Malhonnêtes femmes?
Women Performing Same-Sex Friendship in Seventeenth-Century France

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Most honnêtes femmes are hidden treasures, who are kept safe only because one does not look for them.
François de La Rochefoucauld¹

L'honnête homme was a model for ideal seventeenth-century French masculine behavior. It entailed a certain quality of manners to which a man of society, if he wished to be regarded highly by his peers, should aspire. But what did the concept of honnêteté mean for women? Could a sex thought to be innately less than virtuous aspire to be honnête?² La Rochefoucauld's maxim would certainly indicate that, in his opinion, honnêtes femmes were most uncommon in Old Regime France. If this remarkable being did exist, surely she had to be a "hidden

¹ François de La Rochefoucauld, Maximes et réflexions diverses (1678; repr., Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1977), Maxim 368, 77. All translations are my own except when otherwise stated. The French concepts of honnête and honnêteté are very difficult to translate into equivalent words in English. They encompass a set of ideal social conduct and practices revered by seventeenth-century French high society. The notion of honnête resembles the modern ideal of being reputable. Given this difficulty, I have chosen to keep the terms honnête and its opposite, malhonnête, for accuracy.

² Especially given the misogynistic rhetoric of many men engaged in the long lasting querelle des femmes, which swept over Europe and tainted the way women were perceived for hundreds of years. See Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the Querelle des femmes, 1400–1789," in Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 65-109.
treasure." But what La Rochefoucauld implied in his maxim was more than the extraordinary nature of such a female character. In a typical play on words, he also revealed the absolute necessity for an honnête woman to remain socially concealed and therefore unseen if she desired to be thought of as honnête. Yet public recognition of her honnêteté, if indeed such a woman could be found, would simultaneously ruin that seemingly impossible ideal.

La Rochefoucauld's satirical and somewhat misogynistic stance on female honnêteté and his requirement that it remain socially invisible was not unique in seventeenth-century French culture. An interesting dichotomy arises at the heart of Antoine Furetière's definition of "honnesteté" in his 1690 Dictionnaire universel, one marked by a construction of gender that limits women's access to and performance of honnêteté. Initially, Furetière defines the term as meaning, simply, "moral propriety, decorum." He goes on to explain: "the rules of honnêteté are those of decency and good morals." Although the essential characteristics of honnêteté remain ungendered for the moment, very soon his definition begins to bifurcate into two distinctly gendered paths. On the one hand, Furetière defines what constitutes honnêteté in a man primarily as accomplishment and action: "honnêteté in men is a way of acting appropriately, sincerely, courteously, obligingly, politely. He showed me countless honnêtetés when I visited him. I found honnêteté in all his actions." While actions define the honnête man, in contrast, the honnête woman is far more limited in what she can actually do. Indeed, his definition of feminine honnêteté is one anchored in the domains of female passivity and, especially, self-control: "honnêteté in women is defined by chastity, timidity, feminine modesty, and restraint." It is fair to deduce that, for Furetière, the

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3 In fact, in the previous maxim, La Rochefoucauld pointed out the unbearable social constraint called for by female honnêteté: "There are but a few honnêtes women who are not weary of their work." Ibid., Maxim 367, 77.

seventeenth-century honnête homme is judged for who he is and, chiefly, by what he does, while the honnête femme is deemed so on the basis of who she must not be and, above all, by what she must not do. Finally, although Furetière briefly acknowledges Father du Bosc's writings on the honnête woman, he promptly dismisses du Bosc's emphasis on women having qualities and potential equal to men, which would enable them to be honnête. Instead, he gives his own interpretation of what a woman must be in order to deserve the epithet honnête: "The honnête woman is embodied particularly by she who is chaste, prudish, and modest, who gives no reason to be the subject of conversations, or even cause for suspicion." Again, it appears that to deserve the socially desirable distinction of honnête, a woman must be guided by the notion of restraint, but she must also clearly be undetectable, unnoticeable, that is to say, invisible to (male) others.

Given the obvious gender difference embedded in Furetière's concept of honnêteté, how does his definition and construction of the honnête femme inform our readings of female friendship and its most intimate manifestation, female homoeroticism, in seventeenth-century French texts? To what extent does the female friend take into account and observe these codes of moral restraint and physical moderation prescribed by Furetière and La

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5 Jacques du Bosc, L’honneste femme (Paris, 1632). This is the first of a three-volume work that appeared in several editions between 1632 and 1643.


7 “Honneste femme, se dit particulierement de celle qui est chaste, prude & modeste, qui ne donne aucune occasion de parler d’elle, ni même de la soupçonner.” We note that the phrase “ni même de la soupçonner” has an ambiguity that suggests two different meanings: "not even to suspect her of attracting conversations," or "not even to suspect her presence." I have chosen to translate this simply as "or even cause for suspicion," to suggest the same ambiguity.
Rochefoucauld in her performance of friendship? Do female friends and couples all adhere to prescribed notions of feminine self-control? How do they follow this male-imposed ideal of feminine moderation in their emotional outpourings in order to remain honnête or to achieve honnêteté? And, more important, are there any consequences when female friends encounter the concept of female restraint identified explicitly in Furetière's definition? I wish to reflect on these questions by examining Jean de La Bruyère's *Les caractères* and Madeleine de Scudéry's *Mathilde (d'Aguilar)*, because both texts deal specifically with the issue of whether female friendship and female friends can, in fact, be honnêtes.

The chapter "Of Women" in La Bruyère's *Les caractères* (1688) contains a moralistic and highly satirical depiction of female friends. In it, La Bruyère also passes a cruel verdict on the consequences of the lack of emotional restraint in female friendship. In the eighty-first character, La Bruyère offers the following caricature of the female disposition: "The woman who is insensible is one who has not yet seen the one she is to love." For the moment, his portrait appears to be completely unrelated to female friendship. But La Bruyère is about to depict the most dangerous form of all female friendships, that is to say, the exclusive female bond and its devastating consequences. His narrative recounts the tale of Emira, a woman entirely unmoved by male affection. The narrator introduces her as "a very beautiful woman called Emira, who was known throughout the town less for her beauty than for the severity of her conduct and especially for the indifference that she maintained in regards to all men whom, she said, she saw without danger and with no other feelings than the ones she felt for her female friends or for her brothers." Although the tale is only beginning, Emira already appears as a young woman who is far from the ideal honnête femme; her public self-avowed indifference to men and her subsequent reputation as a woman indifferent to masculine desire are surely signs of excessive and unacceptable overt female behavior. In fact, not only does Emira remain insensitive to men, she also refuses to understand the very nature of heterosexual
love: "[S]he did not believe the least in all the follies that, she was told, love had caused throughout the ages; and the ones she had seen herself, she could not comprehend." Emira rejects the universality of heterosexual love that is implicit in the text's reference to its past and present manifestations and that also possesses a mythical or fairy-tale like quality ("the follies that, she was told, love had caused throughout the ages"). More important and with far more serious consequences, her rejection of men is contrasted with her devotion to female friendship. Indeed, as if her refusal to understand and to enter the heterosexual economy was not enough, Emira "knew only friendship." While Emira's refusal of men is well known by all, her feelings for a particular woman become even more public. The narrator explains that:

A young and charming person to whom she owed this experience [friendship] had made it so sweet for her that she could only think of how to prolong it, and she could not imagine how any other feeling could ever weaken those of deep respect and trust, which gave her so much contentment. She would only ever speak of Euphrosyna—that was the name of her faithful friend, and all of Smyrna could only speak of Emira and Euphrosyna.

In other words, Emira has found complete emotional satisfaction with Euphrosyna and cannot imagine any other mode of intimate human relationship as fulfilling. Their female intimacy and emotional self-sufficiency prompt gossip, as the whole community knows of the two women's affection for one another. In fact, they express their fondness for each other so openly and publicly, it has acquired a sort of legendary status in Smyrna. Indeed, the narrator insists soon after that "their friendship became a proverb."

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La Bruyère's representation of female friendship, while appearing thus far to be without prejudice, quickly takes a turn for the worse for the outspoken heroine Emira. For when it comes to friendship, no woman should ever enter the public domain; this is, of course, a privilege given traditionally only to men. Women's friendships must remain in the private realm, the domain of the silenced, the unspoken, the invisible, as suggested by La Rochefoucauld's maxim, and that of female restraint, as called for in Furetière's definition. And so, while Emira partly adheres to the honnête femme's conduct by being chaste (given her profound dislike of heterosexual love), she has made the blameworthy and fatal mistake of becoming the subject of gossip. That is to say, she has transgressed Furetière's rule for female honnêteté: a woman "who gives no reason to be the subject of conversations," who remains therefore undetected, unnoticeable.

Emira's public notoriety rapidly increases when she rejects five suitors in succession. Three of her lovers, crippled by their lovesickness for her and emotionally wounded by the scorn and contempt she shows them, commit suicide. At this point in the portrait, the narrator brutally interrupts his narrative to inform

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10 La Bruyère, Les caractères, 132.
the reader that "the one who was to avenge them had not yet appeared."\textsuperscript{11} Not surprisingly, when the lover Ctesiphon does come, not only does Emira fall madly in love with him, but the male avenger also ruins the intimate bond that the two women share by being completely indifferent to Emira while desiring Euphrosyna: "He had eyes for Euphrosyna only, told her that she was beautiful; and the normally indifferent Emira became jealous."\textsuperscript{12} In a tour de force worthy of La Bruyère, female friendship is supplanted by the divine and inescapable powers of heterosexual love. Emira "distances herself from Euphrosyna, no longer sees in her the merits which had charmed her, loses all taste for conversation; she no longer loves her; and this change causes [Emira] to feel that, in her [own] heart, love has taken the place of friendship."\textsuperscript{13} Just as the friend undergoes a radical change to become the enemy, the reversal of the old (public) image of the perfect (female) couple is also complete. Smyrna now has new gossip, as "[t]he news [of the young lovers] is spread about the town."\textsuperscript{14} Once famously known for her worship of the female friend and for her refusal of male desire, the proud Emira quickly degenerates into a woman driven to madness by the unrequited love of a man. The narrator explains:

This unfortunate woman loses sleep, refuses to eat: she deteriorates; her mind wanders; she mistakes her brother for Ctesiphon, she speaks to him as to a lover; she realizes her mistake, blushes for her error; she soon makes worse ones, but no longer blushes for them; she no longer grasps them . . . madness takes her.\textsuperscript{15} In addition to being henceforth a woman physically and psychologically broken, Emira is a woman socially ruined, for her madness is such that it has led her to enter the collectively taboo and unforgivable realm of incest. There is no turning back.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 133.  
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
In La Bruyère's eighty-first character, the long-lasting sexual indifference Emira felt toward men, exacerbated by the exclusive nature of her feelings for Euphosyna and the public notoriety that she acquired for proclaiming them, brought about her tragic end. The tale of Emira suggests that the woman who dares to be overtly demonstrative and vocal with respect to her feelings for the female friend is headed for disaster. In many ways, La Bruyère's text exemplifies the social necessity and inevitability of what Gail Rubin has called "the traffic in women," a system in which women traditionally have served as goods exchanged by and between men.\textsuperscript{16} It is no wonder that, in such a social arrangement, women have intentionally been allowed little space for intimate same-sex relationships. For the reality of women's friendship, as demonstrated by Emira's conduct, disrupts this social and androcentric scheme by temporarily suspending the oppressive exchange of women. Within female friendship, women are no longer objects of male exchange; they are equal partners in an exchange that is now strictly female. In This Sex Which Is Not One, Luce Irigaray describes the female-centered scenario offered by female friendship as one in which "the commodities refus[e] to go to the market, [and] maintai[n] 'another' kind of commerce, among themselves."\textsuperscript{17} La Bruyère's text quickly eliminates the social menace caused by the exclusivity of the female exchange offered by female friendship. Everything in Emira's blatant conduct with respect to friendship violates the female code of honnêteté. She is certainly malhonnête; thus, she has to be recuperated by the heterosexual economy. Her far too public, exclusive friendship has to be eradicated in a terrible way by the friend becoming the enemy.

\textsuperscript{16}See Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex,” in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., Toward an Anthropology of Women (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210. Although Rubin does not explore the thematic of female friendship, the way she explains this trafficking evokes the difficulty women face in creating same-sex friendship when confronted by a system put in place to sustain male bonding.

\textsuperscript{17}Luce Irigaray, This Sex which is Not One, tr. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 196.
La Bruyère's punitive and recuperative hetero-normative scenario exemplifies Hélène Cixous' accusation: "Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs."\(^{18}\)

Did all fulfilling and public female friendships face the same punishing fate in the seventeenth-century literary imagination? Let us now turn to a similar plot, one in which the exclusivity and fame of the female couple and its refusal of heterosexual love also dominate the narrative, that of Madeleine de Scudéry's *Mathilde d' (Aguilar)*, first published in 1667.\(^{19}\)

Despite the resemblance to La Bruyère's female friends, Scudéry's female couple escapes the dreadfulness and humiliation of Emira's fate. Her novel refuses Furetière's construction of the honnête femme by mapping out its own representation of the ideal *amie*, who ultimately is celebrated for her intensely emotional and even overt practice of female friendship. While Scudéry's novel may initially appear to be mostly about the many perils two heterosexual lovers (Mathilde and Alphonse) must face before finally experiencing happiness together, her text masks a discourse on female friendship. The plot's happy ending will indeed be delayed for more than five hundred pages, mostly due the heroine's disdain (true to the philosophy of the précieuses) for the institution of marriage and for heterosexual love. Scudéry's heroine Mathilde shares extraordinary similarities with Emira. Like her, Mathilde professes publicly her distaste for heterosexual love, preferring instead the joys of friendship: "when one has decided never to love anything, says she, I don't see that it is a terrible thing not to be loved, or at least in this sort of affection; as for friendship, I

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will not renounce it." For Mathilde, heterosexual love is clearly unacceptable; it is a feeling for which she has such disdain that she cannot even bring herself to name it, resorting instead to "this sort of affection." In contrast to her dismissal of heterosexual love, friendship is for her the only honorable affection. In fact, she defines herself to others through her very practice of friendship: "one must be like me, a good person for whom friendship is the only thing that counts." We soon discover that it is female friendship that Mathilde seeks and honors above all other attachments, but, in contrast to La Bruyère's story, Scudéry's narrative completely sanctions the public notoriety Mathilde consequently acquires. In that sense, Scudéry offers an unprecedented positive scenario of female bonding.

From the beginning, the novel's dominant emotional and even erotic bond is the one that Mathilde shares with her companion Laura. The narrator insists that "Mathilde was thus inseparable from Laura." The resemblance between Scudéry's and La Bruyère's heroines and their abundance of feelings for their female friends is striking. Like Emira, Mathilde has the reputation of not wanting to be loved by anyone other than her friend. As the unlucky lover Alphonse explains: "When I first met Mathilde, she did not want to hold me in high esteem or love me: Her heart was completely filled by a female friend she has in Avignon, whose portrait you can see next to her mirror, the incomparable Laura occupied her mind entirely then and still does." At times, Mathilde and Laura's performance of friendship may seem confined to the private sphere. This is the case, for example, in the privacy of Mathilde's room where Laura's portrait is strategically placed by her mirror to appear at the same time as Mathilde looks at herself. The projected image of the couple creates a symbolism through which Scudéry

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20 Ibid., 30.
21 Ibid., 169-70.
22 Ibid., 6.
23 Ibid., 140-41.
cleverly illustrates the primacy of this female couple. Although presented here in a private setting (Mathilde's bedroom), the intimate nature of their relationship is nonetheless often made public: "[Mathilde] came to be loved so tenderly by her that the one would never be seen without the other." Everyone in Avignon sees that the two women are inseparable. Mathilde's public performance of female friendship is made visible again later in the story when she gathers flowers for Laura to wear: "Since [Mathilde] was skilful in all things, and Laura loved flowers so much that she had some even in the winter, it was [Mathilde] who would gather bouquets for her and make her garlands of flowers with which she loved to adorn herself so much." The text's celebration of Mathilde and Laura's public performance of friendship is unusual and, as Georges Haggerty has elsewhere noted, normally absent from female-authored texts where, "unlike male homosocial relations, which are public, visible, and 'structurally congruent' with the dynamics of patriarchal power itself, female-female bonds will be private, invisible, and structurally opposed, as it were, to the sex-gender system itself." In Scudéry's narrative, Mathilde undertakes her pursuit of passionate female friendship without constraints or fear of hetero-normative reprisals. Throughout the novel, Mathilde and Laura articulate both the significance of their friendship and the feelings of completeness acquired through such an intimate bond. It is worth noting that this is not just any Laura, but Petrarch's renowned Laura. In a kind of strategic reversal of fate, Scudéry's Laura is not limited to being the ideal Petrarchan lover; instead, she represents the perfect female friend. Scudéry thus undermines and destabilizes the legendary couple, as well as the traditional sexual economy, by insisting on the bond between the two women. This time, La Bruyère's male avenger will not be the spoiler.

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24 Ibid., 14.
25 Ibid., 20.
26 Haggerty, *Unnatural Affections*, 75.
Although Scudéry seems to sketch the relationship between Laura and Mathilde in the margins of the main heterosexual plot, concealing its importance and adhering to traditional early modern expectations of the novel, Scudéry always maintains the intensity and intimate nature of this female bond, contrasting it sharply to the young women's lengthy refusal of their respective suitors. While Mathilde will eventually have to comply with the heterosexual expectations one is accustomed to seeing in a novel, Scudéry nevertheless succeeds in sketching out the unthinkable: a performance of female homoeroticism between Mathilde and Laura. Here, Scudéry's scenario goes where La Bruyère had neither dared nor wanted to venture, although both texts clearly show common representations of female friendship, whether in the intensity of the bond or in its exclusion (at least for a while) of men. Scudéry develops the homoerotic feelings of the heroine for her friend in a gradual and logical manner. As the years go by and the two women begin to share the same anti-marriage philosophy, the bond between Laura and Mathilde naturally intensifies. The reader is told, for instance, "that Mathilde loved Laura tenderly, that she did not want to marry, and that the life she led in Avignon was most sweet." By juxtaposing Mathilde's refusal to marry with her love of Laura, the text emphasizes the very reason for that refusal: Mathilde's heart is entirely for Laura. In fact, the narrator informs us that Mathilde comes to love Laura "more than life itself." As her feelings toward Laura grow, Mathilde begins to step into the role of the lover Petrarch. It is at this point that, concealed behind the not-so-compelling heterosexual love intrigue, the text illustrates a coding that allows the performance of a passionate and erotic female friendship to take place. In her coded representation of the homoerotic friends, Scudéry has created two nearly identical heroines. Their similarities are as physical as they are

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27 We are indeed told, for instance, that Laura is an "enemy" of marriage, while Mathilde has "a natural aversion to marriage." Ibid., 144, 40.
28 Ibid., 74.
29 Ibid., 80.
ideological. Many characters in the novel, including Laura's lover, remark on Mathilde's resemblance to her friend—even Petrarch mistakes her for Laura. And both women share for a long time the same preference for social freedom over the institution of marriage. This emphasis on the female double allows the female author to articulate a female character's desire for another woman, a desire traditionally taboo. Scudéry's insistence on the female double shows simultaneously a homoerotic fascination with the female friend and a natural disposition for these two women to love each other.

Although again coded, homoeroticism in this female couple becomes more apparent in another scene where Mathilde, having learned by heart the passionate sonnets of Petrarch, recites them to her friend: "[S]he knew all the verses he had written for Laura, and would recite them with such grace; so much so that at times Petrarch would say that he found what he had written to be sufferable only coming from Mathilde's mouth." Because Mathilde is the only person allowed by Laura to recite the ardent poetry of the passionate lover Petrarch, her narrative performance is crucial for the expression of female homoerotic desire in this novel. In many ways, this scene is a perfect scenario of tendre amitié (tender friendship) that Scudéry offers her readers, one in which the friend directs what Delphine Denis has called an erotic practice of language toward the beloved friend. Mathilde is indeed allowed to express publicly her love for her friend by claiming as hers, albeit for a moment, the blazing verses of the immortal lover Petrarch. Later on, in the privacy of her room, Mathilde, "[who] had Laura's portrait in her bedroom, and all of Petrarch's verses in her dresser," can read

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30 Ibid., 13-14.
31 The two women having almost identical hands, Petrarch takes the wrong glove with him to adore privately. Ibid., 66.
33 Ibid., 17.
without any constraint the passionate sonnets while she gazes upon the portrait of her beloved friend. Of all her pastimes, the narrator tells us that this one "was her greatest pleasure." In Scudéry's universe, the female friend is not restricted to being the object of male desire and of the male gaze; by controlling the visual economy of desire in this scene, Mathilde herself becomes the desiring subject. Furthermore, Mathilde's erotic practice of friendship remains true to Scudéry's overall concept and use of tendre amitié, which blurs any distinction between friendship and sexual love, thereby refusing to limit the possibilities of female intimacy.

We are in 1667, however, and such display of female affection and homoeroticism can only be momentary. The novel must end, and marriage is—despite the heroines' philosophy—socially inescapable. In fact, Scudéry had suggested the inevitability of this marriage at the beginning of the novel when the astronomer Anselme sees the union of Mathilde and Alphonse in the stars' alignment. Although Mathilde must marry, she will marry a man in whom she sees "the world's most faithful friend," and thereby the only one who can truly recognize the value of her friendship with Laura. At the end of the novel, Mathilde finally accepts Alphonse's proposal—but on one condition: that he agree to leave the patriarchal court of Castile, where he had been residing, and move to the female-centered court of Avignon, where she and Laura will be united forever. Significantly, the novel does not end with the anticipated marriage of Mathilde and Alphonse, but rather with the reunion of the two friends and the celebration of their friendship. Mathilde has her house built next to Laura's so that at the conclusion the two friends will be allowed to continue their

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35 Ibid., 91.
36 Ibid.
37 On Scudéry's use of tender friendship, see James S. Munro, Mademoiselle de Scudéry and the Carte de Tendre (Durham, UK: University of Durham, 1986), 13.
38 Mathilde, 178.
39 Ibid., 135.
practice of friendship. In Mathilde, no man is permitted to come between the passionate friends.

Clearly then, nothing gets in the way of female friendship in Scudéry's fiction. Her heroine adores her friend without constraint, publicly and passionately. Given this lack of female constraint, Mathilde's practice of friendship, like that of Emira's, can only be labeled malhonnête. Apparently, then, for both La Bruyère and Scudéry, there is no possible relationship between honnêteté and female friendship, because the female friend cannot restrain herself and the expression of her feelings. But whereas La Bruyère's eighty-first character seeks to punish the friend for her malhonnête conduct, Scudéry's text celebrates female malhonnêteté. Her novel essentially refutes the heteronormative ideology of her time as exemplified in La Bruyère's text that sees female friendships as powerless when confronted with the appeal of divine heterosexual love. In Scudéry's fictional universe, the malhonnête friend is celebrated and here to stay.