

## Platonic Love in Renaissance Discussions of Friendship

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Renaissance discussions of elite friendship drew extensively on classical precedents, including in particular works by Cicero, Aristotle, and Plutarch, and often repeated a set of commonplaces according to which friends were virtuous, male, and few in number, and their relationships egalitarian and non-sexual.<sup>1</sup> Plato offered somewhat different models. In an account of a putatively virtuous, reciprocal, but constitutively unequal pederasty, the *Symposium*'s Pausanias claimed that the desire (*erôs*) of the lover Aristogeiton and the friendship (*philia*) of his beloved Harmodius led to the downfall of an Athenian tyrant.<sup>2</sup> The *Lysis*—Plato's most sustained meditation on friendship, to which I return below—begins with a discussion of desire among male youths and moves on in typically elenctic method to challenge a series of received ideas including some of the very commonplaces that would go on to shape subsequent friendship discourse. In the Renaissance, Neoplatonic love would also trouble the strictures of what had by then become a dominant set of truisms about friendship, at least when the two discourses intersected. This chapter will consider several of these intersections, foregrounding how they variably insinuated desire into celebratory discussions of male friendship, cast a sceptical eye on idealizing rhetorics, made room for women within

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<sup>1</sup> For recent overviews of the literature on friendship in early modern Europe as well as a rehearsal of relevant friendship commonplaces, see Daniel T. Lochman and Maritere López, "The Emergence of Discourses," and Lewis Seifert and Rebecca Wilkin, "Men and Women Making Friends."

<sup>2</sup> See Plato, *Symposium*, 182b-c. On some of the implications of this passage for Renaissance discussions of friendship, see Marc Schachter, *Voluntary Servitude and the Erotics of Friendship*, 30–33.

a discourse that had long been paradigmatically male, and at times eschewed the aspiration for the divine that is a hallmark of Neoplatonism.

The *Lysis* commentary by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) offers a convenient point of departure for our discussion. His *De amore*, nominally a commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, was among the most influential Renaissance accounts of Neoplatonic love.<sup>3</sup> It and the *Lysis* commentary were first printed in the 1480s, alongside the dialogues they addressed, in Ficino's monumental Latin translation of Plato's complete works, which would be reprinted numerous times in the Renaissance and beyond. Both also circulated in French and Italian, facilitating their dissemination among a broader public.<sup>4</sup>

Adapting Plato for contemporary religious, social, and intellectual mores posed some challenges for Ficino. In the case of the *Lysis*, these were two-fold: 1) erotic desire for boys, condemned by the church, plays a crucial role in the dialogue and 2) its ideas about friendship were not necessarily congruent with those espoused in a more doctrinaire fashion by later classical authors such as Aristotle and Cicero. Ficino's strategy for handling the first problem was fairly straightforward. He wrote that in the dialogue, Plato "rebukes those who waste themselves in love and, under the guise of friendship, are enslaved to shameful

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<sup>3</sup> On love in Ficino, see Blum's and Horowitz's contributions in this volume; on friendship in the *Lysis*, see the chapter by Klitenic Wear.

<sup>4</sup> For vernacular translations of Ficino's *Symposium* commentary, see Marsilio Ficino, *Le commentaire de Marsille Ficin, Florentin: sur le Banquet d'amour de Platon* and *Il comento di Marsilio Ficino sopra il Convito di Platone*. French and Italian versions of his *Lysis* commentary are found in Blaise de Vigenère, trans., *Trois Dialogues de l'amitié*, and Plato, *Il Liside di Platone de l'amicitia*, respectively.

desire.”<sup>5</sup> He also offered a spiritual interpretation of a key phrase—“first friend” (πρῶτον φίλον in Plato’s Greek and *primum amicum* in Ficino’s Latin)—found at a crucial moment in the text.<sup>6</sup> Although arguably Plato did not intend for the “first friend” to have a metaphysical significance—it might merely be the ultimate utilitarian reason for becoming a friend, the prime mover in a metonymic chain of motivations—Ficino wrote that in the discussion of the term, “our Plato’s devotion to God and his great religious faith amazingly shine forth.”<sup>7</sup> As for the potentially unorthodox claims about friendship elaborated in the dialogue, Ficino had strategies for dismissing some—for example, by asserting that Plato was often not proclaiming his own ideas so much as ventriloquizing those of other philosophers he doesn’t necessarily agree with—and found others conducive to his purposes.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “eos qui amore abutuntur, & sub amicitiae specie turpi libidini serviunt, increpat” (Marsilio Ficino, “Argumentum,” 119). In transcribing the Latin, I have expanded abbreviations and modernized punctuation. Translations are mine except where an English version is referenced.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Opera omnia*, fol. 45v. For the Greek and an English translation, see Plato, *Lysis*, 219c. On Ficino’s *Lysis* translation, see James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, I: 313-314.

<sup>7</sup> “Platonis nostri pietas in deum, summaque religio mirifice fulget” (“Argumentum,” 120). On the significance of the “first friend” in the *Lysis*, see Gregory Vlastos, “The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato,” 36-7.

<sup>8</sup> Two points in particular vexed Ficino: 1) Socrates’ general contention that similar men might not become friends and 2) the more particular argument that the good man will not be friends with another good man because, being self-sufficient, he does not need a friend. Aristotle responds at length to such concerns in his *Nicomachean Ethics* at IX.ix. I address Ficino’s own rebuttal to these concerns at several points below.

Early in the *Lysis* commentary, Ficino foregrounds what he sees as the central role played by love (*amor*) in Plato's understanding of friendship (*amicitia*). He explains that according to the Greek philosopher, friendship is the "honourable communion of a constant will (*honestam perpetuae voluntatis communionem*)" whose goal or end point (*finem*) is a shared life, whose origin (*principium*) is a kindred spirit or affinity (*cognitionem*), and whose medium (*medium*) is love (*amorem*).<sup>9</sup> The key terms of this definition are each addressed in turn, beginning with *honestus* and concluding with *amor*.<sup>10</sup> Regarding the former, Ficino asserts that Plato "excludes the cohabitation of base men and the union of the lascivious."<sup>11</sup> While one might have expected a more positive explanation echoing the commonplace that "friendship cannot exist except among good men," this would not in fact accord with Ficino's

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<sup>9</sup> Ficino, "Argumentum," 119. The emphasis on the communion of wills is a commonplace in the friendship tradition. See, for example, Cicero, *De amicitia*, §61.

<sup>10</sup> *Cognatio* is provided a particularly technical definition: it means "coming together in Idea, stars, genius, and a certain inclination of soul and body (*convenientiam in idea sidere, genio, et quadam animae corporisque affectione*)" ("Argumentum", 119). This definition is the key to Ficino's response to Socrates' proposition that friendship cannot be based on similarity. Ficino explains that Plato "is not saying that similar things can in no way be made friends, but rather refuting the idea that simply any similarity you please would be sufficient to generate friendship (*non dictum esse similia nullo modo amica fieri, imò negatum quod simpliciter quaelibet similitudo ad amicitiam procreandam sufficiat*)" ("Argumentum," 120). What men must share rather than generic likeness is *cognatio*, a special kind of similarity lying at the origin of the desire for communion between them ("Principium quo communionis huius desiderium excitatur cognatio est") ("Argumentum," 119).

<sup>11</sup> "excludit improborum hominum contubernia lasciviorumque congressus" ("Argumentum," 119).

understanding of Plato, according to which friendship can develop between the good and the neutral.<sup>12</sup> (More on this below.) It may be that the prominent place afforded Ficino's discussion of *honestus* reflects the necessity to distinguish friendship from pederasty or sodomy, perhaps a result of an ongoing debate about the nature of Platonic love and its potential appropriateness in a Christian context.<sup>13</sup> This issue returns when Ficino repeats and elaborates on his earlier statement regarding the role of *amor* in *amicitia*. Ficino explains that

Love is the medium and as it were a kind of path to friendship. Moreover, since love is desire for beauty, and friendship comes from love and likewise the word *amicitia* derives from *amor*, it is necessary that those who will be friends are beautiful men, beautiful men I say whose souls are beautiful. For man is the soul, the body of man a tool, and he who loves the beauty of the body does not love the man himself, but that which belongs to man. Therefore, whenever affinity is present and is joined with the beauty of the soul, perfect friendship is born. If the beauty of the body is added to the beauty of the soul, they begin to love more quickly, and in short order they achieve the state of friendship.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cicero, *De amicitia*, §18. See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.iii.6: "The perfect form of friendship is that between the good, and those who resemble each other in virtue."

<sup>13</sup> For a sustained meditation on this issue, see Todd W. Reeser, *Setting Plato Straight*.

<sup>14</sup> "Medium et quasi quidam ad amicitiam trames amor existit: Cum autem amor pulchri desiderium sit, et amicitia ab amore et ducatur pariter et dicatur, necesse est eos qui amici futuri sunt pulchros esse, pulchros inquam quorum animi pulchri. Homo enim animus est. Corpus hominis instrumentum, et quisquis pulchrum amat corpus, non hominem, sed ea quae sunt hominis amat. Quamobrem quotiens cognatio illa adest, et animorum pulchritudo concurrat, perfecta nascitur amicitia. Si corporis forma huic animorum pulchritudini adiuncta

Here, a familiar Neoplatonic distinction is drawn between the body and the soul. As Ficino clarifies elsewhere in the commentary, Plato “teaches that it is appropriate to seek friends not on account of the shadowy appearance of the body but rather because of the true beauty of the soul, namely wisdom and prudence.”<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, as we have just seen, Ficino also endorses with some important stipulations the potential impact of physical beauty (itself often understood as reflecting a metaphysical or spiritual state and pointing the way back towards the divine).<sup>16</sup>

Ficino goes on to describe what happens when less ideal pairings occur. For example, when a beautiful body is joined to an ugly soul, then a “desire for shameful union arises.”<sup>17</sup> When one soul is beautiful and the other is ugly, however, affinity leads the man with the beautiful soul to desire to chastise and correct the other one. Finally, if one soul is beautiful

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est, citius amare incipiunt, et brevi amicitiae habitum assequuntur” (“Argumentum,” 119).

The proposition that the word *amicitia* might derive from the word *amor* (whether in Latin or in Romance cognates) is something of a commonplace. See, for example, Mario Equicola, *Libro di natura d’amore*, fol. 81v: “Love is a precious word; from it derives that venerable name, friendship” (“Pretiosa parola è amore, donde quel venerando nome amicitia si deriva”).

<sup>15</sup> “docet, non umbratili huius corpusculi forma, sed vera animi pulchritudine, sapientia scilicet & prudentia amicos aucupari decere” (“Argumentum,” 120).

<sup>16</sup> Compare the following passage in Ficino’s *De amore*: “Certainly we cannot see the soul itself. And for this reason we cannot see its beauty. But we can see the body, which is the shadow and image of the soul. And so, judging by its image, we assume that in a beautiful body there is a beautiful soul. That is why we prefer to teach men who are handsome” (*Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love*, VI, 11).

<sup>17</sup> “turpis congressus cupido exoritur” (“Argumentum,” 119).

and the other is neither ugly nor beautiful, then the desire to teach and to learn arises.

“Ultimately,” Ficino explains, “from that rebuke and this teaching, friendship is born”<sup>18</sup>

This version of friendship differs strikingly from the one we find celebrated in Aristotle and Cicero. While some accounts of classical friendship understood the chastising or correcting of a friend to be an important function of the relationship, it was not construed as its potential foundation or origin.<sup>19</sup> Embedded in Ficino’s account is something akin to the pedagogical dimension of classical Greek pederasty, for example as described by the character Pausanias in the *Symposium*.<sup>20</sup> Such hierarchies are inimical to canonical accounts of friendship with their emphasis on equality.

The relationship between love and friendship is further clarified later in the commentary. Claiming that Socrates’ aporetic challenges to received opinion about friendship are actually critiques of the ideas of thinkers such as Heraclitus (who asserted that opposites attract) and Empedocles (who instead insisted the similar things are drawn to each other) rather than statements of his own beliefs, Ficino remarks that these philosophers “do not separate the desire of love from friendship” and that their models require “a perpetual desire along with friendship.”<sup>21</sup> Ficino argues that Plato’s understanding is very different:

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<sup>18</sup> “turpis congressus cupido exoritur”, “[t]andem ex increpatione illa, & hac doctrina, amicitia nascitur” (“Argumentum,” 119).

<sup>19</sup> On the duty to criticize one’s friend, see Cicero, *De amicitia*, §88-§91.

<sup>20</sup> See Plato, *Symposium*, 184c-e.

<sup>21</sup> “amoris desiderium ab amicitia non distingunt”, “una cum amicitia cupiditas perpetua” (“Argumentum”, 120). The argument that similar things are attracted to each other is put forward most concisely in the *Lysis* at 214b and the argument about opposites attracting can be found at 215d. It may be that Ficino’s mention of Heraclitus and Empedocles—who are

Plato actually considers friendship to be a kind of habit drawn from a love of long duration.<sup>22</sup> Because of this, love is incipient friendship. Friendship is actually old love, in which there remains much more pleasure than desire. From which it follows that he who desired in the past now takes pleasure. Accordingly, the ardor of present desire is not necessary for the habit of friendship, but it does require delight.<sup>23</sup>

In essence, Ficino claims that the desire that initially motivates friendship will eventually give way to shared enjoyment.<sup>24</sup> This claim agrees with his earlier assertion, marked with Neoplatonic spiritual vocabulary, that friendship's "goal is that from two souls a single one not named in the dialogue—as champions respectively of these positions was inspired by a passage in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* at VIII.i.6.

<sup>22</sup> A similar idea is found in a letter from Ficino to Alamanno Donati captioned "As love is, so is friendship (*Qualis est amor talis est amicitia*)": "No one doubts that friendship receives its name and power from love, for it is nothing but mutual love established and honoured in practice" (*The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, 81). According to Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 286, the term "Platonic love" is first used in this letter.

<sup>23</sup> "Plato vero amicitiam habitum quendam esse vult ex amore diuturno contractum. Quo sit ut amor sit exoriens amicitia. Amicitia vero inveteratus amor, in quo multo plus voluptatis quàm desiderii restat. Ex quo sequitur, ut qui cupierat, iam delectetur. Itaque amicitiae habitus non necessario desiderii praesentis ardorem, sed delectationem exigit" ("Commentum," 120).

<sup>24</sup> This is a crucial part of Ficino's response to Socrates' argument (which Ficino contends is actually only a Sophistic argument ventriloquized by Socrates) that the good man does not need friends. Ficino suggests that while the good man might not want for anything, and thus not experience desire predicated on lack, he can still enjoy the company of another.



be willfully made, from one will one life, and finally from one life, the enjoyment of the single Numen and the same Idea.”<sup>25</sup> Here, we find friendship marshalled in the service of a project of shared spiritual ascent akin to that described in Ficino’s *De amore*.

For the remainder of this chapter, I consider the presence of Neoplatonic love in some sixteenth-century French discussions of friendship. I begin with an influential adaptation of the Aristophanic myth of the origin of desire from Plato’s *Symposium*, itself influenced by Ficino’s commentary on the same passage in his *De amore*, before turning at more length to consider a verse commentary accompanying a French translation of Ficino’s Latin version of the *Lysis*, and concluding with the essay “Of Friendship” from Michel de Montaigne’s *Essays*. These texts offer an array of responses to and adaptations of Neoplatonic love that push at the confines of canonical friendship discourse.

In 1543, Antoine Héroët (1492-1568) published a verse paraphrase of the myth of the origin of desire from Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium* that included an abridged version of Ficino’s interpretation of the same myth.<sup>26</sup> This poem appeared in a volume whose title—*La parfaicte amyè, or The Perfect Friend*—results from the same lexical phenomenon that makes Héroët’s *Symposium* adaptation relevant here: in the French of the time, the word “ami” could mean either friend or lover, depending on context. In the title *La parfaicte amyè*, the word appears in the feminine to indicate a female beloved. The work participated in an

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<sup>25</sup> “finis est, ut è duobus animis unus voluntate fiat, ex una voluntate vita una, ac demum ex una vita, numinis unius eiusdemque ideæ fruitio” (“Argumentum,” 119).

<sup>26</sup> While Héroët dedicated his “Androgyne de Platon” to François I, Marguerite de Navarre seems to have inspired the translation. See Abel Lefranc, “Marguerite de Navarre et le platonisme de la Renaissance,” 14 and Loris Petris, “L’amour divin par celluy de ce monde.’ Platonisme et Évangélisme dans l’*Androgyne* d’Antoine Héroët,” 179–208. I will briefly return to Marguerite de Navarre below.

active literary debate about the purposes and parameters of what we might call amorous heterosexual relationships, at times responding to ideas put forward in Ficino's *De amore*, but now explored beyond their original, largely homosocial context. Should—or could—these erotic relationships have a spiritual dimension? Or were they more apt to offer carnal pleasure? Did the virtue of the relationship lie in the purity of the man's dedication to his beloved? Or should he instead expect, or require, a reward for his services? Would consummation once achieved devalue the beloved object? Did love require reciprocity? These were some of the questions explored in this substantial body of often witty writing.<sup>27</sup>

Héroët's *The Androgyne of Plato*, as he entitled his adaptation of the Aristophanic myth, ultimately contended that heterosexual relationships do facilitate spiritual ascent and it did so with the language of friendship. Early in the poem, he diverges from his Platonic model when he explains that there were originally three types of being—male and female, just as there are now, and a third, androgynous type.<sup>28</sup> In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes describes a male-male being, a female-female being, and an “androgynous” or male-female being.<sup>29</sup> By having only the male-female being be double in nature, Héroët avoids having to address the tricky question of same-sex desire between men and between women. The descendants of his male and female single-sex beings instead become joyless, jealous scolds who threaten the happiness of lovers. The titular androgyne, however, after becoming overly prideful, is punished—as all three primordial beings are in the Platonic text—by being split in two. He explains that from the resulting male and female halves come “[a]ll those who are

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<sup>27</sup> For an overview, see Émille Telle, “La querelle des amyes.”

<sup>28</sup> Antoine Héroët, *La parfaite amye*, 70.

<sup>29</sup> See Plato, *Symposium*, 189d-190b.

held to be true friends” and that reunion with the lost half should be called friendship.<sup>30</sup> Later in the poem, however, Héroët explains that the myth has a higher significance, “showing us... divine love through love on this earth.”<sup>31</sup> Paraphrasing Ficino now rather than Plato, he explained that the splitting of the androgyne actually refers not to the division of the body but the splitting of the soul, one part of which remains with God while the other descends to the earth. In a Neoplatonic commonplace, he explains that the soul’s desire felt on earth should properly be directed back towards the divine light emanating from on high rather than becoming mired in matter: “she,” which is to say the soul, “loves God, and seeks her other half.”<sup>32</sup> Only when God reunites the soul with her lost half—“O happy friendship!”—does she achieve true satisfaction.<sup>33</sup> While Héroët’s adaptation of the Platonic myth of the origin of desire makes key changes to the source material, his summary of Ficino’s interpretation, despite its application to “friendship” between men and women, is in the spirit of the original. On this point, it contrasts strikingly with a near contemporary interpretation of the *Lysis*.

In 1544, a French translation of Plato’s *Lysis* appeared in print with the title *The Discourse of the Quest for Friendship* (*Le Discours de la queste d’amytié*) and an accompanying interpretive poem similarly entitled “Quest for Friendship” (“Queste

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<sup>30</sup> “Tous ceulx, qui sont pour vrays amys tenuz” (*Parfaicte amye*, 72). “Tel bien on dict proprement amytié,/ Recouvrement de perdue moytié” (*Parfaicte amye*, 73).

<sup>31</sup> “Nous monstrant .../ L’amour divin par celluy de ce monde” (*Parfaicte amye*, 76).

<sup>32</sup> “Elle ayme Dieu, & requiert sa moytié” (*Parfaicte amye*, 77). For Héroët’s source, see in particular Ficino, *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love*, IV, 4-5.

<sup>33</sup> “O heureuse amytié” (*Parfaicte amye*, 77).

d'amytie").<sup>34</sup> Both were composed by Bonaventure des Périers (c. 1501-1544), primarily known to posterity as a satirist and an author of a novella collection.<sup>35</sup> Des Périers dedicated the translation and his verse commentary to Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549), who may have commissioned them.<sup>36</sup> Marguerite de Navarre was the sister of the king of France, François I, and queen of Navarre by marriage. She was also a major author in her own right, who took a particular interest in spiritual matters and the problem of earthly love from an evangelical perspective that emphasized man's fallen state. She was also an important patron of letters and sponsored the translation of several Platonic and Neoplatonic texts about love, including a French version of Ficino's *De amore*.<sup>37</sup> Des Périers's *The Quest for Friendship* was part of the same general project. Indeed, in some ways, and perhaps at the queen's direction, his translation transformed the dialogue from a reflection on friendship into a consideration of love, and more specifically an Augustinian and Neoplatonic meditation on God as at once the source and the aim of love, and of the love of God as the model for other forms of desire.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Both are found in Bonaventure des Périers, *Recueil des œuvres de feu Bonaventure des Periers*. The translation is the first work in the volume. It is followed by the verse commentary on pages 42-51. Quotations from the poem will be identified by stanza number.

<sup>35</sup> For a succinct overview of Des Périers's life and literary pursuits and an excellent bibliography, see Emily Thompson, "Bonaventure des Périers."

<sup>36</sup> On Marguerite de Navarre's patronage, see Barbara Stephenson, *The Power and Patronage of Marguerite de Navarre*.

<sup>37</sup> See Lefranc, "Marguerite de Navarre et le platonisme de la Renaissance," and Jonathan A. Reid, *King's Sister-Queen of Dissent*.

<sup>38</sup> See Marc Schachter, "Translating Friendship in the Circle of Marguerite de Navarre."

The “Quest for Friendship” opens by figuring Marguerite de Navarre as a muse, then describes a search for true friendship that rehearses the argument of the *Lysis*, and concludes by describing women joined in spiritual friendship on earth before they achieve the perfect friendship that is union with God in the afterlife. While the poem inflects its characterization of the *Lysis* with numerous contemporary evangelical Christian themes, its celebratory and climactic conclusion is the most radical departure from the dialogue, given the Greek text’s focus on relationships between men and its famously aporetic ending in which the character Socrates says to his youthful interlocutors, “Today, Lysis and Menexenus, we have made ourselves ridiculous—I, an old man, as well as you. For these others will go away and tell how we believe we are friends of one another—for I count myself in with you—but what a ‘friend’ is, we have not yet succeeded in discovering.”<sup>39</sup>

The account of spiritual ascent and salvation in the “Quest for Friendship” uses the personification “Disette” (Famine) to describe different forms of love encountered on the path to union with the ultimate beloved and prime mover of friendship that is God. Famine, Des Périers explains, is not at all motivated by the “So Cruel desire of base men”; instead, she “Always casts her eye to the Good that she had and she misses, Poor Thing, what she sees herself deprived of.”<sup>40</sup> There has been some debate about how precisely to interpret this passage. I would suggest that it evokes the same yearning to reunite with God engendered by the separation from divinity that Héroët describes in his paraphrase of Ficino’s remarks on the Aristophanic myth of the origin of desire in the *Symposium*.<sup>41</sup> While the poem explains

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<sup>39</sup> Plato, *Lysis*, 223b.

<sup>40</sup> “Tant Cruelle/Envie qu’ont les chetifs” (Stanza 32), “Tousjours jette/ L’œil vers le Bien qu’elle avoit:/ Et regrette/ La Povrette/Ce dont privee se voit” (Stanza 34).

<sup>41</sup> See P. H. Nurse, “Christian Platonism in the Poetry of Bonaventure Des Périers,” 235 as well as Schachter, “Translating Friendship,” 110.

that she will only be fully satisfied after death when she attains “perfect Friendship” with God, before then, her boundless desire for the “only Beloved Friend” inspires a loving community of women: “Her female neighbors, and female cousins, she holds very dear, so too her nearby full sisters who likewise love.”<sup>42</sup> This consorority must content Famine until true satiety is achieved through her final union with God.

The account of desire and of the community it creates offered at the conclusion to the “Quest for Friendship” differs strikingly from that elaborated in Ficino’s *Lysis* commentary. Whereas Des Périers explicitly rejects any link between the “Cruel Desire of base men” and Famine’s spiritual longing, describing instead a community of women mirroring God’s love during their lifetime and finding full satisfaction after death in union with the divine, in Ficino’s account, two men are initially drawn together by affinity, the beauty of their souls, and potentially that of their bodies, before eventually taking pleasure in mutual meditation on the divine. Des Périers’ poem also rejects the model of spiritual ascent endorsed in Héroët’s “Androgyne de Platon.” Des Périers writes, “So, the Beauty, seeing that she possesses but half [la moytié] of herself, is content to wait for her perfect Friendship”—evidently with God.<sup>43</sup> This use of the expression “la moytié” echoes the Aristophanic myth of the origin of desire from Plato’s *Symposium*, as we saw in Héroët’s paraphrase above, but it does not endorse (heterosexual) terrestrial erotic “friendship” as a potential stepping stone towards spiritual ascent. Instead, the conclusion of the “Queste d’amytié” follows Marguerite de Navarre’s skepticism regarding claims that earthly attachments can serve to augment one’s

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<sup>42</sup> “parfaicte Amytié” (Stanza 47), “seul Amyaymé” (Stanza 35), “Ses voisines,/ Et cousines/ Ha moult cheres, mesmement/ Ses prochaines/ Sœurs germaines,/ Qui ayment pareillement” (Stanza 46).

<sup>43</sup> “Or, la Belle, Voyant qu’elle/ N’a de soy que la moytié,/ Se contente,/ Soubs l’attente/ De sa parfaicte Amytié” (Stanza 47).

devotion to God, a theme she explores in her *Heptaméron* and other works.<sup>44</sup> But what unites all three of the texts I have discussed above—Ficino’s *Lysis* commentary, Héroët’s adaptation of a section of Ficino’s *De amore*, and Des Périers’ commentary on the *Lysis*—is an endorsement of spiritual ascent, whether it be preceded by male friendship, heterosexual love, or female community. The final text I will consider offers yet another perspective on Platonic love.

In the chapter “De l’amitié” (“Of Friendship”) of his *Essays*, Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) offers a sustained meditation on and memorialization of his relationship with his deceased friend Étienne de La Boétie. Montaigne compares their friendship favourably to other forms of human connection including male relatives (fathers and brothers), relationships with women (sexual liaisons and marriage), and “that other, licentious Greek love,” by which he means pederasty.<sup>45</sup> One key problem with blood relations that Montaigne highlights is that they are not chosen. As for women, he writes in a familiar misogynist vein that their “ordinary capacity is inadequate for that communion and fellowship which is the nurse of this sacred bond; nor does their soul seem firm enough to endure the strain of so tight and durable a knot.”<sup>46</sup> Turning to the other Grecian license, he notes that it “is justly

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<sup>44</sup> See Paula Summers, *Celestial Ladders*, 13–14.

<sup>45</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, 138. Montaigne’s comparison of his friendship with La Boétie to other kinds of relationship follows Aristotle, whose discussion of friendship in books 8 and 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* compares *teleía philía*, or perfect friendship, with other forms of friendship, including pederasty. See, for example, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.iv.1.

<sup>46</sup> Montaigne, *Essays*, 138. On the question of women and friendship in Montaigne, see Carla Freccero, “Cannibalism, Homophobia, Women: Montaigne’s ‘Des Cannibales’ and ‘De

abhorred by our morality.”<sup>47</sup> In a long addition first printed in 1595 after the author’s death, Montaigne counterbalanced this cursory dismissal by listing a series of benefits to be had from a pederasty nobly pursued according to various speeches in Plato’s *Symposium*. In so doing, he enacts the overarching ethos of the *Essays*, which promotes a provisional cultural relativism and refuses to accept blindly the authority—he might say tyranny—of custom. Nonetheless, Montaigne still remarks that “[s]ince [ancient Greek pederasty] involved, moreover, according to their practice, such a necessary disparity in age and such a difference in the lovers’ functions, it did not correspond closely enough with the perfect union and harmony that we require here.”<sup>48</sup> Nestled between his remarks about women and about pederasty, Montaigne observes that “if such a relationship, free and voluntary, could be built up, in which not only would the souls have this complete enjoyment, but the bodies would also share in the alliance, so that the entire man would be engaged, it is certain that the resulting friendship would be fuller and more complete.”<sup>49</sup> Curiously, in the midst of his essay about his friendship with La Boétie, which he describes as being “so entire and so perfect that certainly you will hardly read of the like,” he implies that there might be an even

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l’amitié””; Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*; and Donald Stone, “Women and Friendship.”

<sup>47</sup> Montaigne, *Essays*, 138.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* Numerous critics have argued that there was no model for egalitarian same-sex sexual relations in the Renaissance. A seminal work on the topic as it relates to friendship is Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, which has however been much contested. On the Florentine context—particularly interesting in light of Ficino’s remarks about handsome students—see Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*. For a different opinion, see Bruce Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England*.

<sup>49</sup> Montaigne, *Essays*, 138.



*better* form of friendship—one in which the mind and body might both be engaged—if only such a thing were possible.<sup>50</sup>

Montaigne's essay seems to express a further discontent, implying that the very discourse of friendship is inadequate to his relationship with La Boétie. Whereas friendship discourse tends to emphasize the rational origins of the relationship and the length of time needed to develop and verify it, Montaigne's account reads more like a story of falling in love. He writes that, "[b]eyond all my understanding, beyond what I can say about this in particular, there was I know not what inexplicable and fateful force that was the mediator of this union. We sought each other before we had met...; I think it was by some ordinance from heaven."<sup>51</sup> The crucial role of free choice in selecting the friend here finds itself attenuated. He also foregrounds the speed and vehemence with which their relationship began: "And at our first meeting... we found ourselves so taken with each other, so well acquainted, so bound together, that from that time on nothing was so close to us as each other."<sup>52</sup> Montaigne readily acknowledges that this violated the strictures of the friendship tradition, but excused the precipitousness because, "[h]aving so little time to last"—but how could they have known?—"and having begun so late..., it could not lose time and conform to the pattern of mild and regular friendships."<sup>53</sup>

It seems that in "On Friendship," Montaigne struggles against the limitations of both friendship and love. The love tradition, which allows for the loss of reason and his depth of

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 136: It may be worth mentioning in passing that Montaigne's emphasis on spiritual/intellectual union with men and physical union with women echoes a partition we find in Plato's *Symposium* and in Ficino's *De amore*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

feeling, is inappropriate for his friendship with La Boétie because of cultural prejudices against sodomy (which Montaigne implies he shares) and because Montaigne suggests at least here that sexual love, whether heterosexual or pederastic, was founded on a constitutive inequality. The discourse of friendship, which emphasizes reciprocity and equality, and thus in this respect fulfils Montaigne's requirements, describes relationships that are too moderate and overly rational. Neither seems quite adequate to the friendship he describes having shared with his lost friend, one moreover, Montaigne claims, with no model but itself.

The tension between the expression of an ineffable and irrational desire and the need to figure an egalitarian relationship with the friend manifests itself in perhaps the most erotic and mystical passage in the *Essais*:

Beyond all my understanding, beyond what I can say about this in particular, there was I know not what inexplicable and fateful force that was the mediator of this union.... It is not one special consideration, nor two, nor three, nor four, nor a thousand: it is I know not what quintessence of all this mixture, which, having seized my whole will, led it to plunge and lose itself in his; which, having seized his whole will, led it to plunge and lost itself in mine, with equal hunger, equal rivalry. I say lose, in truth, for neither of us reserved anything for himself, nor was anything either his or mine.<sup>54</sup>

This passage echoes some striking moments in earlier texts describing friendship and in others characterizing love, pointing to an overlap between the two discourses. From the friendship tradition, we might mention a passage drawn from Cicero's *De amicitia*, in which Gaius Laelius, after discussing how animals experience self-love and seek their own kind, exclaims, "how much more, by the law of his nature, is this the case with man who both loves

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

himself and uses his reason to seek out another whose soul he may so mingle with his own as almost to make one out of two!”<sup>55</sup> Within the love tradition, Aristophanes’ account of Hephaestus’ description of lovers’ desire to unite in Plato’s *Symposium* offers another analogue. Hephaestus notes that if their desire is indeed “to be joined in the closest possible union’,” then he is “ready to fuse and weld [them] together in a single piece, that from being two [they] may be made one’.”<sup>56</sup> A third resonant passage is found in Ficino’s *De amore*: “Here, certainly, is a miraculous thing: whenever two people embrace in mutual goodwill, one lives in the other and the other lives in him. Thus, in turn, men are transformed into each other, each one giving himself to the other such that the other may receive him.”<sup>57</sup> These are all texts with which Montaigne was intimately familiar although we cannot be sure which, if any, he might have had in mind when he composed his account of the interpenetrating wills.<sup>58</sup>

There has been substantial debate about how to interpret this account. Might it suggest some sort of physical desire, transposed onto an immaterial, intellectual level?<sup>59</sup> Or do we take the passage to express a purely spiritual union and enjoyment more akin to that celebrated by Ficino in his *Lysis* and *Symposium* commentaries? Rather than seeking to answer these questions, I will make a different point: where Montaigne’s text diverges from Ficino’s account of friendship, and agrees with the implications of Hephaestus’ offer in the *Symposium* and Cicero’s characterization in *De amicitia*, is in the immanence of its ecstatic

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<sup>55</sup> Cicero, *De amicitia*, §81.

<sup>56</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 192d-e.

<sup>57</sup> Ficino, *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love*, II, viii.

<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of another potential intertext, this one Lucretian, see Schachter, *Voluntary Servitude*, 179–80.

<sup>59</sup> For two contrasting views, see David Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, 122 and Gary Ferguson, “Montaigne’s Itch,” 114.

account of his most important friendship. His relationship with La Boétie may have been preordained by heaven, but its meaning and its value is of this world, and does not point the way back to divinity.

The four texts that I have focused on above—Ficino’s *Lysis* commentary with its emphasis on spiritually erotic friendship between men, Héroët’s verse interpretation of the Platonic androgyne featuring instead the spiritual potential of heterosexual “friendship,” Des Périers’s verse commentary on the *Lysis* where earthly attachments are eschewed and female community provides solace until the union with God that only comes after death, and Montaigne’s chapter “Of Friendship” in which the author’s mourning for his beloved friend La Boétie makes no pretense of facilitating spiritual ascent—suggest the range of ways in which the discourse of Neoplatonic love intersected with that of friendship during the Renaissance, thereby facilitating the adaptation of both for evolving social contexts. This process of adaptation would continue in the ensuing centuries. For example, less than a hundred years after Montaigne asserted that women were inadequate to the requirements of friendship, women authors writing in English such as Margaret Cavendish (1623-1573) and Katherine Philips (1632-1664) would find in the Neoplatonic tradition resources with which to describe friendships between women whether potentially sexual or Platonic in the now standard sense of the term.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps this contemporary understanding of the expression “Platonic friend” will itself be eclipsed one day by new connotations reflecting new forms of sociability that nonetheless find inspiration in an ancient but still dynamic tradition.

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<sup>60</sup> See David Robinson, “Pleasant Conversation in the Seraglio,” and Harriette Andreadis, “The Sapphic-Platonics of Katherine Philips.

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