas Corneille's *Ariane* and the demolition of the hero', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 34.2 (1997), 183-95.

[25] It is worth remembering from the outset that Phèdre only agrees to flee with Thésée in the final scene of Act IV.

> De laisser sans scrupule agir toute sa flamme,
> Et voudrait, pour montrer ce qu'elle sent pour moi,
> Qu'Ariane eût cessé de prétendre à ma foi.   (ll. 225-31)[26]

The play can be read as an investigation of this idea: to what extent can friendship resist the ravages of a physical erotic love? It is clear from the beginning that Thésée has little or no interest in this bond of friendship and, unlike Phèdre, has no scruples in categorically attempting to destroy it to satisfy his own desires, a point I will return to below. Phèdre, for her part, is in constant turmoil, as is particularly obvious in I.iv, III.i and IV.v. Her reluctance to yield to her love for Thésée is partly founded on an awareness of the risks and sacrifices Ariane has made for him – and a corollary sense that Ariane therefore 'deserves' him (297-300) – and partly on a refusal to betray their sibling love:

> Mais trahir l'amitié dont on la voit sans cesse…
> Non, Thésée, elle m'aime avec trop de tendresse.
> D'un supplice si rude il faut la garantir;
> Sans doute elle en mourrait, je n'y puis consentir.   (ll. 325-29)[27]

Battling against this love, she later (at her sister's request) exhorts Thésée to return to Ariane despite her own feelings for him. So that there can be no doubt of her selflessness and virtue here, the dramatist makes Pirithoüs a witness to her (off-stage) interview with Thésée, and it is his reaction we are given:

> J'admire encor, Madame, avec quelle vertu
> Vous avez de nouveau si longtemps combattu.
> Par son manque de foi, contre vous-même armée,
> Vous avez fait paraître une sœur opprimée.
> Vous avez essayé par un tendre retour
> De ramener son cœur vers son premier amour.
> Et prière, et menace, et fierté de courage,
> Tout vient pour le fléchir d'être mis en usage.   (755-62)[28]

The strength of feeling for her sister implicit in this action, is underlined by the fact that she is distraught to think of herself as the cause of her sister's pain,[29] and goes on to exhort Pirithoüs to convince Thésée that she will not give in to her love. Far from playing the role of the archetypal rival and plotting against her sister in order to win her beloved at all costs, Phèdre is actively trying to dissuade Thésée in his love for her; as she comments to Pirithoüs: 'Ôtez-lui tout espoir que je puisse être à lui' (l. 796). This self-sacrifice, together with Ariane's blindness, are encapsulated in her comment to Ariane, pregnant with meaning beyond her sister's understanding: 'Si vous saviez pour vous qu'a fait ma tendresse…' (l. 845). At no stage does Phèdre enjoy her love of Thésée; in fact following

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[26] All references are to Thomas Corneille, *Ariane* in *Théâtre du XVIIe siecle*, t. II, éd. Jacques Scherer et Jacques Truchet, coll. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).
[27] See also ll. 810-12.
[28] These efforts are again underlined in Phèdre's later description of events to her sister (ll. 825ff).
[29] See, for example, her declaration in ll. 773-76.

Ariane's passionate outburst indicating her intention to kill her rival (unaware who it is), Phèdre sees her death as the necessary corollary of the fact that Thésée loves her (ll. 1413, 1416-17). At this point not only does Ariane seem a victim of the betrayal, but Phèdre also appears a victim – of her own passion (where have we heard that before?) and of Thésée's insistent love. Furthermore, she realises that to be betrayed by a family member will clearly worsen Ariane's plight (ll. 1410-13); when persuaded by Thésée to flee, it is her sister's despair that she dreads rather than her own death (ll. 1461-64). Once the decision is made in Thésée's favour, she demonstrates some of the lucidity of her later Racinian incarnation, as she bewails the situation:

> Oui, Prince, je veux trop ce que vous désirez.
> Elle se fie à moi, cette sœur, elle m'aime;
> C'est une ardeur sincère, une tendresse extrême,
> Jamais son amitié ne me refusa rien.
> Pour l'en récompenser je lui vole son bien
> Je l'expose aux rigueurs du sort le plus sévère,
> Je la tue, et c'est vous qui me le faites faire.
> Pourquoi vous ai-je aimé? (1468-75)

Torn between love and guilt, here she lucidly prioritises her love for Thésée, clearly aware of the consequences for her sister.

The indication here (l. 1471) of Ariane's love for Phèdre (certainly as Phèdre experienced it in the past) nuances the image of the domineering older sister in the present of the play. Despite Ariane's first comment concerning Phèdre ('J'aime Phèdre; tu sais combien elle m'est chère' (l. 425)), it seems that Ariane sees Phèdre's role as primarily to serve her (Ariane's) ends. This is initially apparent in her desire to marry Phèdre off to Pirithoüs to suit herself (l. 555), and with no thought for her sister's desires.[30] Nonetheless it is to her sister that she relates her distress, and to whom she turns, when she needs someone to plead her case to Thésée:

> Ma sœur, au nom des Dieux, ne m'abandonnez pas.
> Je sais que vous m'aimez, et vous le devez faire;
> Vous m'avez dès l'enfance été toujours si chère
> Que cette inébranlable et fidèle amitié
> Mérite bien de vous au moins quelque pitié. […]
> Enfin, ma sœur, enfin je n'espère qu'en vous. […]
> Sans vous, à mes malheurs où chercher du remède? (ll. 720-24, 732, 738)

On one level, obviously, the power of this passage, and others like it, for the audience, hinges on the dramatic irony of Ariane's words, as she unwittingly confides in her rival. Nonetheless, while her words are revelatory both of her manipulative personality, and of her emotional blindness of those around her, the fact remains that, taken in the spirit in which they are uttered, they underline a trust and a need for her sister which hallmarks the

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[30] Furthermore, she later reveals herself as false, in attempting to pass off as sisterly solicitude what was clearly earlier motivated by self-interest. (See ll. 1285-86).

sibling bond for her.[31] Similarly, when it becomes apparent that Thésée has fled in the dead of night, she has difficulty suspecting her sister of betrayal:

> Mais pourquoi m'alarmer de ma sœur?
> Sa tendresse pour moi, l'intérêt de sa gloire,
> Sa vertu, tout enfin me défend de rien croire.   (ll. 1588-90)

When the full extent of the betrayal is realised, it is indeed worsened by being caused by a sister (ll. 1635ff), as Phèdre had suspected, and furthermore because Ariane, wrongly, suspects her sister of having revelled in her pain and misfortune (l. 1651). It is what Ariane calls 'ma tendre amitié' which Phèdre has abused (l. 1649). Seeing as Ariane now seeks to kill her sister (ll. 1663 & 1740), it is clear that the *tendre amitié* is indeed a thing of the past.

  Leaving the sisters aside for a moment, Thésée's own behaviour merits comment. What must be clear in all of this is that Thésée ignores the sibling bond throughout and does everything in his power to counter every argument of Phèdre's. He is aware that to discover her rival in her sister would destroy Ariane (ll. 261-264); he falls far short of the noble character that Phèdre imagines when, as she suggests they should not see each other and conquer their love (ll. 341ff), he suggests her love is fickle, provoking Phèdre to upbraid him for making things worse as she tries to adhere to her 'fier devoir' which requires her to silence her love. He shows no sense of remorse for causing his new love any heartbreak, not to mind his old love (although he never loved Ariane), and continues to force the knife into the wound. Following Phèdre's confession that 'dès que je vous vois, / Ma tremblante vertu ne répond plus de moi', he cries:

> Ah! puisqu'en ma faveur l'Amour fait ce miracle,
> Oubliez qu'une sœur y voudra mettre obstacle.
> Pourquoi pour l'épargner trahir un si beau feu?   (ll. 365-67)

There is no sense that any other *trahison* might be taking place. Juxtaposed with Phèdre, this unfavourable portrayal of Thésée as ignoble and egocentric, rather than the hero of myth, can only throw into relief the virtue, albeit ultimately vanquished, of Phèdre and the conflict she incarnates, and hence evokes, it seems to me, audience sympathy for her.[32]

  What can we draw from all this? On one level it is clear that the sisters *were* united, sharing confidences, trust and mutual affection. The relationship of the two women within the play is still clearly framed within the parameters of that original bond. Ultimately what the play demonstrates is that Thésée was wrong: *amitié* could not withstand the pressures

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[31] Later, when she wants Phèdre to help her find out who her rival is, we are reminded of this need and dependency: 'Car je ne doute point qu'une amitié sincère
       Contre sa trahison n'arme votre colère
       Que vous ne ressentiez tout ce que sent mon cœur. […]
          Je vous connais, ma sœur.
       Aussi c'est seulement en vous ouvrant mon âme
       Que dans son désespoir je soulage ma flamme.' (ll. 1277-79, 1281-82)
 This latter remark is reminiscent of the opening line of Rochefort's definition of *amitié* cited above.
[32] For a different analysis of how Thésée's heroic stature is diminished throughout the play, see Harrison, *op. cit*.

of *amour*. In sacrificing *amitié* to *amour*, the play provides a demonstration of the involuntary nature of passionate love (see l. 781) and its nefarious effects, that override all other concerns to the destruction of moral standards and the annihilation of the integrity of the individual. Phèdre's *gloire*, *vertu* and sisterly *tendresse* (that Ariane evokes in l. 1589) are all obliterated, in a fashion hardly surprising for a contemporary of Racine's. What of course it also does, is to demonstrate not only how passion can destroy familial affection, but furthermore how a relationship between two women is sacrificed to a male-female relationship, providing an example of what Amy K. Levin refers to as 'the way patriarchal tales of sisters sacrifice closeness among women to intimacy between men and women'.[33]

Family dramas

A very different model of sisters appears in dramas where the relationship of the two sisters is played out against a larger network of family ties: it is these ties and the larger family crisis which define the sisters' bond. One example can be found in Rotrou's version of the story of Antigone, one of Western mythology's most famous sisters / daughters, and focus of countless artistic representations.[34] Offspring of Œdipus and Jocasta, and simultaneously half-sisters of Œdipus (as also are their brothers Polyneices and Eteocles), Antigone and Ismene represent an unparalleled blood union of sisterhood, united in their incestuous origins.

The original classical myth, found in the tragedies of Æsycheles, Sophocles, Euripedes and Seneca in addition to the epic by Statius, and the subject of two sixteenth-century French tragedies by Robert Garnier and Antoine de Baïf, would have been well known to Rotrou's public.[35] Central to the original Sophoclean text, and what Simone Fraisse refers to, in Lévi-Strauss terms, as one of the six *mythèmes*,[36] is the contrast between the sisters' attitudes which sets the tone for the Greek play in its Prologue.[37] Since Rotrou's play (1639) starts earlier in the story than Sophocles', this encounter occurs in Act III.v in the seventeenth-century text, following Ismène's announcement of Créon's decree to Antigone in III.iii.[38] In the lengthy exchange (over 100 lines) between the sisters which constitutes this scene, it is not immediately apparent that any opposition between the

[33] Levin, *op. cit.,* p. 24.

[34] For details of the Antigone myth in its numerous guises, see George Steiner, *Antigones: The Antigone Myth in Western Literature, Art and Thought* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986); Simone Fraisse, *Le Mythe d'Antigone* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1974); Jacques Morel, 'Le mythe d'Antigone, de Garnier à Racine', *Agréables mensognes. Essais sur le théâtre français du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1991), pp. 361-67.

[35] Following the fratricidal combat between Polyneices and Eteocles, provoked mainly by the latter's refusal to alternate the throne of Thebes with his brother as originally agreed, Creon, successor to the Theban throne, refuses Polyneices a burial, and decrees that his corpse be left on the battlefield to be devoured by dogs and crows. Although he has threatened that anyone who defies him will be buried alive, Antigone refuses to see her dead brother subjected to such an inhuman fate, and secretly attempts to bury Polyneices, thus endangering (and ultimately sacrificing) her own life. Her sister Ismene opposes her actions which she sees as futile. Antigone is duly buried alive but commits suicide before she can die of hunger.

[36] Fraisse, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

[37] On the sister's dialogue in the Prologue, see Steiner, pp. 208-13. On the relationship between the sisters, see Steiner pp. 144-51, and Christine Downing, *Psyché's Sisters. Re-imagining the Meaning of Sisterhood* (London: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 80-84.

[38] Rotrou follows Garnier in dramatising in one play both the story of Polyneices and Eteocles, and the epic tale of Antigone. The edition used here is that established by Bénédicte Louvat, in Jean de Rotrou, *Théâtre complet*, t.2 (Paris: S.T.F.M., 1999).

sisters exists. In fact, on the contrary, the reader-spectator is reminded of the unity of the two sisters in their shared parentage and shared (cursed) fate: Antigone's address to 'ma sœur, ma chère Ismène' at the opening of the scene abounds with plural pronouns and determiners as she bemoans the fate of *nos deux frères*, and *notre sang*, since 'le Ciel aujourd'hui nous déclare sa haine' and Créon's reign 'déjà nous persécute' (ll. 807-18). Ismène clearly agrees, referring to Créon's law as *impie* and his decree concerning Polynice as *inhumaine* (ll. 828-30). In Antigone's second intervention, that unity is again underlined; it is clear that she sees Créon's decree as a challenge deliberately aimed at the two sisters, now sole surviving members of Œdipe's family, whose nobility and familial honour indicate their pathway. She appears to have no doubt that they will act together:

> C'est à nous qu'elle [l'ordonnance] parle, à nous qu'elle s'adresse: […]
> Or il est temps, ma sœur, de montrer, qui nous sommes,
> Et qui peut plus sur nous, ou des Dieux, ou des hommes;
> C'est ici que le sang, et la condition
> Ne nous permettent pas une lâche action,
> La vertu doit ici forcer la tyrannie,
> Peut-être que plus faible elle sera punie.   (ll. 832, 835-40)

It is here that the cracks begin to appear in her unity with Ismène as the latter is clearly horrified at what she sees as futile (*inutile*) contravention of the decree.[39] The stichomythic exchange which follows highlights not so much an animosity between the two as quite simply the opposing moralities which the two represent. Against Antigone's heroic / fanatical stance (depending on one's view-point) is Ismène's pragmatic, ordinary, sane voice. While the latter is not lacking in courage (as she comments, 'L'espérance me manque, et non pas le courage' (l. 852)), she sees the undertaking of an exploit which is destined to fail, and from which there can be no concrete beneficial result, as pointless.[40] Any efforts to bury Polynice's body will ultimately be thwarted by Créon, and Antigone will, in addition, lose her life. One of the reasons Ismène sees the idea as destined to fail is based on a sense of their impotence (ll. 850, 870) which in turn seems linked to their (physical) weakness as women:

> Considérez, ma sœur, que restant sans défense,
> Le pur rebut du sort, et la même impuissance;
> Filles, pour dire assez que nous ne pouvons rien,
> Un peu d'abaissement aujourd'hui nous sied bien.   (ll. 869-72)[41]

However, Rotrou does not develop this here into an explicit opposition of Antigone as 'masculine' and Ismène as 'feminine', as one finds in his sources.[42] In the final part of the scene, the tone changes once again as Ismène realises she cannot dissuade Antigone from

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[39] 'Dieux! que proposez-vous? et que pouvons-nous faire, / Qui ne soit inutile au repos de mon frère?' (ll. 847-48).

[40] Three times she voices variations on this theme (ll. 854, 862, 900).

[41] This is toned down from the Garnier text which refers to 'nostre sexe imbecile' (l. 1568).

[42] On issues of masculinity and femininity, see Steiner, pp. 237-42, and Fraisse, pp. 52-57. In Rotrou's text, the notion of Antigone as 'male' does appear later: her defiance in her confrontation with Créon excites the remarks: 'O mâle cœur de fille! ô vertu non commune!' (l. 1189).

her path, and she can only admire 'ce grand cœur, cette grande assurance' (l. 885). Interestingly, this is the only point at which Ismène mentions her reverence for the law (l. 886): such a brief reference would imply that fear of authority is not Ismène's primary motivation for inaction. Throughout the scene, therefore, the sisters seem less polarised into the opposing categories of strength / weakness, masculinity / femininity, revolt / conservatism which dominates their representation in other ancient and modern sources. Furthermore, while Antigone does see her sister's attitude as one of *faiblesse* and is disparaging towards her because of it, the harsh criticisms of Sophocles' Antigone towards her sister are played down. The opposition becomes, in fact, one common to seventeenth-century tragedy between a heroism which revels in confronting death and a pragmatism which values life.

The situation is different in the second of the two main encounters between the sisters (IV.iv). Following the Sophocles text, Ismène, in a dramatic change of heart, declares to Créon that she played a role in the attempted burial and demands to die with Antigone. Her claims and pleas are scornfully and brusquely rejected by her disdainful sister, who accuses her of earlier cowardice, a charge a rueful Ismène now accepts. What motivates the two sisters here? While Ismène's words imply a genuine change of heart and a desire for a glorious death,[43] it is possible that she is primarily motivated by a desire not to live on without her sister: as she moans, 'Ne vous possédant plus, quel bien me sera doux?' (l. 1283). Not only is this desire consistent with the sources, but furthermore, Ismène changes tack towards the end of the scene and tries to persuade Créon to spare her sister for the sake of his own son Hémon, Antigone's beloved. By implication, if the sisters cannot be united in death, perhaps they could still be united in life. For Antigone, on the other hand, consideration for her sister seems irrelevant. In fact, she is anxious firstly to differentiate herself from the allegedly fearful Ismène (ll. 1267-1272) and secondly to exclude her from the special relationship Antigone shares with their brother:

> J'ai seule aimé mon frère, il n'appelle que moi.
> […]
> Non, non, ne prenez part à rien qui m'appartienne,
> L'ouvrage fut tout mien, la mort est toute mienne.   (ll. 1275, 1281-82)

Given the fact that this latter statement is untrue – since her sister-in-law Argie played a role in the attempted burial, as we will see below – her exploits are only 'solely' hers to the extent that they are not her sister's. Separation and not unity is what now defines the sisters. Long gone are the terms of endearment and concord of the opening of III.v: there can be no union where there are no shared values. Their (recent) past is no longer shared. In her exclusion of Ismène here (from this recent past and from union in death together), Antigone, ironically, denies to her sister the fulfilment of a sibling devotion which (as regards Polynice) defines her own existence.[44]

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[43] See ll. 1276 and 1280 respectively.

[44] As Downing says of the Sophocles original: 'Antigone ends up vehemently denying to Ismene the very sense of irrevocable kinship that motivates her to bury Polyneices. Her sense of drastic estrangement leads her to betray, with respect to her sister, the very heart of her own deepest convictions.' Downing, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84. See also Steiner, p. 278. The word *amitié*, which figures eight times in the Rotrou play, is used six times to refer to Antigone and Polynice and never to the two sisters.

Given the centrality of the bond between Polynice and Antigone to the plot – it being the catalyst which motivates Antigone to defy Créon and hence uphold divine law – its special nature has been set up from early in the play. Theirs is a love which transcends sibling affection:

> Une étroite amitié de tous temps nous a joints
> Qui passe de bien loin cette instinct ordinaire
> Par qui la sœur s'attache aux intérêts du frère.   (ll. 210-12)

She later comments to Argie, 'L'amitié nous joignait bien plus que la nature' (l. 994) in reply to her sister-in-law's remark: 'Vous ne fûtes qu'un cœur, et qu'une âme, et qu'un sang' (l. 992). Indeed, the most lyrical expression of her sibling love (in Act II.2, as Antigone tries to persuade her brother to abandon the combat) is not without erotic overtones.[45] In any case, incestuous or not, in this triangular family relationship one sibling bond is used to alienate another. It is therefore another variation of a female-female bond being sacrificed to a male-female one. Antigone sacrifices her relationship with Ismène (and her life) to live up to her ideal (possibly incestuous) love for Polynice.

It is left to Ismène in the final scenes of the play to recount Antigone's death to Hémon. Interestingly, her lamentations here do not focus on the passing of her sister (although she did try to prevent her suicide) but on herself, her solitude and her cowardice. Rotrou gives the most explicit expression of the sisters' difference to her to voice ('Le sang qu'elle a versé, l'embellit, et me tache, / Il la peint généreuse, et me témoigne lâche (ll. 1717-18)), and the play ends with a further self-criticism:

> Lâche, ne puis-je donc faire un dernier effort:
> Mourrai-je mille fois, pour la peur d'une mort?   (ll. 1790-91).

Rotrou's Ismène seems, in fact, rather ambiguous. Is her initial pragmatism merely a feint? Is she in fact cowardly throughout? While analysis of Ismène in Rotrou's sources (beyond the scope of this article) would throw further light on the dramatist's borrowings and modifications, suffice to say that the picture at the end of the play is of radically different sisters, a heroic and disparaging Antigone, and a pusillanimous and tearful Ismène.

The representation of the sisters' opposition is considerably nuanced by the inclusion of their sister-in-law Argie, a character who is given little attention in the ancient tragedies and whom Rotrou borrowed from Statius' epic.[46] The difference in the relationships between the women is highlighted by the juxtaposition of Argie's appearances with the scenes of confrontation between Ismène and Antigone. From Ismène's attempts to dissuade Antigone from burying Polynice (III.v), the scene moves directly to Argie searching for Polynice's body among the corpses on the battlefield, seeking also to bury him (III.vi). This scene in turn moves to the first meeting of Antigone

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[45] On the idea of incestuous overtones in the love between this brother and sister, themselves born of incest, see Fraisse, pp. 69-78 and Steiner, pp. 160-62. There is a similarity between this scene and Act III.iii in La Calprenède's *La Mort de Mithridate* (1637), where Berenice tries to persuade Pharnace likewise to renounce his decision and spare their family. Interestingly, the role played in La Calprenède by the wife is here played by the sister.
[46] See Louvat, pp. 171-75.

and Argie, united in their grief and in their revolt (III.vii).[47] In Act IV, she and Antigone appear together in defiance before Créon (IV.iii), before they are interrupted by Ismène's arrival in IV.iv.

The inclusion and characterisation of Argie is interesting in terms of female relationships. She and Antigone are close here because they are bound by the same value system: they are doubles, not opposites. This is all the more striking since there is in fact potential for rivalry: as Argie remarks about Polynice: 'Je paraissais sa sœur, et vous sembliez sa femme' (l. 1002). The implied interchangeability underlines their quality as doubles while also throwing further light on the relationship between Polynice and Antigone. In the confrontation with Créon, the arguments put forward by Antigone and Argie complement each other.[48] This complementarity has the dual effect of, on the one hand, diminishing Antigone's uniqueness while, on the other hand, doubling the image of female heroism. In sum, it provides a moving example of closeness and affection between women, as Argie provides the support Antigone's blood sister denied her.

Accomplices and devotees

The two final plays under examination here, Du Ryer's prose tragi-comedy *Berenice* (1645) and Boyer's *La Sœur généreuse* (1647),[49] portray the sister bond as one of intimacy and solidarity. In *Berenice*, the sisters do not represent a threat to each other's happiness – as we see in two of Du Ryer's other tragi-comedies, *Cleomedon* (1636) and *Anaxandre* (1655) – but rather are united against the tyrannical father figures who represent the obstacle, in typical tragi-comedy fashion. The six scenes of the opening act constitute one lengthy exchange between the sisters, punctuated by a number of small interruptions. The play opens with a scene of mutual exchanges and confidences, and the tone is set from Berenice's opening line: 'Estes-vous contente, ma sœur, & puis-je mieux vous monstrer mon amitié, qu'en vous descouvrant mon amour?' Having duly done so, she remarks, 'Vous n'auriez pas de raison de me cacher vos secrets, apres que ie vous ay monstré les miens' which evokes the response from her sister Amasie: 'Non, non, ie ne puis rien vous cacher', followed by her confidences in turn. The tone of intimacy and trust is set. However, the girls' relationship is not free of tension: as their conversation continues, both reveal surprise at the other's love object. Berenice has fallen in love above her station with the king's son Tarsis, while Amasie's love for the subject Tirinte is perceived as being below her station. As both try not only to justify their choice but to assert the superiority of that choice, friction is obvious in the exchange of caustic remarks. Berenice's comment: 'Vous appellerez votre amour generosité & d'autre[s] l'appelleront bassesse' is met with Amasie's retort: 'Vous appellerez votre amour grandeur de courage, & d'autre[s] l'appelleront temerité' (I.iii). The exposition of these opposing views concerning love would no doubt have appealed to the salon-going audience of Du Ryer's day, for whom this debate was familiar and the issue of exogamous love of perennial

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[47] Louvat sees this scene as 'un des sommets du pathétique dans la pièce' (p. 203). The complementarity between the two was hinted at earlier since Argie's attempts to dissuade her husband from the fraternal combat (I.vi) is mirrored by Antigone's tirade to Polynice (II.ii).

[48] In fact, Rotrou here gives to Argie part of the argumentation which the source tragedies give to Antigone herself. See Louvat, p. 293, n. 118.

[49] Pierre Du Ryer, *Berenice* (Paris: A. de Sommaville & A. Courbé, 1645); Claude Boyer, *La Sœur généreuse* (Paris: A. Courbé, 1647).

interest.[50] On one level, each sister's choice is inherently a criticism of the other's values; both wish their opinion to be echoed in order to be proven right. However, such contrasting views do not point to a deep-rooted rift between the sisters but rather to the dynamics of differentiation and identity which is central to sisters' relationships, and clearly not exclusive of mutual affection. On the whole, their *amitié* is marked by solidarity and unity, as they provide support and affection for each other. When their discussion about the relative merits of their loves is interrupted by the news that there is a possibility of having to leave Crete (hence their lovers), solidarity immediately re-surfaces as Berenice comments: 'Ha, ma sœur, qu'elle [sic] nouvelle infortune s'oppose à nostre felicité?' (I.v). The similarity of their fates, inextricably linked, overrides any differences: as Amasie remarks, 'quelque difference qu'il y ayt dans nos passions nostre fortune est semblable, puisque nous sommes toutes deux genée[s] par l'inegalité de nostre amour' (I.i).

Interestingly, a doubt is sown in the spectators' minds when unexpectedly, at the opening of Act III, Amasie declares she will marry Berenice's beloved Tarsis, as the king has ordained, claiming to be more interested in the crown than love, and apparently inconsiderate of her sister. However, she quickly reveals her comments have been made in jest. Since gratuitous torment of her sister is not in character, this is possibly included to heighten audience suspense, or to highlight a playful side to Amasie's nature.[51] At any rate, she clarifies matters immediately:

> quoy que l'on puisse faire, ie n'obeïray iamais à vostre desavantage, & toutes les beautés de la couronne ne me seront iamais si chere que la satisfaction de ma sœur.
> (III.i).

Moments later, Berenice asks Amasie her opinion of a love letter which she has received from Tarsis. Surprised by their father who becomes angry that his daughter is receiving love letters and begins to upbraid Amasie, mistakenly assuming the letter to be hers since she is holding it, Amasie lies to shield her sister. Recognition is immediate from Berenice as she comments in an aside: 'O la meilleure sœur qui ayt iamais aymé une sœur; elle se charge de ma honte, afin de me tirer de peine', an idea that Du Ryer emphasises since he gives it to Amasie to quietly comment as she leaves the room: 'C'est pour vous espargner, que i'ay souffert tant d'injures'. Interestingly, the complicity between the women, or their *intelligence* together as their father calls it (III.ii), plays a role in the plot since Amasie's fostering of their father's error leads him to order Berenice to meet Tarsis in order to dissuade him of his love, thus facilitating a rare authorised meeting between the two

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[50] For Amasie, love should be based on merit, irrespective of social standing: 'ie croy qu'un homme est grand des qu'il merite de l'estre, & des qu'il merite d'estre grand il merite aussi d'estre aymé'. […] She later adds, '[I]l y a bien plus de generosité à aymer un moindre que soy qu'à en aymer un plus grand. On ayme les grands par interest & l'on ayme les autres d'un veritable amour, puisqu'on les ayme par leur vertu, & que l'amour qu'on a pour eux est entierement desinteressée'. According to Berenice, 'ou que nous ne devons point aymer, ou que nous ne devons aymer que des objets dont l'amour nous soit glorieuse, & qui nous fassent reluire en nous bruslant' (I.iii).

[51] H. C. Lancaster sees her as a playful character. See *Pierre Du Ryer. Dramatist* (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1913), p. 139.

lovers.[52] Complicit, intimate, affectionate and mutually supportive – these two women are clearly friends in the modern sense of the term.

A final representation of the sister relationship presents an idealized image of sisterhood as selfless devotion. The heroines of Boyer's *La Sœur généreuse*, as the title implies, are the very epitome of virtue and *générosité*. As their spotless heroic characters are incapable of any whiff of vice, it is not surprising that their relationship with each other is based on mutual understanding, love and trust. Since the two uphold the same value code, and value their honour over life, there is no place for disagreement. Just as they often echo each other's sentiments, they can be seen as mirror images of each other, each providing for the other a veritable *alter ego*.

For the *sœur généreuse* of the title, Sophite, being a sister (particularly to a captive queen) entails self-abnegation and sacrifice. From Act I.iii onwards, she repeatedly expresses a desire to die for her sister, the queen Clomire (older in age and superior in station), if necessary, and a considerable part of the plot of the play revolves around her organising to be murdered in her sister's stead. In fact, even before the play opens, desire to see her sister has led her to flirt with death and has led to her capture, despite her skills on the battle field: 'L'interest de sa sœur a trahi sa franchise / Et la fut exposer au peril des trespas' (I.iii). Following their emotional reunion (I.iii), Clomire seeks support from her sister as the latter gives her the bad news of the kingdom's fall ('Soutiens avecque moy, l'effort de cét orage'). Sophite demonstrates *constance*, *tendresse*, and *courage* in her sister's eyes, proving 'un exemple si rare', the 'seul appuy de l'espoir qui [lui] reste' (I.iv & II.iv). Boyer underlines their equality of virtue by giving them mirror situations which require them to be equally virtuous. Realising that Sophite is the unwanted subject of the king's son Hermodor's affections as Clomire herself is of the king's, the similarity of their fates strikes Clomire:

> D'où vient qu'un pareil sort afflige l'une & l'autre?
> Il semble que le Ciel iniuste à mes desirs
> Pour esgaler nos maux conte tous nos soupirs,
> Ou bien que mon mal-heur, pour devenir extréme
> Se reproduit lui-mesme en un autre moi-mesme,
> Fatale esgalité plus dure que mon mal,
> Partage trop iniuste, alors qu'il est égal

which provokes the reply from Sophite:

> Pourquoy vous plaignez-vous d'un si iuste partage?
> Nous avons mesme sort comme méme courage:
> Ie connois vostre cœur, vous connaissez le mien,
> Ma sœur apres cela ne nous plaignons de rien.   (I.iv)

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[52] Although the situation seems hopeless when it is revealed that Tarsis is in fact Criton's son, thus making his love for Berenice incestuous, all is conveniently righted when it is in turn revealed that Berenice is not actually Criton's daughter but in fact the king of Crete's since the children were exchanged at birth. Young love wins out, as the conventions of the genre necessitate. This, of course, means that the sisters are not actually blood sisters, but they merit inclusion here since they have grown up as such and believe themselves such until moments before the play ends.

This lyrical duet ends, fittingly, with them both deciding to die together, in order to save their honour, which is endangered by their amorous captors (I.iv).

Aware that the jealous queen is plotting to kill Clomire, Sophite decides to take her place, hoping that the king, appropriately horrified by the queen's crime, will release her sister (IV.ii). Feigning to believe the queen's suspicions of adultery between Clomire and the king, she asks Hermodor to murder her sister, fully intending to take her place (IV.iv). The plan is foiled in the end as fortunately Hermodor baulks at the murder at the last moment. Evoking the reasons for her actions, Sophite links her *amitié* with honour:

> Mourons, s'il faut mourir, mais mourons pour ma sœur
> Faisons-la profitter de mon dernier mal-heur; […]
> Contentons par un coup l'honneur et l'amitié.   (IV.ii)

Following the event, in her explanations to her sister, the same link is made, as *amitié* and honour are seen as the 'double devoir' which inspired her behaviour (V.v). To remind us of the mutuality of their affection, and to underline again the mirror effect, Clomire expresses her readiness and willingness to die if that is what her sister wants (as she temporarily believes Sophite's pretence to be allied with the murderous queen (V.v)). A final comment of Sophite's is worthy of note. Towards the end of the play she comments:

> I'ay tasché de deux sœurs du moins d'en sauver une;
> Et d'un tout qu'on veut perdre, une noble pitié
> M'oblige à conserver la plus belle moitié.

The two sisters therefore represent 'un tout', two halves of the same whole (a common idea in modern theories of blood sisterhood).

So, what conclusions can be drawn from this representation? On one level, the play provides an example of a tragi-comedy where virtue is threatened by a tyrannical figure (here represented by the king, his son, and particularly his jealous consort), and, true to form, youth and beauty and virtue win out. (The imperatives of the genre cannot be overlooked). In terms of the theme of *amitié*, we are presented, at the very least, with a conventional representation of friendship in the epic tradition, where one friend dies, or is prepared to die, for the other on the battlefield. However, it seems to me that these women go beyond the epic tradition, and represent here the *amitié* of moral philosophy, of Dupleix' definition: the *conformité des volontez,* the *connoissance de l'autre*, the *autre moy-mesme* of Aristotle as Boyer gives it to Clomire to say, the *amitié* which is inextricably linked with honour, the *amitié honneste*, *vraie*, ou *vertueuse*. Of further interest is that, notwithstanding the moral equality which underlines this friendship, Boyer makes them politically unequal: the women's friendship is between sovereign and subject. (As Sophite points out: 'Comme subjete & sœur, i'ay deu mourir pour vous, / Et conserver un sang, dont le Ciel est jalous'). So, in a single stroke, Boyer dispenses with two received ideas, firstly that women are incapable of friendship, and secondly that true friendship is impossible between sovereign and subject. This somewhat radical representation of female friends can be partly explained by the feminist trends of the time. The year is 1647: the climate is one of Le Moyne's *Gallerie des femmes fortes*, Scudéry's *femmes illustres*.

These sisters are the very incarnation of *la femme forte, illustre, héroïque*; their *amitié* is a form of *générosité*.[53] This image of female friendship, therefore, is another example of the questioning of gender constructions typical of what Ian Maclean terms the 'new' feminism of the 1640s.[54]

Conclusion

It is clear, then, that it is not only in Greek myth and the nineteenth-century novel that the relationship of blood sisters is an important concern.[55] These plays provide us with a range of configurations of sister relationships – based on greater or lesser degrees of affection and involving greater or lesser degrees of contrast and differentiation – and point to blood sisterhood as an interesting and rich theme for dramatists to exploit. Even a play such as *Ariane* which provides a variation on the patriarchal 'sister plot', defining sisters and their relationship uniquely in relation to men, contrives to nuance the dilemma of the sisters, and to portray their conflict as sincere and tormented. Interestingly, not all of the plays incite the reader/spectator to choose between the sisters. In some cases differentiation between the two women is insufficient to provoke a choice between them; in others, sympathy is aroused for both sisters. As always, choosing one sister over another is as revelatory of the reader's own value system (Ismène or Antigone?) as it is of the dramatist's characterisation. A more thorny issue is that of female friendship. Since these women are sisters, do these plays tell us more about a sibling bond than about women's capacity for friendship? On one level, if *amitié* is understood in its broadest sense of affection, then these plays quite simply challenge the notion that women are incapable of it. On another level, an example of the traditionally philosophical definition of *amitié* can be found, as we saw above, in Boyer's text, while for breezy complicity and a model of sisters who appear to like each other as well as love each other, *Berenice* provides the best example. Of course, while the values of *honnêteté* and *vertu* central to friendship are more likely to be found in tragedy and tragi-comedy, it would be interesting to examine how sisters are represented in comedy. Although it is probable that many images would tend to reinforce conventional ideas of sisterly rivalry, not least for comic effect (Molière's Armande and Henriette are an obvious example), nonetheless examination of these characters in the light of theories of friendship and sisterhood could throw further light on an early modern *imaginaire des sœurs*.

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[53] It is hardly surprising that both women are skilled warriors, who are only captured because their followers deserted them.

[54] See Ian Maclean, *Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature, 1610-1652* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

[55] In addition to Phèdre & Ariane and Antigone & Ismene, Greek mythic sisters include Circe & Pasiphaé, Procne & Philomela, Helen & Clytemnestra and Iphigenia, Electra & Chrysothemis.