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**Amongst Sisters: Rivals or Equals? A Study of *The Blind Assassin*, *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *Dust***

**Belo Horizonte**

**Faculdade de Letras**

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To my mother, Ângela de Oliveira Corrêa, I celebrate all our love and turmoil over the years.

To my academic mother, Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida, for her unwavering support, counseling and patience over the years.

You are both within these pages built out of love, resistance and sorority.

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## Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the conflicted interactions of sister characters in *The Blind Assassin*, by Margaret Atwood, *The Other Boleyn Girl*, by Philippa Gregory, and *Dust*, by Elizabeth Bear. The sisters form a special type of double, configured through gendered identities, transgressive acts of resistance and complex connections to mother figures. The analysis of the sister doubles relies on the theoretical support of feminist psychoanalysis and gender studies, with a focus on theories about body politics and ontological matricide. I propose a reconceptualization of the sisters' conflicted relationship under the lens of sorority, portraying how the positive reconstruction of motherhood and maternity approximates the sisters and enables them to resist patriarchal control. This study reflects upon traditional psychoanalytical theories that view the double as a manifestation of estrangement and death, recasting the sisters' doubling as a positive and empowering manifestation of their alterity and subjectivities. This work provides a reinterpretation of the sister pairs in the novels, analyzed under a feminist aegis, through the study of their struggles and the recognition of their acts of resistance, defiance and sorority.

## Resumo

Esta tese enfoca as interações conflituosas de personagens irmãs em *The Blind Assassin*, escrito por Margaret Atwood, *The Other Boleyn Girl*, de Philippa Gregory, e *Dust*, de Elizabeth Bear. As irmãs formam um tipo especial de duplo, configurado por meio de suas identidades gendradas, atos de resistência transgressivos e de suas conexões complexas com figuras maternas. A análise dos pares de irmãs se baseia em um suporte teórico de psicanálise feminista e dos estudos de gênero, com ênfase nas políticas de corpo e no matricídio ontológico. Proponho uma releitura do relacionamento conflituoso entre as irmãs pelo viés da sororidade, demonstrando como a reconstrução positiva da figura materna e a maternidade aproxima as irmãs e torna possível sua resistência contra o controle patriarcal. Este estudo reflete sobre as teorias tradicionais de psicanálise que enxergam o duplo como uma manifestação de estranhamento e morte, reinterpretando o duplo de irmãs como uma manifestação empoderadora de suas alteridades e de suas subjetividades. Este trabalho fornece uma releitura dos duplos de irmãs sob uma égide feminista por meio da análise de suas lutas e do reconhecimento de seus atos de resistência, rebeldia e sororidade.

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Introduction:

Sister, Rivals, Equals

Two girls there are: within the house

One sits; the other, without.

Daylong duet of shadow and light

Plays between these.

“Two Sisters of Persephone,” Sylvia Plath

The origin of this dissertation lies in my persistent ponderings on the conflicts between women characters portrayed in literature. My queries include reflections on the lack of sorority and identification between women characters, specifically among sisters. The corpus for this study is composed of the novels *The Blind Assassin* (2001) by Margaret Atwood, *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2003), by Philippa Gregory and *Dust* (2007) by Elizabeth Bear.

All the novels contain a pair of sisters, and the more rebellious sister dies in all narratives. The apparent absence of sorority between the sisters seems, at first glance, to contribute to the destruction of one of them, as if their lack of support and love has deteriorated into a type of passive sororicide. However, I propose that we look beyond a simplistic plot analysis and delve in depth into the sisters' relationship. A reductionist view sets the sisters as rivals and ignores issues that directly affect their formation. These formative factors include the influence their families have on them, the contexts and communities they are raised in, and the patriarchal forces that are imposed upon them. The lack of sorority is not a natural phenomenon, but a culturally designed imposition that often undermines women's bonds and purportedly turns the sisters against each other. I investigate

the conflicted relationship between the sisters, and show how they struggle against patriarchal norms to develop a complex sorority. I also argue that the sororal bonds the sisters foster enables them to achieve character growth, to free themselves of oppressive shackles to make their own decisions and become fully formed and independent subjects.

The special pair of sisters is present in the historical novel *The Other Boleyn Girl*. This novel is authored by the Kenyan-born British writer Philippa Gregory, who is renowned for feminist perspectives in historical romances. Her first novel was published when she completed her PhD in eighteenth century literature, and she is a prolific writer of revisionist fiction who also adapts her novels into screenplays. Gregory has pioneered the contemporary genre of fictional biography, and *The Other Boleyn Girl* is an international best-seller that brought the little-known sister of Anne Boleyn, Mary, to the forelight. The story describes the interaction between the two sisters, Anne and Mary Boleyn. Their relationship is destroyed by the intrigues concocted by the family patriarchs. Young Mary is sent to court to capture King Henry VIII's eye and be used as a political pawn. After the King gets tired of Mary, she is relegated to the shadow as she helps Anne to take over her previous position. Their bond deteriorates to the point that Anne will not miss any opportunity of lording her power as the King's mistress over Mary's head, who becomes "the other Boleyn girl," despised by her sister and the court. Humiliated, but entrapped along with her sister, Mary witnesses Anne's fall from royal graces, tumbling into a down spiral of scandal and treachery. In a forced union, the sisters fight to ensure that the Boleyns survive, but, despite their efforts, the family is annihilated. The novel ends with Anne's decapitation, and Mary's understanding that the King, a man she had once loved, had shown himself a monster and robbed her of her other half, Anne.

The duality between the Boleyn sisters is the main trope in the novel, and I draw on the theories on the formation of identity, the double, gender and body politics to analyze their

oppositions. The King initially falls for Mary, a blond, innocent, pious girl child of thirteen. Anne, on the other hand, has dark hair and eyes, and every inch of obedience and naivety that her sister shows is counteracted by Anne with wit, irony and manipulation. Anne Boleyn is depicted as a transgressive, aggressive woman who is punished by death. Mary, on the other hand, is apparently spared because of her passive, traditionally stereotyped feminine personality. To counteract the stereotypical characteristics that are attributed to the sisters, I show that their casting as polarized opposites is a construct fabricated to maneuver their gendered identities. This opposition guarantees that the sisters are cast as incomplete subjects and it encourages their rivalry. The moment the sisters discover that they have much more in common than they first realized, they begin to act out their sorority and enter a process of character development and growth.

The rivalry theme is also present in *The Blind Assassin*, by Margaret Atwood. Atwood is a Canadian author that has written over forty books of fiction, poetry and critical essays that have been published in over thirty-five countries and received several awards. Atwood's works are often associated to feminist views on gender and on the issue of authorship. *The Blind Assassin* won the Booker Prize in 2000, and narrates the story of the two sisters. The older sister, the socialite Iris Chase Griffin, begins the narrative by describing her younger sister Laura's death, who commits suicide in a winter evening. The text then develops into three different metanarratives: that of the elderly Iris remembering her past life; a posthumous novel by Laura which narrates the story of a hidden love affair between a rich socialite and a working-class political agitator, and a pulp science fiction story, in which a blind assassin and a mute sacrificial virgin pair up for a symbolic journey.

The narrator Iris attempts to explain through short chapters, magazine and newspaper clippings, police reports and even death certificates, her conflicted relationship with Laura. Iris is always seen as the respectful, dutiful daughter, while Laura's impulsiveness and

rebelliousness are taxed by the family as mental instability. Both women suffer at the hands of the patriarchal figures in the narrative, beginning at a tender age with abuse from a shell-shocked ex-soldier father to Iris's sexually abusive husband. Laura is blackmailed and abused by Richard, Iris's husband, and, consequently, becomes pregnant. Laura is hospitalized in a sanatorium and forced to have an abortion. Iris becomes aware of these terrible facts only after Laura's suicide, through written and visual clues left as a trail of crumbs by her sister.

The posthumous novel attributed to Laura is, in fact, written by Iris, and recalls the conflicted extra-marital relationship Iris had with Alex, an impoverished writer. This novel merges with the narrative of the blind assassin and the sacrificial virgin. The two iconic figures are metaphors of Laura and Iris, playing upon the tropes of sacrifice and blindness which define the two sisters. Iris is Laura's metaphorical assassin, for she ignores her sister's warning and attempts to denounce Richard's violence. Additionally, Iris tries to force Laura to conform to a subjugated, passive feminine role, a role which both sisters struggle to fulfill. Simultaneously, Laura is also her sister's protector. After Laura commits suicide, Iris leaves her state of inertia and pursues the truth about all the suffering that Laura had endured. Iris then rebels against the patriarchal forces that control her and denounces the violence done to Laura, publishing her story as a testimonial and a refusal to passively accept Laura's pain. The sisters' struggles against normative feminine behaviors translate into gender performances that defy traditional women's role. Laura fights back through her blatant non-conformity to expected norms and her refusal to passively accept Richard's abuse. Iris in turn fights for her subjectivity and freedom through an adulterous love affair and her writings.

The third novel analyzed is *Dust*, by Elizabeth Bear, which presents an unusual pair of sisters. Bear is an American writer of science fiction and fantasy, who has won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2005, two Hugo Awards for her short fiction, a Sturgeon Award, and the Locus Award for Best First Novel. Her writings contemplate

contemporary discussions on gender, the body and queer politics. In *Dust*, the sisters discover their relationship amidst a world of post-apocalyptic war. Rien is a “Mean,” a common human being, while Perceval is an “Exalted,” a genetically modified human. They fall in love, although they are impeded to act on it because of Perceval's chastity vows. This narrative is a science-fiction *bildungsroman*, in which the heroines need to achieve maturity through abdication and sacrifice. True to these themes, both sisters sacrifice themselves to ensure their survival. However, these are conscious choices. Rien chooses to give up her life to integrate with Perceval and save their planet-ship. Rien is not sacrificed, she chooses to sacrifice herself for a constructive sororal act that adds to and complements her pair. When Rien abdicates her life, she ensures that Perceval survives, and literally becomes part of her sister, adding her memories to Perceval's mind. Perceval holds Rien's memories and feelings within her psyche. Their separation is much less extreme than that experienced by the other sister doubles analyzed in this study.

The literary texts discussed in this dissertation are comprised of contemporary novels, published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in different English speaking countries. The study of sisters in recent literature contrasts with traditional studies on sisters, which focus on the sisters' relationship in novels written in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, with special emphasis on the British literary canon. Novels by Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters have overshadowed research on sister characters, diverting attention to other literary texts on the subject. Analyzing the theme of sister characters and their relationship in contemporary novels, especially the ones published within the last decade, shows that they differ greatly from the research that was done on the topic in the past. After all, the sisters of contemporary novels are worlds apart from Miss Austen's witty narrators and the Brontë's gothic heroines and their romantic, naïve approach on sister characters. Contemporary sister characters illustrate concerns related to more recent cultural aspects such as gender and feminism.

Besides, the representation of these characters and their relationship also lead to different impacts on the plot and narrative construction. This dissertation engages in the analysis of sisterly pairs in contemporary texts, highlighting how the construction of sister characters in literature are molded and affected by gender and identity politics.

Although the publication of the literary corpus is recent, the tragic trajectory and outcome of the sisters in the literary corpus is not novel. The tempestuous narrative of sisters reflects centuries of disempowering ideology of control over women. The denial of sorority and the cyclical reproduction of dominance is present in the millennial narratives of Greek stories. Beginning from an analysis of pairings of feminine characters from canonical Greek texts in Chapter 1, I compare them to the contemporary sisters with the objective of highlighting and questioning the entrenchment of negative symbolism and manipulation over women's identities and subjectivities. Although there are many interesting pairings in classical Greek literature, I choose three because of their similarities to the contemporary sister pairs. They are Antigone and Ismene, Psyche and her sisters and the mother/daughter duo Clytemnestra and Electra.

Differences and tensions between sister characters are often highlighted in the narratives they act as protagonists and in which the sisters posit themselves as antagonists to each other. This rivalry among the sister characters often causes the dichotomy of the sisters' attitudes and personalities. The contending sisters' conflict seems to highlight an intrinsic dependency on each other. Their identities and identification with each other and their mother figures are relevant topics to better comprehend the sisters' relationship. How are their identities formed? How do they relate to paternal and maternal figures of power and to each other? What are their differences and why are these differences so polarized?

The investigation into the formation of the sisters' identities focuses on the following issues: the constitution of gendered subjects, the formation of a special double amongst the

sisters, gender roles, their relation to motherhood and the gendered bodies. The double is intrinsically linked to identity, in this case translating specifically into gendered identity. The examination of the relationship between sisters and the struggles between them accentuate not only their differing identities, but also how their relationships are often tempestuous because of the origin and development of their subjectivities. All these issues affect sister interactions in specific ways, and directly determine the outcomes of sister characters in the chosen narratives.

The three sister pairs form special kind of doubles, as I discuss in Chapter 2. Mary and Anne both serve, at different times, as mistresses for the king and pawns of their patriarchs. Iris's and Laura's personalities are intertwined and Rien and Perceval are interconnected by genetic technological manipulations, in which one literally consumes the other's DNA to survive. Mary and Anne are mostly at each other's throats and Iris and Laura are shown to have laconic interaction. However, they eventually engage in sororal partisanship when they learn enough to question the patriarchal dictates they are subjected to. Rien and Perceval belong to enemy factions at the beginning of the novel, but when they discover they are sisters, they rapidly move on to a cooperative, productive and constructive relationship.

Despite the diverse settings, the three novels are united by the composition of the special double and the gender issues which pertain to the formation of their gendered identities. Although the surviving sisters in the severed pair are apparently doomed to incompleteness, the sacrifice of their doubles ensures an awareness of what leads to their demise and allows the survivors to cope with the trauma by producing a positive legacy. Iris writes in Laura's name. Mary is a living testament of opposition to Anne's trajectory and defies her family and their patriarchal impositions by choosing to escape their clutches and exert her motherhood positively. Rien and Perceval integrate their psyches and create a new

entity named Angel. Rien's identity is altered and is effectively a part of Angel, so she does not suffer traditional death, and becomes an intrinsic part of her sister.

In Chapter 1, entitled "Ontology and Myth: Classical Mythological Sisters and Contemporary Sister Narratives," I analyze theoretical texts that focus specifically on sister characters and the conflicted interaction of sisters is a main theme discussed. The trope of matricide is central to this chapter, as well as the process of formation of gendered identity. The concept of sororal partisanship is introduced and serves to reevaluate the conflicted interactions among the sister pairs. I also discuss feminist reinterpretations that challenge the patriarchal constraints present in the classic premises and texts, introducing the sister pair Antigone and Ismene. I highlight Ismene's actions, and counter the traditional views that discard her as a minor, weak and undeveloped character.

I develop the theories on the double in the second chapter, "Polar Opposites? Two Sisters, One Desire." I argue that the conflicted interaction of sisters is one of the factors that make the sister pair a "special" type of double. The constant conflict between the sisters resists categorization, but at the same time their implicit desire to find a common ground approximates them, never allowing for a comfortable positioning in their polarized differences. They form not only a gendered *doppelgänger* pair, but one whose relationship as opposites creates intrinsic and unique characteristic of the double formed by them. I use both classic and contemporary views to discuss the theorization on the double, considering, more specifically, a feminist critique.

In Chapter 3, entitled "Body Politics and Resistance," gender issues also connect the sister pairs. Iris and Laura's relationship is interposed by Iris's husband, Anne and Mary's by the King, and Rien and Perceval's by various patriarchal figures throughout the narrative. Iris and Laura turn to anorexia, obsessive cleanliness and, finally, to writing as a kind of therapy which I view as a means of resistance to counter the attempts to control them. Anne and



Mary, sisters living in the Renaissance epoch, have no recourse but to use their bodies as negotiation tools for survival. Nevertheless, they are still empowered. Mary reconceptualizes her pregnant body in a positive form, and Anne's forward attitudes and outspoken manner question normative gender roles. Rien and Perceval seek knowledge to escape patriarchal impositions, and use their bodies as tools of resistance by engaging in a borderline, shifting manifestation of the female body. Iris and Laura resort to the abject body as tool of resistance through the rejection of food and excessive cleanliness. Iris also reclaims her individuality through the development of her sexuality and the refusal to comply with physical abuse.

Approaching the issue of the gendered subject, I draw extensively on Luce Irigaray's views. She claims that the subject is always masculine, for the formation of the subject occurs within a patriarchal, masculine centered society. Viewing the female gender as irrelevant within this cultural context, Irigaray affirms there is only the masculine sex, which elaborates itself through a specularization of the feminine sex and identity. The existential subject represents the masculine, while the unimportant, mirrored double is the feminine. Ergo, the feminine as subject is seen by Irigaray as only a projection, a creation of the masculinist subject. In other words, Irigaray theorizes that, ideally, notions of subjectivity and identity should not include gender issues. However, the binarism (male/female) of gender politics enforces a compulsory link between gender roles and identity. Hence, the feminine subject, projected as the "Other," is a construct both disempowered and subjugated to the masculine subject. Irigaray views the gendering of the subject as a form of domination. The feminine subject, which was devised to validate the superiority of the masculine subject, is imposed to maintain this unbalanced power dynamics in the masculine signifying economy. Therefore, the need to reconsider the particularities of the gendered subject arises, as well as its reconceptualization under a positive theorization. Considering Lacan's theories on identity and its constitution and Irigaray's post-Lacanian critique of the gendered subject, I argue that

sister characters are gendered subjects and are effectively coerced into a patriarchal framework to perform their expected normative gender roles. Moreover, the relationship between the sister characters is by origin and design conflicted because of their status as women. Their gendered identities are further problematized by the rupture with the maternal body. The reconnection with mother and sister figures, the positive reconceptualization of feminine bodies, especially maternal bodies, and the rejection of normative gender roles in favor of gender fluidity are central to construct an empowering interpretation of the sister characters. These theoretical devices enable a feminist rewriting of the sisters' subjectivities and identities, their bodies and their choices.

The gendered identity of the sister pairs is fractured, fragmented and shifting. The special double they form add to the problematic equation of the sisters' relationship, highlighting the polarization of the binarized halves they compose. Their conflicted interactions, and the destruction or disappearance of the more active sister at the end of the narrative, seems, at first, to confirm sexist stigmas placed on female characters and the impossibility of a healthy relationship among women, even among sisters. However, the facets which compose the sister's subjectivities and relationship are exactly what offer readers and critics a challenge to sexist, binarist ways of thinking. The sisters' gendered identities are multiple and mutable. They change throughout the narrative, rising above the conflicts with each other to better understand their identities, choices and their relationships. They do not conform to the polarized, binarized halves they initially form. The sisters question the oppression of binarism, whether in relation to gender or to their subjectivities and attempt to escape or subvert the binary framework placed upon them. The loss of their double does not immobilize the surviving sisters. In fact, the sacrifice of their other half – a half which, by the end of the narrative, is no longer binary but multiple – allows the surviving sisters to better comprehend the signifying economy they are tied to and to try to bend, shift or transform

their positions in a sexist, binarist context. The forms of resistance the sisters use, which are shown through the employment of both bodily and psychological tools (for example, their mutable bodies or their positive reinterpretation of motherhood), demonstrate the sisters' struggles against passivity and normatization. The insight on the body, identity, and gender issues that this study of sister pairs offers enrich literary and cultural studies and allows critical theory to go beyond gender, binarist stigmas and sexist prejudice.

## CHAPTER 1

## Ontology and Myth: Classical Mythological Sisters and Contemporary Sister

## Narratives

## I. A Contestation of Matricide

I, who was never quite sure  
 about being a girl, needed another  
 life, another image to remind me.

And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure

Or soothe it. I made you to find me.

*The Double Image, Anne Sexton*

The main focus of this dissertation is the development and composition of sister characters in the selected corpus of contemporary novels. The sister characters' personas, trajectories, choices and narrative outcomes are directly linked to a self-destructive cycle whose genesis can be traced to the ontological formation of these characters. The psychoanalytical ontological theory applied in this study refers to the act of analyzing the characters by means of their formative processes that enable them to become thinking subjects. These formative mechanisms include both positive and negative experiences with family, society, as well as subjective perceptions connected to gender, social positions, and class hierarchy.

To better discuss the sister character's trajectories, actions, behaviors, choices and narrative outcomes, I employ a post-Lacanian feminist critique to trace the origins of the subject, and subsequently, the gendered subject. In other words, the ontological formation of the characters is developed through a critique of the patriarchal influences which sanction and control the characters, with special attention given to the harsher limitations the sisters suffer

because of their gender configurations.

The ontological formation of the sister character's identities is a key point to understand the genesis of the sisters' inherent conflicts and destructive behaviors. Psychoanalysis has traditionally recurred to Greek mythology to ground studies on ontology. The *Oedipus Rex* myth is used in the Lacanian approach to ontology and is problematized and criticized in post-Lacanian feminist theory. The Oedipus narrative, as discussed by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, is used to investigate the issue of the ontology of the subject. The Lacanian approach in turn focuses on the issue of patricide.

Luce Irigaray criticizes Lacan's concepts about the composition of identity and chooses instead to utilize the Orestes myth to investigate the ontological formation of the subject. Although patricide also features in Irigaray's analysis, it is matricide that spearheads the discussion. The author draws an important parallel between the relevance of both crimes in mythological narratives to discuss psychoanalytical ontology, analyzing Lacan's patriarchal theories and proposing an alternative feminist view that shifts the attention from patricide to matricide.

The study of canonical myths is a cornerstone for both the theoretical and literary analysis of this dissertation. Conflicted sibling relationships, in particular sister relationships, is also a recurrent theme in Greek mythology. This study traces a parallel between the mythological and current sisters, pinpointing the ontological and matricidal conflicts which directly contribute to the conflicted development and cyclical tragic conclusions for the sister characters, thus allowing for a questioning and critique of the dramatic trajectories and outcome involving the sisters' narratives.

The examination of Greek mythology reveals a specific pattern for tragedies involving sister characters, tying these women inexorably to doomed fates. The demise of one of the sisters in *The Blind Assassin*, *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *Dust* mirrors the violent deaths of

classic Greek mythological sisters.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I have chosen to discuss the myths of Antigone, Electra and Psyche. All three narratives present sister characters at odds, and each merits a discussion of their own. Although there are many other sisters in Greek mythology, these specific pairings offer narratives that enable the positive reading of motherhood, sororal partisanship and gender fluid performances. The myths of Antigone and Electra were selected because of their recurrent use in psychoanalysis and their feminist reinterpretation by modern theoreticians, in particular by Irigaray. The Psyche myth is studied by the psychoanalyst and translator Erich Neumann, who views the conflicts of the characters in the story as a metaphor for the construction of a feminine, individual identity. The three myths were also selected because they directly illustrate another key point to this study, that is, the polarization of the contemporary sister pair's characterization and their antagonism towards each other. Antigone is the aggressive, active sister, while Ismene is the more passive, conformed sibling. Electra is an instigator, a survivor who rebels against her mother and is an opposite to Iphigenia, who was meekly led to sacrifice. Psyche is initially an obedient and dutiful daughter, who is later convinced by her aggressive sisters to challenge Eros's orders. The three myths also reveal issues related to matricide, conflict, destruction and identification. Antigone mirrors her mother's Jocasta's sacrifice and love for her sons. Electra rejects her mother's choices, and Clytemnestra tries to connect to her daughter and mend the mother/daughter relationship. Psyche challenges the mother figure Venus. She is also encouraged by her sisters to develop her subjectivity and become independent from her husband Eros. The mythological sister characters Antigone and Ismene, Psyche and her sisters, Electra and her mother Clytemnestra are compared to the modern sisters under the aegis of a feminist post-Lacanian psychoanalytical framework. These comparisons show how the genesis of sister characters is intrinsically tied to a cycle of violent acts and rupture.

Having thus established the importance of the mythological sisters for this study, I return to the ontological aspects. We must first consider the traditional views on the origin of the subject: the Lacanian adoption of the Oedipus complex to explain the formation of a subject's identity. Lacan claims that children can only acquire an identity of their own when they obtain complete separation from their mother's body, and, consequently, her identity. According to this theory, Oedipus is punished because he seeks the impossible (even if unconsciously): a return to the mother's body and psyche through unconscious sexual desire. The dire consequence for Oedipus is direct patricide and indirect matricide. For a subject to be healthy, within the Lacanian paradigm, the dual relationship between him or her and the mother must become a triadic structure with the interference of the father. Lacan understands this process as a transition from the Imaginary order, the initial formation of the subject's ego, to the Symbolic order, the system of laws that regulate kinship, alliance and language. When subjects make a transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, they are regulated by a set of laws which Lacan terms the "law of the father," since an imaginary father figure is the third element that ruptures the child/mother relationship and forces their passage into the Symbolic (*Écrits* 822). Lacan argues that the separation from the mother's figure is the genesis of the id, which is the original aspect of an individual, ruled by the pleasure principle and uninhibited by social norms.

Considering Lacan's theories on identity and its constitution, and Irigaray's post-Lacanian critique of the gendered subject, I argue that sister characters are gendered subjects and are effectively coerced into the law of the father to perform their expected normative gender roles. Their gendered identities are further problematized by the rupture with the maternal body, depriving the sisters from a formative identity reference and associating their bodies with negative and destructive ideals.

Irigaray views the Lacanian disassociation from the mother figure, connected to the

Oedipal complex, as a form of matricide. She focuses much of her ontological studies on the importance of matricide and its connection to individuation and subjectivity. In *Sexes and Genealogies* (1993), Irigaray claims that rupture with the mother is essential for children to acquire their own sense of selfhood. The author states that “society and culture operate on the basis of an original matricide” (11). By committing matricide, the subject then enters the law of the father and forms his or her own identity. To illustrate her ideas, Irigaray uses Orestes’s narrative, contrasting it to Lacan’s views on *Oedipus Rex*.

In the chapter “Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother” (1993), Irigaray clarifies her rationale on how the *Oresteia* works as an alternative to the traditional Oedipus complex to explain the effect of matricide on the subject’s individuation. In the *Oresteia*, King Agamemnon is murdered by his queen, Clytemnestra, when he returns from Troy. The main reason guiding Clytemnestra is the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia, who is offered to the gods by Agamemnon in return for favorable sailing winds. Orestes, their son, returns to avenge his father, killing his mother Clytemnestra and her lover, and is aided by his sister Electra. Irigaray compares Orestes’s conciliatory narrative conclusion to Oedipus’s more violent one. As a patricide, Oedipus is persecuted by the Furies and savagely punished for his crime. Orestes, a matricide, while also persecuted by the goddesses of vengeance, flees to Athens and is absolved when he pleads for mercy. Irigaray draws attention to how matricide is treated as a less consequential, less important a crime than patricide. More importantly, Irigaray’s views on matricide hypothesize that this crime is condoned by Lacan’s theories as a necessary, inescapable ritual that a subject must undergo to become independent and fully formed. Matricide, while temporarily punished, will eventually be forgiven, as shown in Orestes’s case. However, patricide is strictly forbidden, withholding dire consequences for the perpetrators with no chance of absolution.

Irigaray goes beyond the Lacanian view that only patricide is unavoidable for the



development of individuation. She reinterprets the act of matricide itself in a more constructive, productive manner. Irigaray points out that the Lacanian matricide and the entrance of an individual into the law of the father serve the interests of erasing women's contribution to the subject's formation, thus, confirming patriarchal superiority. Hence, the mother is associated with a primitive influence, a disconnected and dangerous body that ensnares the infant in an irrational, underdeveloped state ("Body Against Body" 11). On the other hand, the entrance into the law of the father represents evolution, civilization and rationality. Irigaray claims that this misrepresentation of the mother's figure negatively affects the mother-daughter relationship. She affirms that daughters, in the Lacanian paradigm, view mothers in two different ways: first, as a phallic mother, a mother who tries to assume the position of power in the Lacanian schema. Such a position is viewed as an unnatural and destructive force. The mother becomes a negative oppressor that the daughter must struggle to separate from. Second, the mother is viewed as a deficient, lacking persona, whom the daughter must repudiate and turn away from (11). For Irigaray, this mother/daughter conundrum is representative of the patriarchal schema of feminine exclusion from the Lacanian Symbolic. She proposes to counteract this exclusion by attempting to create a new feminine imaginary, that is, a feminine Symbolic. To achieve this task, Irigaray accepts the importance of myths in the formation of the subject, and proposes to reinterpret feminine mythic figures.

Reimagining these mythic heroines empowers women with new voices, thus redefining the mother/daughter relationship and reshaping the concept of motherhood and the mother figure for the subjectivity of feminine subjects. Irigaray offers as examples the reimagining of the relationship between Clytemnestra and Iphigenia before the sacrifice of the latter, or of Demeter and Persephone, before Persephone is abducted by Hades. Irigaray believes that offering these mythic women voices effectively propels the mother-figure to the

fore, providing for a better understanding and analysis of matricide in individuation (12).

Irigaray's theories on matricide and the reinterpretation of mythic feminine figures serve as a sounding board for this first chapter. The problematic relationship between mothers and daughters is a mirror to the destructive love/hate relationship between sister characters. Considering Irigaray's theories on daughters at odds with the phallic/deficient mother, I argue that the sisters in this study project this negative relationship onto each other and consequently sever their bonds of identification and affection. Their tendency is to push each other away, to erase any common ground that approximates them, simultaneously engaging in self-destructive behavior and bows to normative framework that erases their subjectivity. Nonetheless, moments of connection between the sisters can be noted, with the offering of mutual aid and assistance.

Although most of the interactions of the sister characters chosen for this study are of conflict, there are instances of identification, moments when they offer each other aid, even if in tiny morsels. These exceptions, these acts of defiance, demonstrate how these characters struggle against patriarchal dictates and against the ideological apparatus which shapes their own identities as individuals. Even the death of one of the sisters of the pair, directly influenced by the actions of the surviving sister, still offers a form of resistance to the imposed self-destructive cycle that entraps them. The remaining sister can then better grasp the vision of how exterior forces manipulate her and her deceased sister, and chooses to fight against the impositions of society and their families. Most important of all, the loss of their sisters enables them to understand how important these sisters are as an integral part of their identities, and how sabotaging each other harms both intrinsically and irrevocably.

Amber Jacobs, in her book *On Matricide: Myth, Psychoanalysis, and the Law of the Mother* (2007), refines Irigaray's interpretation of matricide. Jacobs argues that it is important to destroy the male Symbolic phantasy of parthenogenesis, that is, reproduction without

fertilization, a reproduction which excludes the mother. Jacobs claims that while the patriarchal Symbolic indulges in parthenogenesis, the mother's influence on subjectivity will be silenced and erased.

Casting her look once more upon the *Oresteia*, Jacobs highlights another matricide, that of Athena's mother, Metis. The author discusses how it is Athena who casts the final vote on Orestes's trial. Athena states, as she decides upon Orestes's fate: "No mother gave me birth (...) in all my heart I am my father's child" (Aeschylus, *The Eumenides* 735-39). Athena's lines and decisions are interpreted by Jacobs as a confirmation of the act of matricide. In accordance with Irigaray's concepts, Orestes's matricide is accepted and institutionalized as a necessary act for the formation of the subject in Western culture. In addition, it alludes to a second matricide that is not mentioned in the *Oresteia*.

Jacob's text focuses on this other matricide, which concerns Athena's mother, Metis. Metis is a Titan who attracts Zeus's unwanted attention. After he forces himself on her, Metis becomes pregnant with his child. It had already been prophesized that Metis would bear extremely powerful children, the second being a son that would overthrow Zeus. To forestall these predictions, Zeus then tricks Metis into assuming the form of a fly and swallows her. Nevertheless, Metis, pregnant inside Zeus's head, begins to make a helmet and a robe for her child. The hammering caused by Metis's crafting causes Zeus great pain, so Hephaestus split his head with an axe and Athena, Metis and Zeus's daughter, leaps out fully grown, armed and armored.

Metis's annihilation is congruent with theories on ritual matricide and parthenogenesis. Her disappearance effectively silences the mother's voice and subjectivity. Jacobs proposes an alternative to the Oedipal/castration model to counteract matricidal economy, the law of Metis, or the law of the mother. The law of the mother is not, as Jacobs explains in her article "The Life of Metis: Cunning Maternal Intervention" (2009), a mimetic

inversion of the law of the father. Jacob aims at understanding matricide as an act that produces generative loss and functions to transmit maternal genealogy. She believes that, by destroying the male phantasy of parthenogenesis, and recognizing the true impact of matricide on a subject's psyche, the mother gains access to subjectivity and mother/daughter relationships could be given structural mediation. The mother and daughter would thus begin to better comprehend their destructive dynamics, which originate from collapsed identifications, separation problems, envy and proximity anxiety.

I believe similar relationship problems arise between the sister pairs and that they mirror the same conflicts of the mother/daughter pair. The latent, repressed matricide of Metis serves as a bedrock theme for Jacob's law of the mother, and, under Irigarayan instigation, the critic encourages her readers to capture the hidden, matricidal contents of other myths. In this work, I employ Jacob's concept of the law of the mother to analyze matricide in the chosen Greek myths, and extend its lens to the conflicted relationship between sisters in the three chosen novels.

Irigaray's views on female genealogy and her theories on the reinterpretation of myths will be the foundations utilized to study the nuances of the sister characters' conflicted interaction. The destructive cycle of rupture and approximation between sisters is directly connected to the complexities of matricide and female subjectivity, and the closer examination of classic mythic sisters is a useful tool to better help us understand the established pattern of patriarchal domination under which the sisters operate. However, to fully analyze these patriarchal discourses observed in the narratives of Greek myths, we must consider some of the blind spots of Irigaray's propositions.

A central criticism of Irigaray's theories focuses on how she apparently fails to move beyond the Lacanian Symbolic. Laura Green, in her article "Myths, Matricide and Maternal Subjectivity in Irigaray" (2012), questions not only Irigaray's use of the patriarchal Symbolic,

but also her views on the reinterpretation of the mythic feminine figures. Green writes: “The idea of the ‘mythic feminine’...should be understood on Irigaray’s terms as a construct of the masculine symbolic-imaginary and its attempt to render the feminine intelligible by bringing it under the phallic signifier” (4). Moreover, Green questions why there should even be the need to kill the mother (8).

The solution Green offers is to return to Irigaray’s earlier discussions on ontological issues, adopting views ideas on a primary imaginary, an imaginary which predates the one proposed by Lacan and the Symbolic. This primary imaginary would recognize the mother’s contribution to an individual’s subjectivity by “acknowledging the primordial links with the mother’s body which give rise to subjectivity in its very basic form *in utero*” (8). Green’s article expands on Irigaray’s notions on matriarchal influence, proposing a reinterpretation of the mother’s subjectivity on individuation and subject formation. She offers a new triadic view on the mother-infant relationship. Instead of having the father cause a rupture in the connection between mother and child, Green proposes the conceptualization of the mother’s body act as a third space of mediation. The critic claims that this triadic composition ensures the relevance of the mother’s influence on subjectivity. Furthermore, this concept transforms the maternal body into a rationalized space, a locus that contributes to the individual’s civilizing process, before the intrusion of the paternal third term (18).

Green’s contributions to Irigaray’s oeuvre add another layer to the ontological critique of the sister pairs. I believe that the need to question the necessity of matricide enlightens and allows for a rethinking of the relationship between the sisters, offering a possibility of rehabilitating their strained relationship. Furthermore, the concept of casting a different, more positive light on the mother’s body enables the sisters to not only view their roles as mothers under a constructive lens, but also develops a deeper understanding of their conflicts, since they, more often than not, reproduce the mother/daughter duo’s problems.

Considering that the sister's mothers in the literary corpus here analyzed are either personifications of the phallic or deficient mother, I propose to analyze the sisters' relationship as mothers to their own children. In *The Other Boleyn Girl*, Mary directly challenges patriarchal bonds by isolating herself from fortune and life in court to spare her children. Bastards of King Henry, Mary fears they may become political pawns, and shields them by eloping with a commoner and retiring with her family to the country. Their father, the king, plays no role in the children's destiny, and it is their well-being that spurs Mary into effectively defying her family for the first time in the novel. Mary's relationship with her son and daughter belongs to Mary alone. There is no mediating patriarchal third-term; it is the mother's choices and influences that protect the children, ensuring their safety and well-being. Therefore, Mary escapes the Symbolic formula of the phallic/deficient mother, positively contributing to her children's formation. She acts as an Irigarayan mother, challenging the Lacanian notion that the mother is merely a vessel of natural birth, disassociated from the father's privilege of cultural birth.

In *The Blind Assassin*, Isis tries to break the pattern of the Symbolic mother, when she leaves her husband and takes their daughter with her. Nevertheless, she later loses her daughter's custody, and from this point on, Isis no longer bears any influence over her daughter's formation and rearing. Even so, she still tries to leave her memoirs as a legacy to her granddaughter, refusing to surrender her chance of bearing positive influences and contributions to her granddaughter's subjectivity. Isis hopes her novel will serve as both a testimony and lesson, explaining her actions and life choices.

In *Dust*, the subjective maternal body takes on a new significance. While the characters do not bear any children, the relationship between Perceval and Rien becomes even more intricate when Perceval consumes Rien, that is, she devours her sister's memories and psyche, withholding parts of Rien's memories in her mind. Perceval's own body becomes

the third mediating space between the sisters, a space in which the two become more intertwined than ever, an act that ensures the survival of both Perceval and her entire world. Perceval gives birth to a new consciousness, a multiple psyche which contains her own and that of her sister. Perceval's mind is enhanced with Rien's memories, with a part of Rien's own psyche.

All three novels present alternate models of motherhoods and the possibility of positive rereading's of the act of being a mother. The Lacanian Oedipal myth and the patriarchal Symbolic are questioned by the juxtaposition of the literary texts with the feminist reinterpretation of the myths of Antigone, Electra, and Psyche, questioning the dominance of the masculine subject. The sister characters' subjectivities, the empowerment of their choices add to the Irigarayan oeuvre of feminine genealogy, challenge the notion of a culture of sexual indifference and of a homosocial, monosexual economy.

II. Antigone, Ismene, Sisters and (M)Others

And thus- I must be back.

A thousand times.

To breathe the dark in which your body is enshrined.

To hold your helpless head.

To place the blade against your side.

Condemned a thousand times.

Your sister.

Your Antigone.

“Antigone”,

Janina Degutyte

Pray I will and sing I must,

And yet I weep- Oedipus' child

Descends into the loveless dust.

“Antigone,” William Butler Yeats

Where do we draw the line between familial obligation and duty towards the state, towards society? Is there any real separation between the individual and collective spheres? Who stands to gain with the vilification of the weakest, the repetitive and continuous gender warfare? How to deal with the voiceless, how to read into the subjectivities of silence or of what was purportedly left unsaid? Can we listen to what they have to say? These are some of



the questions that the critic Luce Irigaray asks in relation to Sophocles's play *Antigone*.

In *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), Irigaray dedicates a whole chapter, entitled "The Eternal Irony of the Community," to the analysis of Antigone. To attempt to listen to what the repressed have to say, "we must abstract from the seductive, reductive discourses and listen to what she [Antigone] has to say about government of the polis, its order and its laws," as Irigaray, in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, encourages us to do. She is referring specifically to the main character of Sophocles's play, *Antigone*. The relationship between Antigone and her sister, and aspects of motherhood discussed by Irigaray, exemplifies the theories on matricide and can be discussed in relation to the sister pairs in this thesis's corpus.

Carol Jacobs, in her article "Dusting Antigone" (1996), discusses how patriarchal theories posit community as universal, and women as the community's individual enemy. Indeed, Jacobs strives to show how women's relationship with the community is non-dialectical, and discusses the definition of women as a perverting force (4). Analyzing Irigaray's interpretations of Antigone as a mean of identification for women, Jacobs indicates that Antigone's "fidelity to maternal genealogy" represents a way to defy the Oedipally centered patriarchal views (2).

Jacobs proposes an interpretation of Antigone that moves a step further from her traditional analysis as a sister, daughter, woman, the representative of individual drives and as the carrier of the will of the divine. Jacobs offers a new category for Antigone, that of a mother. The author believes that reimagining maternity, which gives birth not only to life, but to alterity, is the key to Antigone's character (12). She views Antigone's acts as metaphors for maternity, as they directly contribute to the individuation and subjectivity of other characters. Jacobs turns back to Irigaray and the theme of motherhood, mentioning how Irigaray "places the kinsman back into *the womb of the earth*" (*Speculum* 215). Jacobs exemplifies the ways in which Antigone can be seen engaged in motherly behavior: she covers Polynices body in

dust, thus returning him to the Irigarayan earth womb (6). She is then heard screaming like a bird, mourning for her lost offspring (9). In sequence, she takes Haemon to the womb of the earth, for he takes his own life when he sees her corpse. Antigone also compares herself to Niobe, “condemned to perpetual mourning” (12). Niobe is the daughter of Tantalus, who is the founder of Orestes lineage. Tantalus offers his son’s flesh as dinner to the gods, and, in consequence, all his descendants are cursed. Niobe brags about the fact that she has fourteen children and that the people of Thebes should worship her instead of the goddess Leto. Leto’s twins, Apollo and Artemis, kill Niobe’s children as a response to her insult. Niobe is mother to the dead, and, according to Jacobs, in her own unconventional way, so is Antigone.

Jacobs proceeds with the reimagination of Antigone’s motherhood, describing Antigone as mother of what remains, that is, of the literal remains themselves, of what cannot maintain its shape, of only what is gone, mother of dust itself (12). This alternate motherhood includes the subjectivities of the repressed, the excluded, what refuses to conform to imposed norms. Antigone’s alternate motherhood, as mother of the dead, this “unimaginable place as mother” (13), not only grants Polynices access to subjectivity by burying him, but also produces other refigurations of meaning and associations to maternity.

Antigone’s role as mother, then, is both creative and destructive. Jacob affirms that the interpretation of Antigone as mother, much more than Antigone as sister, conceptually implodes patriarchalism. However, considering the introduction of the chapter, in which I argue that the sister pairs analyzed in this study reenact the conflicts generated by mothers and daughters, I would like to take a closer look at Antigone’s sister. Whereas Jacob focuses on Antigone’s relationship as sister/mother to Polynices, Ismene, long ignored by scholars, has traditionally been seen as the weak link in the narrative. Ismene is, at first sight, a minor character to be set aside, a passive woman who meekly accepts her fate of fading into the background, all the more so when compared with the dramatically tragic Antigone.

In her article “Ismene’s Forced Choice: Sacrifice and Sorority in Sophocles’ *Antigone*” (2011), Bonnie Honig offers a myriad of dual adjectives which have been used to oppose Antigone and Ismene: active/passive, heroic/cowardly, monstrous/human, martyr/survivor (32). However, Honig claims that the sisters do not oppose each other; they rather act in concert ways (33). To attempt to hear what Ismene has to say, to unsilence her, we must carefully read into her lines and actions in the play.

To counter the claims that Ismene is an irrelevant side character in the narrative, Honig presents us with an alternative version of the events surrounding Polynices’s two burials. Conventional readings have always assumed that Antigone is responsible for the two burials, the first ensuing in Polynices’s body being covered by dust, and the second the offering of libations to consecrate his body. While Antigone is caught in the second act, there are no witnesses to confirm she is the agent in the first. Not even Antigone herself clarifies if she is responsible for dusting Polynices, leaving it for her uncle, King Creon, to interpret that she is indeed guilty of the first act. Although many critics corroborate that textual evidence points to Antigone as responsible for the first burial, such claims are not enough to rule out any other possibility. Honig takes advantage of this chink in the interpretative armor to propose another option: what if it is Ismene who performs Polynices’s first burial?

Two sisters, two burials, in two completely different manners. Honig compares the two acts, presenting them as opposed to one another, and linking them to the different sisters. The first, furtive-like burial, is “sub-rosa, quiet, performed exactly to a tee” as Ismene counseled Antigone to do it in the play’s first scene: ““Then don’t, at least, blurt this out to anyone. Keep it a secret”” (Honig 40). The second burial is conducted with Antigone’s dramatic flair, out in the open, under the midday sun, accompanied by Antigone’s desperate wailing and witnessed by sentries. Honig ponders the possible contests to her claim of the sisters performing two separate burials.

Initially, Ismene attempts to dissuade Antigone from forfeiting her life in such a rash act. Most critics would hold that Ismene's lines would prove that she is incapable of putting her life at risk for Antigone's sake, because of Ismene's vehemence in her failed exhortations to her sister. But Honig instigates her readers to question one of Ismene's lines: "You are truly dear to the ones who love you" not as a "passive declaration of unconditional but resigned love for her impossible, impetuous sister," but as an intention, a plan in formation, a way to save Antigone from enacting her defiance and compromising her life (40-41). Considering Ismene as being the author of the first burial, Honig declares she does it not for politics, but for sororal love of both Antigone and Polynices. She even suggests that the act may also have occurred because of sibling rivalry: Ismene's need to perform the act first, much like Antigone's need to enact a loud, public burial (41). I agree with Honig's theories, viewing Ismene's counsels as a way to fight back against oppressive impositions, and consequently, to establish sororal agency.

In addition, this other version of events would account for Ismene's desperate cries when Antigone is taken, as a prisoner, before Creon. Traditionally, the passage, in which Creon hears Ismene's cries and states that the very act condemns Antigone, is interpreted by critics as another instance of Creon's paranoia. Honig argues that maybe Creon has a point, that Ismene is not merely crying out for her sister's fate when she discovers what has unfolded, but is already aware of the happenstance in which Antigone is caught because she, too, has taken part in the transgressions. Creon's initial reaction, to punish both sisters equally, and his claim that Ismene has been "plotting in the dark," and Antigone, "caught red-handed, tries to glorify her crimes," lay the grounds for Honig's claim of the "twinned and complementary character of the two burials" (41). Creon then orders Ismene to be brought before him and Antigone. Antigone reacts desperately, asking him "Creon, what more do you want than my arrest and execution?" to which he replies: "Nothing. Then I have it all". Honig

points out that Antigone rushes to exclaim: “Then why delay?” before Ismene is brought in, and continues to provoke and taunt him, in an effort to further spare Ismene (41). As Ismene enters the scene, Creon accuses her of plotting with Antigone. Ismene replies “I did it, yes.” Honig points out that Ismene not only does not deny the act, like Antigone, but actually avows it. However, she argues that critics have read Ismene’s claim akin to Creon’s definition of it: hysterical (43). Ismene’s following lines, ripe with duality, further complicate the situation: “I did it, yes, if only she consents, I share the guilt, the consequences too.” I agree with Honig’s defense of Ismene’s choices to be a sororal partisan. We can link Ismene’s lines, again, to the beginning of the play, in which Ismene pleads with Antigone to abandon her defiance, as an act of sororal resistance. Ismene acts in accordance with, and not against, Antigone.

Under Creon’s accusations, Ismene may be concomitantly assuming her authorship of Polynices’s burial and seeking Antigone’s acceptance of her participation. Confronted by both Creon and Antigone, the first accusing her of participating in disobeying his royal decree, the latter refusing her agency in the transgressive act, Ismene seeks to cast her lot with her sister. But Antigone refuses to allow Ismene to confess. They proceed to argue in front of Creon, debating whether Ismene should follow Antigone to the tomb. Antigone wins the argument, refusing Ismene’s confession and solely bearing the guilt, claiming that she will never again utter her sister’s name. Critics have viewed this erasure of Ismene’s agency as Antigone’s complete indifference to her sister, but Honig interprets Antigone’s sacrifice on behalf of Ismene as sororal solidarity (44). I concur that the traditional views on sororal rivalry tend to posit women against each other. By reconfiguring Antigone’s actions as an act of sororal resistance, we can combat the erasure of women’s voices and establish a positive reading of sister characters.

Honig states that, even if we assume that Ismene has not performed the first burial,

Antigone's last acts reveal sororal partisanship. The exchanged insults and mockeries are a tactic to ensure Ismene's survival. Ismene begs Antigone to admit her participation, crying: "Oh no, my sister, don't reject me, please, let me lie down beside you, consecrating the dead together," and pleads: "What do I care for life, cut off from you?", to which Antigone replies: "if I mock you, I get no pleasure from it, only pain." Finally, Ismene accepts Antigone's lonely fate, inquiring: "Tell me dear one, what can I do to help you even now?" Antigone states: "Save yourself. I don't begrudge your survival." Honig's reading of Antigone shows "an agonistic sorority that is solidaristic, not merely subject to male exchange, and infused with love, anger, rivalry, complicity, mutuality, devotion and care" (51).

Honig concludes her article by stating that the importance of the sisters' concert action surpasses any critique constructed on the individual siblings. She insists that the main issue in *Antigone* is the importance of sorority and that the interaction between the sisters offers more sites of agency. In this approach, Ismene is not simply discarded by Antigone, she is rather an active participant in her sister's choice, and chooses a living martyrdom over Antigone's martyred death (Honig 61). I corroborate Honig's feminist theorization of Ismene's sororal partisanship. If a female character acts in a manner that spares suffering, violence or death to a sister (or any other woman), then she is guaranteeing that women's voices are not silenced. Additionally, we can reconfigure the supposed fading out of a surviving female character as a messenger that can report, testify and represent sororal struggles and denounce violence against women.

If we return to the theories of conflicted juxtaposition of the sister characters discussed at the beginning of the chapter, we can view Honig's reading of the sisters as an attempt to rewrite women's genealogy. While Antigone's final, defiant act mirrors Jocasta's demise, Ismene failed attempt to join her sister ensures that Creon has not completely erased female agency. Ismene's support of Antigone's rebelliousness, even if silent and furtive,

shows that the ties between the two sisters are not as negligible as critics have claimed. The law of the father has not obliterated maternal genealogy completely. Moreover, by shifting the spotlight from the Antigone/Polynices pair to Antigone/Ismene, we move from the realm of the patriarchal exclusion of the feminine to a more contemporary discussion of voicing the repressed, to a challenge to heteronormativity, to a creative possibility of subverting the law of the father and, mainly, to open up the grounds for a new possibility of rethinking sororal partisanship, women's identity and agency.

I apply the arguments constructed about the Antigone/Ismene pair to the three sister pairs in this study, showing how the more passive sister (Mary/Isis/Rien) offers support to their more active pairs, even if in a conflicted and many times silent manner. I claim that the sisters' development as characters and their struggles enable a feminist rewriting of gendered experiences and resistance. Furthermore, when Honig chooses Ismene as Antigone's pair, instead of Polynices, she is shifting the focus away from a heteronormative relationship to one between women, reinterpreting these mythical feminine figures in accordance to Irigaray's proposals, with which I agree. The fact that Ismene chooses to survive, that Antigone instigates her to do so, represents another form of resistance against the law of the father, for in ensuring that one sister of the pair remains alive, the sisters may be said to be enacting the law of the mother, the perpetuation of female genealogy.

I believe that the Antigone/Ismene pair and the sister pairs discussed in this work offer an answer to Green's question, why must we kill the mother? The sisters are a reproduction of the mother/daughter conflicted relationship, but they are positioned in both roles concomitantly. Hence, when one sister is sacrificed, the surviving sister is not a cowardly, passive witness, who allows matricide to dictate her actions, but a supporter of her sacrificed pair. Furthermore, the survivor subverts the required matricide in the law of the father, for since she is also mother to her sister, patriarchal matricide has not effectively wiped out all

the mothers in the story.

To delve into the problematic relationship between the literary sister characters and to understand why they are constantly and simultaneously trying to assimilate and destroy each other, a close reading and analysis of the formation of the sisters' subjectivities is necessary. The analysis of the sisters' life experiences is based on Irigaray's theories on women's genealogy and her views on matricide as a foundational phantasy in Western culture and epistemologies. Irigaray's technique of reinterpreting classical Greek myths and of reading into female characters' lines or silences, beyond what traditional views have offered, provide a cornerstone for analyzing the contemporary sisters, allowing for a tracing and explanation of the ambiguous approximation and destruction pattern between both mythic and literary sisters. I use Jacob's law of the mother, and the disavowal of the institutionalized male phantasy of parthenogenesis as a tool to validate the sister's subjectivities as daughters, mothers, and sister figures. Jacob's theories contribute to my readings of a so-called "voicing" of the mother figure and the criticism of the use of the mother as a mere object. Finally, Green's insistence on moving beyond Oedipus and attempting to formulate an ontological theory that does not require matricide bring about a challenge, in my analysis, to move beyond heteronormative patriarchal impositions. Replacing the disruptive Symbolic third term, the father, by the mother's body space as a civilizing, constructive influence might be a tentative step to mend negative maternal relations. Recasting mother/daughter relations under a more positive light, and trying to trace a female genealogy that effectively gives voice to the mother/daughter pair directly reflect on the sisters' pair, mirroring the complexities of the latter. This work provides a reading of the sister narratives and their outcomes, ranging from their problematic ontological origins to their struggles to move beyond heteronormative impositions.

My act of focusing on these sisters and giving them a voice corroborates Irigaray's



theories on the reinterpretation of female subjects to ensure the empowerment and manifestation of women's issues and subjects. The sisters are equally relevant, both the dramatic one in her *hubris* and blatant defiance, and the more passive one in her quiet resistance and support. They guarantee that matricide is not executed without making a stand against its cultural erasure, that a mother (other) might continue to survive even if one of the sisters is sacrificed, that parthenogenesis does not erase the mother's subjectivity, and that women's bonds, identities and subjectivities come into motion to rewrite female genealogy.

### III. Sororal Motherhood

My three sisters are sitting  
on rocks of black obsidian  
for the first time, in this light, I can see who they are  
"Women," Adrienne Rich

The first two sections of this chapter discuss the importance of psychoanalytical ontology, matricide, and the importance of subverting the patriarchal framework to establish a female genealogy and create a positive space for the reinterpretation of mother/daughter and sororal cooperation and partnerships.

This last section applies these theoretical standpoints to the literary corpus. I begin with the discussion of how the literary sisters' pair functions as surrogate mother figures to one another, reestablishing a positive mother/daughter connection which counteracts the negative influences of their biological phallic mothers. Then, I move on to the analysis of how the act of motherhood, which includes the sisters themselves and other characters, can be read under the theory of the perception of alternate maternities, which offers possibilities for the construction of identities and subjectivities. I also point out the instances in which the

sisters act as allies, offering support to each other, empowering both sisters and fostering character development, especially in relation to the sister perceived as the passive, Ismene-like persona.

*The Other Boleyn Girl* contains the most stereotypical example of the phallic mother. Anne and Mary's mother obeys the family's orders, feels no affection for her daughters, distances herself when their influence at court diminishes, and outright rejects the sisters when they fall into disgrace at the Tudor court. In the beginning of the novel, set at the time when Mary is a young girl of thirteen years old, her mother is already cold and distant, positioning herself in a manner that clearly expresses how she sees her daughter as a political pawn. She is constantly reprimanding Mary, not hiding her distaste for her naiveté: "Watch and learn Mary. There is no room for mistakes at court" (3). Mary observes that, when her mother discusses her with other members of the family, it was like "a horse-trader assessing the value of a filly" (15). When the Boleyn family decides that she is to be offered to the king, and her brother George informs her that he has no choice but to accept, Mary is reluctant to accept their imposition over her.

I view Mary's inherent hesitation to abide to her family's wishes under the light of two issues; the resistance to external control over her choices and subjectivity, and the identification with a positive mother figure. Mary holds Queen Katherine in high regard, has always been well-treated and cherished by her, and admires her actions. Mary attempts to refuse the Boleyn's plan, saying "I can't do it. I'm sorry, but I love the queen. She's a great lady and I can't betray her" (17). Furthermore, to assert her own individuality, Mary argues: "I promised to God to cleave only to my husband, and surely I shouldn't betray him" (18). I see Mary's affirmation of her loyalty as her first step in the direction of affirming her own identity and establishing sororal partisanship.

When Mary is forced to do her family's will, she still maintains a train of independent

thought, when she empathizes with the queen's plight. The following lines exemplify her moments of solidarity and sorority:

When I looked up the queen was looking towards me, not as if I  
were a rival, but as if I were still her favourite little maid in  
waiting who might bring her some comfort. She looked at me  
as if for a moment she would seek someone who would  
understand the dreadful predicament of a woman, in this world  
ruled by men. (31)

Mary's reflections on her own status as a woman and her analysis of her subjugation begin to develop through her maternal bond with the queen, but continue as she thinks of her own disempowerment. When she is sent back to Hever, so that the king is manipulated into missing her, she explains to the farmers who ask her for a small investment that she possesses no money of her own. She tells them, "I do as my father does, as my husband does. I dress as is proper for their wife or their daughter. But I don't own anything on my own account" (48). As she returns to court, Mary informs Anne that she realized that she could live without the king or her husband. Mary tells her sister that she "was on her own for three months, and [she had] never been on her own in [her] whole life before" (50). Mary affirms that she does not need the court, or the king or even the queen's love to be happy. I see this as a major step for her character development. Mary understands that she is dependent upon her family for material provisions, but that she can be happy as an individual, and acknowledges that the freedom and independence to think and act on her own is empowering. This experience is her initial movement away from patriarchal control and her diminished status as a gendered subject.

Mary's independence from family orders is already set into motion as soon as she returns to court. Ignoring her family's warnings, she is faithful to the sorority she feels

towards the queen, and, when asked by Queen Katherine if she has returned on orders from the king, she chooses to reply honestly, “The King sent for me, Your Majesty” (53). Mary discovers a way to navigate around the impositions she suffers to retain her own identity and agency. During King Henry’s courtship, Mary never fails to recognize her admiration for the queen, repeatedly affirming that she was a better woman than she was, a better queen than the king. Mary claimed that the king “feared her intelligence” (206), and how

She was speaking for the good women of the country, for the good wives who should not be put aside just because their husbands had taken a fancy to another, for the women who walked the hard road between kitchen, bedroom, church and childbirth. For the women who deserved more than their husband’s whim. (247)

When Queen Katherine pleads for help, Mary chooses to aid her, leading the queen to her little *prieu dieu* in tears, carrying a hidden letter for her to one of the queen’s faithful servants, “In silence I went forward. It was the first time in seven years she had asked me for help. She put out her arm to be dragged to her feet and I saw that she could hardly stand” (208-9). Mary actively decides to partake in sororal resistance with the positive feminine role-model she has to identify with, a woman she views as a good mother, as an individual who is true to her own standards.

Mary’s fostering of sorority, her affinity and identification with Queen Katherine directly counter her negative experiences with her phallic mother. Mary develops enough perception of her mother’s manipulations when she begins to not follow her orders blindly. When Anne suffers the family’s anger and feels their iron control over her, Mary understands that she must fight to ensure the prevalence of her own identity and subjectivity, or be caught in the cycle of manipulation and subservience. Mary is quietly observant of her mother’s

claims, that her daughter's spirits should have been broken so that they could be of further use to the family (110).

I argue that Mary fully claims her individuality when she becomes a mother. Her experiences with motherhood, the negativity she endures from her phallic mother, and the admiration and respect she develops for her surrogate mother-figure, Queen Katherine, empower Mary to opt for a positive female experience as a mother. She begins to view the king under a new light, no longer condescending to his unfaithfulness, but as a terrible father and a perpetuator of violence against women. He is unconcerned about the children he has with Mary, as he is likewise inconsiderate of Princess Mary, Queen Katherine's daughter, as shown in this exclamation by the queen "I cannot even go to him and ask him to see our daughter" (283). Mary is witness to more of the king's egotistical behavior towards his children, in the episode in which the queen confronts him and Mary exclaims,

I could not believe that the queen should challenge His Majesty in public. That she, whose case was even now before the Pope in Rome, should have the courage to face her husband in his own chamber and politely ask that he set aside his mistress. I could not think of why she was doing it, and then I knew. It was for Princess Mary. It was to shame him to let her go to the princess. She was risking everything to see her daughter (285)

The king concedes only when the princess becomes so sickly that she might die, "Not until the princess was said by her doctors to be close to death, and asking every day when her mother was coming, did Henry release the queen" (286). When told that Anne "swears that the queen will never return to court...that the queen so foolishly loves her daughter that she has gone to her and lost the crown of kingdom in one ride", and asked if she does not rejoice at Anne's victory, Mary replies "Not at this price" (286-7). When the queen is subsequently

kept in exile from the court, Mary mourns and reflects upon her situation, empathetic towards the queen's plight. She ponders "I thought of her, separated from her daughter as I was parted from my son by the ambition of the same woman. And I missed her. She had been like a mother to me when I first came to court and I had betrayed her as a daughter will betray her mother, and yet never stop loving her" (385).

Mary tries to warn her sister of the dangers of submitting herself to the king, offering her own experience as advice. At this point, the heterosexual love plot ceases to be important for Mary and she is liberated from her passive position of a submissive object through her decisions to protect and love her children. For Anne, she reenacts Psyche's sisters' roles, trying to open her sister's eyes to the patriarchal women abuser that King Henry really is, and how Anne shall suffer under his hands. When Mary is summoned back to court after Anne's first miscarriage, she arrives to find her sister kneeled at the same little *prieu dieu* that Queen Katherine used,

I had to choke back an exclamation of superstitious fear. I saw Queen Katherine on her knees at her prie dieu, praying with all her heart that she might conceive a son for her husband and that he might turn back to her, away from the Boleyn girls.

But the ghost queen turned her head it was Anne, my sister, pale and strained, with her flirtatious eyes shadowed with fatigue. At once my heart went out to her and I crossed the room and wrapped my arms around her where she knelt and said, 'Oh Anne'.

She rose to her feet and she put her arms around me and her heavy head came down on my shoulder. She did not say that she had missed me, that she was miserably lonely in a court that

was turning its attention away from her; she did not need to.

The droop of her shoulders was enough to tell me that

queenship was not a great joy to Anne Boleyn these days. (423)

As Mary exerts motherhood in positive ways, including the act of extending maternal sorority to Anne, she frees herself from the external control of her family and court life. She develops her own sense of individuation when she resides in the country with her children. She claims to be free from the intrigue between the king and queen, of the rivalry and spitefulness of court, of the constant comparisons to her sister (213). I argue that maternity is thus an empowering and liberating condition for Mary.

Afterwards in the narrative, it is the positive reconceptualization of motherhood that empowers the sororal bond between the sisters. Mary undertakes the role of Anne's mother when Anne is in her most vulnerable state: under childbirth duress. Mary accompanies Anne throughout her pregnancies, attempting to spare Anne whatever suffering she can, especially at childbirth. When Anne's first child turns out to be a girl, and is despised by the family for not offering leverage over King Henry, Mary comforts Anne and cares for the princess. As Anne's further attempts at childbirth result in abortions, Mary never leaves her side, even in her last, failed attempt to produce a male heir. It is Mary who offers her comfort, when their mother snatches the stillborn and throws it into the flames, as if it were nothing more than a dirty rag. Their phallic mother acts in accordance with the family dictates, as shown in the following passage; "I expect you to be up within a day. Do you hear me? If anybody asks you about the baby you will say that you made a mistake, that there was no baby. There has never been a baby and you never announced one. But for a certainty, one will come soon" (402). Mary then acts in opposition to her phallic mother's orders and holds Anne, acting as the mother they never had, offering support, succor and sisterly protection. Mary offers Anne sisterly support, contesting their mother's domineering choices. She stands by Anne, even

when her sister's doom is certain, doing her best to protect and care for her.

Mary's motherly-like attitudes towards Anne are positive for both sisters. Assuming an active position as a surrogate mother figure, Mary leaves the position of the passive, obedient sibling who is controlled by the patriarchal family members. Mary is empowered by the act of protecting her sister, and she increases her proactive attitudes as a mother used to protect herself and her own children, an act which has relevance later in the narrative. Mary challenges the subservient conditions imposed on her, challenging the stereotype of the obedient daughter. When Mary performs positive acts of maternity, she contributes to the reinvigoration of the mother/daughter relationship and the retrieval of women's subjectivities and genealogies.

#### IV. My Sister's Keeper: Motherhood and Authorship

If you have a sister and she dies, do you stop saying you have one? Or are you always  
a sister, even when the other half of the equation is gone? (168)

*My Sister's Keeper*, Jodi Picoult

In *The Blind Assassin*, the sisters are daughters of a mother who represents the opposite of the phallic mother: the passive mother, a martyr-like persona who sacrifices herself for patriarchal ideals and dies at childbirth. Left motherless at an early age, they are raised under their father's careless orders. The results of their upbringing lead the eldest sibling, Iris, to assume the role of the passive, obedient daughter. Laura, the youngest sister, performs acts of rebellion while concomitantly disassociating herself from the world around her. Laura's unconventional behavior is described by Iris in the following passage,



Laura wasn't very different from other people after all. Perhaps she was the same—the same as some odd, skewed element in them that most people kept hidden but Laura did not, and this was why she frightened them—or if not frighten, then alarm them in some way; though more, of course, as she got older.

(92)

The negative influence of the law of the father on the sisters' formation impacts their choice as adults. Iris describes how she physically resembles her father more, having inherited his "scowl, dogged skepticism" and medals, while Laura is more akin to their mother and her piousness. However, Iris also states that "appearances are deceptive. I could have never driven off a bridge. My father could have. My mother couldn't" (83). Linking her father's self-destructive behavior and its influences in Laura's and her own subjectivities establishes a cycle of patriarchal violence that the sisters are subjected to. Iris describes her father as the "werewolf" in their "besieged" castle-home (85) and he sets a pattern of molding her persona and subjecting her to external impositions: "This was the first time a man would expect more from than I was capable of giving, but it would not be the last" (105). She also describes her relationship to her father as an "iron chain around [her] neck" (106), demonstrating the burden he forcefully set on her.

Nonetheless, the violence they suffer is counteracted by their relationship to different kinds of motherhoods. The sisters do have a mother-figure that they can relate to. The housekeeper, Reenie, sometimes plays the role of a surrogate mother. It is through Reenie's acts of storytelling, a mish mash of daily tidbits, random observations, and cunning comments, that Iris constructs the story of her family. The first facts that Iris learns are about her grandmother, Adelia Chase, a member of a once prominent family that squandered their fortunes. Consequently, she was married off to Benjamin Chase, Iris's grandfather. Iris notes

that Reenie remarks, “She wasn’t married, she was married off”, and that Adelia “did her duty” (62). I view these tales as a foreshadowed warning given to the sisters, an alert to watch out for their control over their own lives, or the danger of being robbed of their autonomy, like their grandmother. In fact, Iris’s marriage does mirror her grandmother’s. Her grandfather Benjamin was a rich man, but one with no finesse, so he supposedly married Adelia to teach him the manners of high society and to bear him children. Likewise, Iris is married off to Richard Griffen, a crude and cruel man with money. She is alerted a second time, when Laura intercedes to protect her, warning her that she views Richard as an evil, abusive man. Even their parents’ marriage, retold from Reenie’s point of view, stands out as an example of patriarchal dominance. Their mother must stand sustained abuse from her husband when he returns from war, tolerating his drinking and infidelity. Reenie tells Iris that her father proposed during a skating party. Iris comments that they were skating in “thin ice,” and that “beneath the surfaces of things was the unsaid, boiling slowly” (72). I view this imagery as a representation of the danger implied in marriage, dangers which are pointed out in the criticism implicit in Reenie’s tale.

Iris learns more about her mother through Reenie’s memories and stories. She is nine years old when she loses her mother. Therefore, Iris experiences with her mother are very limited, being associated to moments she had to share with baby Laura. Her mother was highly invested in charity work, especially in helping wounded soldiers. She overworked herself, ruining her health. Iris believes that she went too far, acting out a martyrdom that was passed on to her sister Laura. Iris is critical of her mother’s actions, as shown in this passage:

What virtue was attached to this notion, of going beyond your strength, of not sparing yourself, of ruining your health!

Nobody is born with that kind of selflessness: it can only be acquired by the most relentless discipline, a crushing-out of

natural inclination, and by my time the knack or secret of it must have been lost. Or perhaps I didn't even try, having suffered from the effects it had on my mother. As for Laura, she was not selfless, not at all. She was skinless, which is a different thing. (71)

Iris is angered by her mother's martyr like personality. She comments that "the other side of selflessness [is] tyranny" (80). Iris's observations are a critique to her mother, who dedicated so much time to others, but ignored her own daughters. Iris is aware of the silencing her mother imposes on her, teaching her passivity, docility and acceptance. She was expected to keep out of the way, to be a good girl, not to cause any trouble. In other words, she was supposed to annul herself to win her mother's approval. One of Iris's childhood memories is illustrative of the meek behavior that was expected of her:

Her comportment as a mother had always been instructive rather than cherishing. I soon found out that if I could keep quiet, without clamouring for attention—especially with the baby, with Laura, watching beside her and rocking her cradle so she would sleep, not a thing she did easily or for long—I would be permitted to remain in the same room with my mother. If not, I would be sent away. So that was the accommodation I made: silence, helpfulness. (89)

What her passive mother teaches her to endure is partially countered by Reenie's stories and her critical comments. Reenie adopts the role of a sororal mother, alerting Iris of the dangers and trap that may befall her. Laura's and Iris's relationship and their ties of sorority and motherhood enact another form of rebellion against the patriarchal society they are deeply inserted into. For example, Reenie's mothering shields Iris from Richard's sister,

Winifred, and her attacks and attempts to mould Iris like clay. In contrast to Winifred's machinations to erase Iris's personality and subjectivity, Reenie taught the sisters that "who [they] were ought to be enough for anybody. [They] shouldn't have to lay [themselves] out for people, court them with coaxings and wheedlings and eye-batting displays" (238). Reenie is also the one who acts to free Laura from the mental asylum to which Richard had sent her to silence her about his sexual abuse and the abortion he forced her to do. Reenie represents a sororal, positive mother, directly countering the suffering and the oppressive environment the sisters were subjected to.

Their lack of a concrete mother figure forces the sisters to take turns assuming such a role. After their mother passes away, Iris explains how much she mothers Laura. Laura climbs into her bed at night and Iris watches her sleep. Iris helps her dress and wash her face, a task she assumes before their mother dies. Throughout the novel, Iris is forced to look out for Laura when they are young, but as Laura matures, sometimes the role of mothering is reversed, and sometimes they engage in mutual sororal partisanship.

They begin to act in concert when they are submitted to different tutors. At first, they are left with a tutor who instills in them ideals of passivity, self-victimization and encourages them to adopt the stereotype of the damsels in distress. Their first tutor is Miss Violet, whom the girls rename "Miss Violence", who instills in them romantic, passive notions of how a girl should be and act. In a second phase, their father decides that they are too feeble and lack proper stances in authority. Norval Chase

Wanted the lacy, frilly, somewhat murky edges trimmed off us  
as if we were lettuce, leaving a plain, sound core. He didn't  
understand why we liked what we liked. He wanted us turned  
into the semblances of boys, one way or another. Well, what do  
you expect? He never had sisters. (165)

Their father delegates them to a second tutor, Mr. Erskine, who is a bully and a pedophile. Mr. Erskine is commanded to give them a proper education, one that is reserved for boys, and with cruel precision he submits both sisters to psychological, physical and verbal abuse. He is a misogynist and a pedophile. The sisters tell Reenie how he tries to sexually harasses Laura, and with her support they manage to make him leave. Iris explains that, although they suffered in Mr. Erskine's hands, they also learned how to lie and cheat, to be insolent, to practice silent resistance and that revenge is a dish best served cold (171). I claim that this is an important moment of character development for the sisters, for they fight back patriarchal authority and manage to subvert the silence imposed upon them as a tool of resistance. Furthermore, it reinforces their sororal bonds, because they act together to deny the violence committed against them.

When Laura is forced to follow her father's orders and marry Richard, it is Laura who sees Richard's vices and alerts Iris to the danger of marrying him. She encourages Iris to turn the marriage down and proposes that they find another solution to get away from the forced matrimony. Throughout the novel, Laura frequently alerts Isis to the dangers surrounding her, performing the maternal role. In contrast, Laura is alternately childlike, requiring Iris to take on the stance of a nurturing mother. Iris once saves Laura's life by pulling her out of the water when they were children, and at other moments, she mothers Laura by caring for her when she is vulnerable. The sisters' exchange of mother/daughter roles approximates them and serves as a link for bonds of affection and protection. As an example, when they harbor Alex Thomas in their house, they act in concert to protect and take care of him. When he leaves, Iris says that they "cried, like mothers" but that "it was also the relief—that he'd gone away, that he was off [their] hands—but that is like mothers too" (224).

Laura in turn also performs sororal acts of partisanship and resistance. She runs away, and asks Iris to go with her, before she is forced to return. She leaves clues for Isis to show

her the abuse she suffered at Richard's hands, and the same clues warn Iris to protect her daughter, Aimee, from suffering the same fate. Through Laura's sacrifice, Iris is empowered enough to escape her husband's clutches and to protect Aimee. Her bond with Laura is what enables her to ensure that her sister is not forgotten. Much like the myth of Philomela and Procne, the sisters can communicate and construct narratives even when the other is silenced. Philomela is raped by Procne's husband when she goes to visit her sister. Tereus, the abusive husband, cuts off Philomela's tongue so that she cannot report the crime. Philomela then weaves a tapestry, depicting what happened to her, and sends it to Procne. Procne saves her sisters and avenges Philomela, by sacrificing her son, Itys. Procne serves her son's mutilated body to Tereus, and then presents him Ity's severed head. To escape Tereus's wrath, the sisters pray to the god and all three of them are turned into birds (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI.424–674). The tapestry of symbolic communication between Iris and Laura is the trail of breadcrumbs left by Laura through her encoded messages in her notebooks.

By publishing a novel in Laura's name, Isis denounces the abuse her sister suffered and vindicates her. But this sister pair do not sacrifice their children; indeed, Iris leaves her memoirs as a legacy to her granddaughter, Sabrina, revealing that "The Blind Assassin" novella was authored by her. She calls it a memorial for herself and Laura. She also claims that Laura was a collaborator in the book and that the "real author was neither of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers" (530). Finally, she writes down that the book is for Sabrina. Her writings are an attempt to positively influence Sabrina, combating the negative patriarchal influences on her granddaughter's subjectivity.

Do I have some notion of leaving a signature, after all? After all

I have done to avoid it, Iris, her mark, however truncated:

initials chalked on the sidewalk, or on a pirate's X on the map,

revealing the beach where the treasure was buried. (165)

Iris is empowered through her mother/daughter affection bonds with Laura, and adds to the construction of female genealogy by rebelling against patriarchal bonds and by contributing positively to women's subjectivities, making her sister's story of loss and suffering public and her own story inheritances to women's genealogy.

#### V. Sororal Sisters, Alternate Mothers

My identity as a cyborg is thus essential to my maternal subjectivity and not merely  
adjunct to it (71)

“Cyborg Mothering,” Shelley Park

*Dust* also presents the sister pair as an alternate pair of daughters who are surrogate mothers to one another, but adds another aspect to the discussion of the reappropriation of women's subjectivity. Since the beginning of the novel, Perceval recognizes Rien as her sister, surprising her by saying her name when she is a prisoner. When Rien questions how she can know her name, Perceval replies, “And why should I not? Are we not sisters?” (23). Rien has unexplained feelings of possessiveness and protectiveness towards Perceval, and discovers that they were “born to be a set. A matched and balanced pair” (27). The immediate bonding between the sisters, who had previously never met, is a positive performance of sororal ties. Perceval is under pain and duress, her wings have been mutilated, and Rien reaches out to comfort and care for her. With the absence of a negative patriarchal figure at their first encounter, unlike the preludes to the other two novels, the sister pair is empowered through affinity, identification and links of affection.

Perceval and Rien are protective of one another, even going so far as to engage in a

romantic, platonic relationship. In a contrast to the previous novels, their struggles are not, initially, against each other. In fact, Rien helps Perceval to escape from a death sentence. To escape, Perceval transforms Rien into an “Exalted,” a cyborg with enhanced, superhuman powers. Perceval empowers Rien by transforming her. Even though she grants Rien the freedom of super-human strength, speed and healing, Perceval is still concerned about Rien and constantly tries to protect her. “There was something possessive in [Rien’s] touch, and Perceval thought she understood it, and Rien’s awkward kindness too” (21). I view these acts as performances of sororal partisanship. Perceval acts in concert with Rien to foster cooperation and growth, and does not position Rien as a weaker or inferior sister.

Through Perceval’s intervention, Rien is empowered enough to assume a motherly role, protecting and saving her sister countless times throughout the novel. She rises from her previous position as a fearful servant to establish her own identity as a free agent, as a sister, and as an active participant of the world around her. Rien assumes a mother’s role when Perceval falls ill and becomes vulnerable. Rien tends for her sister, protects her from danger and guards her. She makes choices to ensure Perceval’s well-being, coming to the fore as a strong, leading character, as shown in this passage in which they meet their father, “Rien caught herself stepping left and crowding Perceval, as if though she were the only reliable thing in the universe. And Perceval didn’t seem to mind” (149), and her protectiveness of Perceval “How dare you take responsibility for her? she wanted to say. Noblesse oblige is lovely, but Perceval does not belong to you; she is her own person, and more of a sister to me than you have ever been her father.” (150). By acting in concert, the sisters discover the plot that has been set into motion to destroy their world. Perceval has been used as a decoy, infected with a virus that should have spread out and eliminated other Exalts, including her sister Rien, to initiate war.

It is relevant to note that it was Rien’s mother who devised this plan. The negative,



phallic mother, who views her daughters as objects or tools, is in motion in this narrative as well. However, she only makes a brief appearance in the novel. This mother is such a minor character that she does not affect the sororal links between Perceval and Rien, differently from what happens in the previous novels. The absence of this negative baggage associated to the phallic mother frees the sister to experience genuine character development and the performance of their subjectivities. That is not to say that there is no patriarchal influence in this novel. The fact that there is a phallic mother, even as a very minor character, follows the pretext of the uncaring, destructive mother-figure in the sisters' formation. However, the narrative is subversive in the sense that it offers a sister pair that can immediately connect with each other without the traditional rivalry that is encouraged by the family in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, or the conflicted connections that the sisters have with their passive mother in *The Blind Assassin*. Rien and Perceval are not introduced as others, martyrs or sororicides.

Perceval views herself as a healer, she “mends what [she finds] that need mending” (123). Rien discovers her feminine genealogy through Perceval's support and sorority. After she becomes an Exalt, through her sister's intervention, her actions lead her to meet her family: an uncle, her father and then her mother. But Perceval remains central to the empowering of Rien's character and her progress. Their relationship, untethered by the dismissal of common DNA in a science fiction setting, develops into romantic love. Rien claims that “she loved Perceval as she had not known she could love” (176). Their relationship connects sorority, motherhood, sexual and romantic love, challenging the shackles of heteronormative impositions.

When Rien dies, she does so of her own choice. While Anne is sacrificed to save the Boleyn family, and Laura drives her car off a cliff in an enigmatic act of unbearable suffering and protest, Rien gives up her life to save her sister and her world. The conscious act of sacrifice performed by Rien brings one more perspective to the fold; she ceases to exist as

Rien, but becomes an integral part of Perceval's psyche. When Perceval absorbs Rien's memories, they create a new being that withholds some aspects of Rien's personality traits called Angel, and it contains Rien's love for her sister, "The angel understood it. Rien would have known. So this is love, he thought. This abjection. This helplessness" (337). The entity Angel allows Perceval to save their ship and their world from disaster, ensuring the continuation of life. Thus, the sisters act in concert as mothers, giving birth to a new form of life and actively participating in the construction of its subjectivity and its cultural birth. Their partisanship actively and positively influences their world and, even with the loss of one of the sisters, their bond continues as Perceval carries a part of Rien within herself. Since Angel is also a part of Perceval's psyche, a whole new concept arises, that of multiple subjectivities made possible through maternity. This act of maternity is as alternate as the one performed by Antigone, and positively contributes to the construction of female genealogy.

This consumption of the other in *Dust* is quite different from the devouring of Metis by Zeus. Rien chooses to sacrifice herself to save Perceval, giving up her life in an act of love, and not being stripped of herself by a third party. The new entity they create, Angel, contains a part of Rien's psyche, unlike Athena, who recalls nothing of her mother and is a phallogocentric agent. Rien's Psyche integrates with Angel's and Perceval's, she is not erased from the narrative, but rather becomes part of a composite new being. Contrary to Athena, Angel recognizes the suffering of its mothers and their sacrifice,

His captain was a long time crying. But that as right and fair.

Right and fair that she should weep for the dead. Right and fair  
that she should weep, as well, for those not truly alive, who had  
sacrificed their consciousness for the wholeness of the world.

Right and fair that she should weep for the death of her wife,  
and her wings. (335-36)

Besides countering the negative mother/daughter roles, the sister pairs discussed in this thesis also present three different ways to enhance women's subjectivities and influences. Mary overcomes the negativity of her phallic mother and empowers herself through the act of motherhood, propelled by the loss of Anne. Isis gives voice to Laura by telling her story, and is also empowered by the loss of her sister. Perceval inherits Rien's memories and is given the means to save herself and others. Through sacrifice and love, the sisters positively overcome their difficulties and losses, in alternate manners, through the strategy of strengthening the mother/daughter ties and thus women's genealogy.

## Chapter 2

### Sisters and Doubles

#### I. Special Doubles

Each of us lacks her own image; her own face, the animation of her own body is missing. And the one mourns the other. My paralysis signifying your abduction in the mirror. (66)

“And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other,” Luce Irigaray

In narratives which present sister pairs as protagonists, it is very common to see the sisters posit themselves as antagonists to one another. The chosen corpus of this dissertation offers two sister pairs who are mostly at odds and one pair that does not adhere to the roles of rival sisters. However, the doubling, duplicity and mirroring of the sisters offers new possibilities of interpretation. All three pairs are dichotomized, even the alternative sister duo in *Dust*, and the discussion of their special doubleness is the main objective of this chapter. Despite the increasing conflict between them, the sisters still manage to find, even if at great pains, a common place of identification, support and growth. This rivalry among the sister characters is by no means random; it is often constructed and encouraged by a patriarchal society through norms that the sisters are expected to accept. The ontological issues discussed in the first chapter, especially the concepts of matricide and parthenogenesis, are directly related to the dichotomy of the sisters’ attitudes and personalities. However, the contending sisters’ conflict seems to highlight intrinsic cooperation. I argue that the special double that is formed by the sisters serves to defy traditional gender roles imposed on them. The feminist reinterpretation of the sisters’ doubling empowers their subjectivities, develops their sororal

agency and reconstructs their relationship under the light of feminist politics.

The tumultuous interaction between the sister pairs and their duality generates rifts and truncates their individual development. Hence, their identities as binarized individuals, and their concomitant identification and distancing towards themselves and their mother figures are crucial to better comprehend the sisters' relationship. Their polarized differences ensure that each sister remains an incomplete individual, necessitating its double—the opposite sister—to try for an uneasy, painful and always unattainable attempt at wholeness. I view the special double formed by sisters connected to specific characteristics and dynamics that often leads to rivalry between them. The alternative sister pair in *Dust*, although not engaged in blatant rivalry like the sisters from *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *The Blind Assassin*, is also punctually polarized through specific moments in the narrative. However, I claim that when the sisters set aside this conflict and act as allies, they subvert patriarchal shackles and obtain insight into the processes used to manipulate them and consequently trying to free themselves. Because they are polarized halves, they differ from the traditional double that is presented as the unhealthy part of an individual who is not split or binarized. To better discuss the sisters' special double, I present a brief account of the genesis of the theory of the traditional double, and then proceed to more contemporary, feminist views on the concept. I analyze the peculiarities of the special type of sisters' double and proceed to the discussion of the sister pairs in the literary corpus.

## II. The Double

“We held on tightly to each other's hands—left in right, right in left” (322)

*The Blind Assassin*, Margaret Atwood

The double is first discussed by Otto Rank in *The Double: A Psychoanalytical Study*, published in 1914. Rank uses the shadow and the mirror images to exemplify the concept of

the double. He traces the double motif in collective superstitions, such as the Germanic belief that you die if you step on your own shadow, or if you see your shadow doubled on the twelfth night of the month you will die the following year. The critic also writes about the widespread belief that if someone's shadow is wounded, they are wounded too, and mentions the Indian belief that a man dies if his shadow or picture is stabbed in the heart. He discusses how the shadow became intrinsically tied to the double, and how the double came to represent the soul in ancient cultures. Rank claims that, under a psychoanalytical interpretation, the double develops into a representation of consciousness (68-70). The mirror image and its connection to the double are also explained through the Narcissus myth, linking the double to narcissism and death. The critic asserts that in the narcissistic development of the subject love and death merge, so the double must arise to prevent the demise of the subject. To exemplify his theories on the dialectic of these two opposing forces, he alludes to fictional stories in which the double is simultaneously loved and hated. The use of literature, in juxtaposition, sets a pattern for future discussions of the double in literary representations. Rank also describes the double as the harbinger of death. For him, a narcissist is always courting death for his or her inability to reciprocate love leads to the impossibility of guaranteeing his or her self-continuation through progeny. Hence, the double in the narcissist's case loses the link to love and is connected only to death (71-2).

Shortly after the publication of Rank's influential work, Sigmund Freud incorporates his initial thoughts on the double, theorizing the concept and defining it as one of the representations of the uncanny in his study *The Uncanny*, published in 1919. Rank's definition of the double as the harbinger of death coincides with Freud's theories on the inherent death drive of the subject. Furthermore, he also believes that the double is a manifestation of the inherent ritual of repetition of the human mind. According to Freud, the most common acts of repetition of the human psyche are repressed beliefs and feelings,

especially the ones he calls primitive: the existence of the living dead, ghosts, demons, the evil twin, *déjà vu*, the *doppelgänger*—all of which could be representations of the double. Freud, following Rank's example, resorts to literature to better explain his theories on the uncanny and the double. He affirms that, as far as literature is concerned, uncanniness will depend on the extent to which the illusion of reality is accepted by the reader, and the capacity of authors to blur the lines between fiction and reality in their texts (220-40). Therefore, the double as a representation of repetition and of the death drive is only valid as long as it causes a sense of estrangement in the reader who is exposed to the story.

Jacques Lacan refines Freud's views on the double, defining it as an unhealthy desire, a manifestation of *jouissance*, a state in which the pre-discursive libidinal drives act. His essay on the double formed by Hamlet and Claudius, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*" (1982), is a sounding board to illustrate his theories on the double. Lacan tries to clarify the subject/object, or signified/signifier relationship by creating a matheme to explain fantasy and desire. He returns to the ontological field to analyze the formative processes of the subject. He claims that, for an individual to become a healthy subject, once he or she enters language, he or she must give up the illusion of being whole, of possessing an integral identity, of being the center of the universe. Thus, the subject must give up what Lacan calls "the pound of flesh," in a reference to the Shakespearean play, or the *petit objet a* (28). To illustrate this, Lacan creates the matheme  $\$ \diamond a$ , in which  $\$$  represents the barred subject, the  $\diamond$  symbol is a pun on the mathematical symbols of greater than and lesser than, and  $a$  the part the subject had to give up to enter the Symbolic. To put it into practical terms, the Lacanian subject must externalize desire and look for completion in an object, in another subject, a substitute for object  $a$ .

In his analysis of *Hamlet*, he argues that, in the beginning of the play, Hamlet is in love with Ophelia, and is described as a healthy subject who externalizes his desire onto her.

However, as he develops his obsession with Claudius's assassination, Hamlet begins to partake in a dangerous kind of desire, an unhealthy kind of pleasure described as *jouissance*. It is pleasure mixed with pain that always borders the edges of the Symbolic and consequently it is in danger of crossing the boundary of the law of the father, the laws that govern society, language and culture. Lacan explains that Hamlet sees in Claudius the object *a* itself, that Claudius is *jouissance* incarnate, a *pere-jouissance*, for he sheds all rules for unrestricted pleasure: he murders his brother to become king, he then beds his brother's wife and denies his nephew the right to the throne. Lacan also points out that, when the father dies, what occurs is the installment of the law of the father, a transformation of the father into the Symbolic order, as in the *Oedipus Rex* myth.

In *Hamlet*, the king is replaced by a father who acts out all his impulses, all his aggression and sexuality, all his *jouissance* (50). Hamlet identifies with Claudius, for he wishes to act out his aggressive impulses by murdering Claudius, and his ontological formation insitgates the act of matricide, as discussed in Chapter 1. Lacan affirms that, as Hamlet sees in Claudius his object *a*, he cannot carry out his murderous intentions because he is bewildered by finding a structure that belongs to the fantasy of the unconscious in the real world. When a subject sees object *a* in the form of another subject, as in Hamlet's case, then he or she sees his or her double and experiences a moment of the Freudian uncanny. To conclude his essay, Lacan claims that Hamlet can only kill Claudius when he receives his own mortal wound, and gives up all narcissistic illusions of being whole (51). The Lacanian double, an unhealthy manifestation of desire, can only be solved through assimilation or destruction.

We can notice from the discussion above that the double often carries a very negative role: that of harbinger of death, the death drive and the moment of rupture with a healthy mind and desire. To propose another, more constructive view on the double, I rely on Jean



Wyatt's article "I want to be you': the Lacanian double and feminist community in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*" (2011). The text draws attention to the double formed by female characters and can be used as a springboard to better understand the special double formed between sisters.

Wyatt uses the concept of the double to reflect upon the trope of envy established between female characters. The desire to be the other, to have "an identification with the real, an identification with a figure of *jouissance* who appears to defy the law of the symbolic order that every subject shall be constituted by lack" (37), allows us to see the sisters as polarized halves that often complete each other. Each sister possesses certain characteristics and lacks others, having the need for a double to fulfill this supposed lack. Wyatt also understands the Lacanian double as a type of rupture between memory and reality, an attempt to escape the past.

The author analyzes the female characters in the novel *The Robber Bride* (1998), by Margaret Atwood, through an analysis of the double. The novel follows the relationship between four women; Charis, Tony, Roz and Zena. Zena, whose name's etymology comes from the Greek *Xenia*, which means stranger—emblematically, one of the definitions Freud uses to exemplify the uncanny—is the apparent harbinger of destruction for all the other women. The three friends take Zena in at different moments of the story, and Zena, in turn, seduces and steals their husbands. If we consider Zena a manifestation of the *jouissance* as a double in the Lacanian real, a double to the other women, then all she can signify, like Claudius in *Hamlet*, is death and torment.

However, although Zena's actions are negative and destructive, Wyatt argues that her role as a double for the other women has constructive influences as well. Charis, for example, who had been regularly molested by her uncle at the age of ten, deals with this trauma through a disassociation of herself, splitting herself in two (46). She creates an alter-

ego, Karen, a little girl who is symbolically drowned to be rid of the traumatic experiences of her childhood. Wyatt reads this moment as a type of healing episode for Charis, a mending of her battered psyche and sexuality, which is catalyzed through Zenia, the figure of female *jouissance* in this novel (13-14).

The next character, Tony, first meets Zenia in college, where she sees her with her future husband, West. Tony views herself as an empty space, an incomplete persona who was deeply traumatized by the abandonment of her mother when she was a child. Much like Charis, Tony has created an alter-ego, who mirrors her own name: Ynot. Ynot is a figure of power, a primitive barbarian who charges into war with sword held aloft. When Tony meets Zenia, she sees all the characteristics her double has, and consequently she craves to be Zenia, to act out her desires in a lustful, liberal way. Once more Wyatt views Zenia as the one who integrates Tony to her double, so much so that Tony marries West, even if she loses him to Zenia in the future (9-10).

Finally, the third character, Roz, experiences transformation through Zenia's *jouissance* in an unusual way. Zenia's complete mockery of all charitable actions horrifies and fascinates Roz. In Zenia, Roz sees an opportunity to leave the expected roles that are imposed on her: the constant goody two-shoes attitude, the oppressive position of caregiver, the perfect political activist. Wyatt explains that, from a feminist point of view, the object *a* that women must sacrifice to enter the Symbolic order implies additional sacrifices, "the excision of specific qualities distinct for each gender." She adds, "A girl must lop off, for example, ambition, aggressiveness, anger, envy, and other self-aggrandizing qualities in order to be a properly self-effacing and altruistic woman" (16). In other words, women must eliminate a series of characteristics to be inserted as a gendered subject into the Lacanian Symbolic.

Wyatt attempts to demonstrate that Zenia, as a figure of *jouissance*, as a double,

diverges from the solely negative interference by also allowing the other women to experience growth, understanding and the achievement of a sense of completeness. I argue that the same interaction, an exchange of destructive and constructive dynamics, often occurs in the case of the sister characters. Furthermore, I claim that the personality duplicity in the sisters is represented not by a fragmentation of their individual personalities, as in *The Robber Bride*, but as the fragmented and polarized separation of the sisters into binarized halves. The double formed between the sisters becomes even more problematic because they do not simply give up qualities that are not appropriate to them as gendered subjects. In fact, they are split apart into polar opposites, a division in which one sister becomes the figure of *jouissance* (Anne, Laura, Rien) while the other becomes the gendered subject who has sacrificed her pound of flesh (Mary, Iris, Perceval).

Nevertheless, the *jouissance-sœurs* are not only shadow figures, they are full protagonists with independent thoughts and desires, characters who lack certain qualities most of the times, but who are individuals in their own rights. When the *jouissance-sœurs* are forced to abdicate their impulsive desires, they often attempt to conform to their expected gender roles. They are not uncontrollable, villainous doubles like Hamlet or Zenia. In truth, their rebellious choices and actions, and even their ultimate deaths, enable the surviving sister to undergo a process of enlightenment about her status as a gendered subject, showing how their sacrifices have turned them into passive, lacking subjects. In fact, the aggressive sisters' attitudes influence the passive sisters to express their own desires even before the death of their pairs. Another facet of the sister's special doubleness is their antagonistic cycle of assimilation and rupture. Traditional doubles and their counterparts seek only a joining, which results in a final assimilation that may lead into in a destructive (Hamlet/Claudius) or constructive (Zenia/Tony/Charis/Roz) merging. Sister characters are constantly seeking both assimilation and separation.

In *Disorderly Sisters: Sibling Relations and Sororal Resistance in Nineteenth-century British Literature* (2001), Amy K Levin reflects on the tempestuous relationship among sisters. Levin begins by pointing out how sisters are usually opposed both in physical and psychological characterizations: usually one sister is dark and the other fair, one is more controlled versus a more passionate sibling. The author then proceeds to affirm that the connection between sisters is a powerful factor in the development of women in narratives and that women characters that do not have sisters very often conceive their situation as a kind of lack, a rupture, a feeling that they are incomplete (16).

Levin views the relationship between sisters as a variation of the pre-Oedipal situation: whilst the growing son begins to establish differences between himself and his mother, daughters create stronger bonds with both mother and sisters (17). In addition, Levin also calls attention to the difference of social roles between brothers and sisters. While sons traditionally have their destinies established by order of birth, daughters fulfill the same roles within the domestic context. When the eldest daughter marries and leaves home, the next daughter assumes her position as if she were a copy of her older sister (17). The author then discusses how the rivalry between sisters is established and nurtured within the family's bosom. The problem arises when a daughter notices the lack of power of the other women within the household. The daughter then decides to sever affection bonds and grows apart from the other women's role models within the family. The daughters' and sisters' similarities to their mothers and older siblings become problematic in the construction of the young girl's persona, who begins to deal with the separation process by directing hostility first towards her mothers and later her sisters (17).

Sisters who are portrayed as different, but whose differences complement each other, invariably lead to the discussion of the double. The constant conflict between the sisters resists categorization, but at the same time their implicit desire to find a common ground

approximates them, never allowing for a comfortable positioning in their polarized differences. They form not only a gendered *doppelgänger* pair, but one whose relationship as opposites creates intrinsic and unique characteristics of the double they form. This binary construction of opposing attributes guarantees that the sisters are never fully developed on their own and this lack consolidates the dependency and subservience to the patriarchal family and customs (Levin 18).

Sisters in mythology also highlight the issue of the double. An analysis based on classical mythology and literature shows, for instance, how the Furies can be contrasted with the Muses, as polarized opposites of darkness and light. The Furies are entities that deal with vengeance, punishment and crime. The Muses are daughters of Zeus and the nymph Mnemosyne, who represents memory, and are patron of the arts, knowledge and intellect as described in Hesiod's *Theogony* (915-17). Other sources claim that the Muses were daughters of Uranus and Gaia (*Diodorus Siculus* 4.7.1), being therefore sisters, or perhaps even the same entities as the Furies. The Muses, representatives of beauty and higher arts, act in vengeful fury too, especially if challenged about the extent of their abilities. The poet Thamyris sought to compete with them and was robbed of sight and lost his ability to sing (Homer, *Iliad*, 2.2). The nine daughters of Pierus, the Pierides, also lost a challenge of song to the Muses and were transformed into birds (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 5.274). Even the Sirens were punished for defying the Muses, their feathers plucked and worn as ornaments (Pausanias, *Descriptions of Greece*, 1.2.5). Although the Muses do not hesitate to cruelly punish their challengers, in the end of the Oresteia they relent and accept Athena's verdict. By doing so, they are awarded the title of Eumenides, which means the soothed, honorable ones. Whether we consider the Muses and the Furies sisters or the doubleness of characterization connected to representations of the same triad of goddesses, the themes traditionally connected to the deities are coded within a binary logic: light and dark, beauty and fear,

destruction and creation.

The same can be said about the three literary pairs of sisters analyzed in this dissertation. They are polarized in personality, choices, and in the case of the Boleyn sisters, even in appearance. Yet, as different as they may seem, they still have intrinsic similarities that approximate them. Levin discusses how sister characters are polarized with the intent of crippling them into half personas, fully dependent on the existence of the other. Per Levin's theories, the loss of one of the sisters would make the existence of the other virtually unviable (16). While I agree with Levin's views about the unbalanced, ever shifting polarized double formed by the sister pairs, I would like to propose another outcome for the sisters who lose their pairs. The surviving sister carries on, despite often being handicapped without her completing double. Indeed, she develops her personality through her conflicted relationship with her double, and comes to a fuller realization of the patriarchal context she is inserted in through the loss of her sister.

In view of this analysis, Levin's and Erich Neumann's reading of the Psyche myth will also provide insight for the discussion of sister pairs in literature. Levin claims that Psyche forsakes her sisters in benefit of the heterosexual love plot (22). Neumann, in *Amor and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine*, is the first scholar to claim that Psyche's sisters are not just a negative aspect in the narrative, but rather serve as catalyst for Psyche's development and progress as a character. These views are important for the analysis of the rival relationship between the sister pairs for they turn against each other in favor of, if not a heterosexual love plot, a plot that endorses patriarchal choices. Moreover, some of the sister's actions which seem, at first hand, destructive, in fact forces their pairs to move beyond patriarchal oppression and ensures character development.

Levin's reading of the Psyche myth further highlights the duality of the relationship between sister characters. The myth, which describes the odyssey Psyche endures in search of

her love, Eros, and the consequent death of her sisters in the tale, is seen by Levin as a suppression of the sister narrative (22). The union between Eros and Psyche creates a rupture with her sisters. The myth states that Psyche's sisters initially lament her unfortunate destiny of having married a monster. Afterwards, as they see and covet Psyche's new, luxurious lifestyle, they begin to plot against her. Levin describes their envy as the genesis of their rupture. She claims that, when Psyche's sisters wish for her suffering, they are in truth representing the dilemma of approximation and repudiation amongst themselves. If Psyche were like her sisters, there would be no reason for envy and no dichotomies. Hence, they wish to assimilate Psyche to their own personas, demolishing any differences they might have.

Neumann states that Psyche's sisters' influence is not totally unwholesome. They are also encouraging Psyche to break taboos and to truly free herself from Eros's dominating force, to truly see him for what he is. To look upon Eros with a more critical eye would enable Psyche to better understand her real situation. The sisters' death is also a result of Psyche's actions for she is used as a messenger girl for the gods to lead them to their tragic fate, death over a precipice. This episode shows how it is often difficult for a woman to simultaneously maintain a relationship with her husband and her sisters. This reading of the Psyche myth also exemplifies how women's transgressive behavior is punished. The sisters, who instigate Psyche to open her eyes to the true Eros, and to duly face reality, need to be disposed of for the traditional heteronormative love story to bloom. This conclusion guarantees that the woman character will only complete herself through a man and not through other bonds with women like herself (23).

I claim that the sister pairs studied in this work are not as fully polarized as they initially seem, bearing important common traits that allow them to flaunt patriarchal conventions. They are special doubles because they are initially split up as polar opposites,

lacking characteristics whose complementary traits (aggressiveness/passivity, humbleness/greed and fear/courage) are distributed unequally between each of the doubles. Nonetheless, they are not wholly polarized, for they do possess their doubles' traits, although in a smaller and repressed measure. The loss of one of the sisters is the narrative trigger which allows the surviving sister to achieve a better understanding of her own polarized identity, enabling her to overcome her loss and question the processes that lead to her sister's death. However, unlike the traditional conception of the *doppelgänger*, and especially despite their halved conditions, both sisters are protagonists of the story, the plot does not revolve around a main character and her shadowy projection, as in the case of *The Robber Bride*, but around two principal fully fleshed characters.

Unlike traditional narratives that revolve around the double motif, in which the main character achieves a supposed completeness through her double and destroys it, as in the case of *The Robber Bride*, or fails and perishes as in *Hamlet*, the sister pairs analyzed here both achieve character growth by learning to complement their assumed lack through assimilation of the other's characteristics, before a death threat is eventually manifested in the story. Even at the very moment of one of the sister's destruction, there is a variation of the traditional interpretation of the double: the death of one of the sisters is not only the death of a dark twin, but of a character who undergoes growth and development and whose existence does not endanger the other character's life. The sacrificed sister's death is not an elimination of an omnipresent, uncanny menace, but a direct strike on the surviving sister's psyche. As much as the death of her special double harms the surviving sister, it ensures the pathway for her independence and enlightenment. Hence, the special double formed by sisters, although initially often detrimental to their personalities, does not become a negative manifestation of unhealthy desire, but a constructive and subversive tool with which to battle constrictive impositions.



### III. The Other Boleyn Girl, The Two Boleyn Doubles

There were long years of rivalry and then a forced unity and always and ever,  
 underpinning our love for each other, our sense that the other must be bested.  
 How could I send her one word which would acknowledge all that, and yet tell  
 her that I loved her still, that I was glad that I had been her sister, that, though I  
 would never forgive her for what she had done to us all, at the same time, I  
 totally and wholly understood? (525)

*The Other Boleyn Girl*, Philippa Gregory

In *The Other Boleyn Girl*, sisters Mary and Anne Boleyn are immediately set as rivals since the beginning of the narrative. They are repeatedly portrayed as each other's polar opposites. Anne is dark in looks, manipulative, and aggressive, while Mary bears fair looks, is passive, meek and obedient. The sisters mirror each other in attributes, both in physical terms and personality. Even their full names are mirrored, Marianne and Annamarie. Mary is the "little golden sister", the "milk and honey sister", and Anne "is a dark mirror" to her, claiming that she "shall be dark and French and fashionable and difficult", and that Mary will be "sweet and open and English and fair" (7). They view each other as antagonists, as negative counterpoints, partially adhering to the traditional view of the double "All our childhood it had been a question as to which of us was the best Boleyn girl, now our girlhood rivalry as to be played out in the greatest stage of the kingdom...the clever Boleyn girl and the fecund Boleyn girl" (180). Nonetheless, even if initially seen under an unfavorable light, they still deviate from the stereotypical conception of the double. Both sisters are main characters, not ghostly-like personas, or shadows in the form of undeveloped secondary characters. Although the story is narrated by Mary, she gives us insights into Anne's mind, effectively

portraying her human side, with flaws and qualities, not just depicting her as a usurping and destructive rival. Mary's descriptions of Anne's feelings, her explanation of Anne's frustrations and joys, are very different from Xenia's predictable rapaciousness and uncontrollable lust or Claudius's aggressiveness and impulsive sexuality. This is not to say that Mary romanticizes Anne. She views her with a mix of criticism and admiration and is perceptive of Anne's qualities and flaws.

The novel begins after Mary gets married at the age of thirteen, and immediately states that her main concern is if Anne will manage to establish a better liaison. Mary says that her "greatest dread was that they would have a better marriage for her than I had made, that I would have to follow the hem of her gown as she swept ahead of me for the rest of my life" (4). These initial feelings of rivalry between the sisters predominate throughout most of the narrative. Soon after Anne arrives at the English court from France, the Boleyn family's machinations begin in earnest. She is used as a pawn by the family's figureheads to vie for the king's attentions. Mary is successful in getting into the king's bed; however, she is a naïve youngling that falls in love with Henry VIII. Her first thoughts as royal mistress are about Anne's feelings concerning her current situation. She muses that Anne would be experiencing the same sentiments she elicited from Mary: "admiration and envy, pride and a furious rivalry, a longing to see a beloved sister succeed, and a passionate desire to see a rival fail" (59). As mirror images, Mary considers that the same feelings of love and hate flow between Anne and herself, and her description of such feelings elucidate their doubling and cycles of approximation and destruction.

When Mary temporarily loses the king's favor because of a possibility of the queen being pregnant, Anne does not mince words to express her view. To Mary's claims of holding the king's love, Anne sardonically replies she is one of many, that there has always been and forever will be a Howard girl to warm the king's bed. Heartbroken, Mary asks: "So who

would come after me? Who'd you think the next Howard girl will be that they push into his bed—the other Boleyn girl?" (77). Mary's question is not only an instance of foreshadowing but a clear statement that Anne is her double, that they reside on the different ends of a balance. When one's star rises, the other's falls, when one of the sisters succeeds, the other becomes the overlooked Boleyn girl.

Anne, the scheming and ambitious half to Mary's docility and passivity, refuses to stand by as her sister curries royal favor. She begins to plot her own marriage to a coveted suitor, and to achieve power through social and financial status. She understands her inferior position to Mary, and struggles to separate herself from this forced dependency. She despises the fact that, although she sees herself as being superior to Mary, she must bow to her and aid her in her conquest. When Mary exclaims that they "are the Boleyn girls [they] have to be guided to do as [they] are told", Anne furiously replies: "Yes, look at you! Married when you were still a child and now the king's mistress! Half as educated! But you are the center of the court and I am nothing. I have to be your lady in waiting. I cannot serve you, Mary. It's an insult to me" (91). Anne refuses to assume the role of the passive double, and struggles for agency, fighting back against the control of society and her family.

Anne struggles to trace her own path, annulling the influence of her family. When her intentions are foiled, she is punished and sent away from court to spend her time reflecting on her disobedience. However, Anne is merely acting a role, presenting herself as a meek and obedient girl. Contrary to Mary, who, having discovered she is pregnant, once more falls into the dictates of her power-hungry family. They wish to cast Mary as the next queen of England, for if she has a boy by the King, he could be the kingdom's next heir. Mary attempts to refuse, but her uncle dismisses her pleas, and ignores her wishes, coldly stating, "Men still rule" (147). It is here that Mary begins her character development. Motherhood is the encouragement that Mary needs to leave her docile, subservient positions, and in this manner,

she also fights for control over her own situation, refusing to be simply a shadow double to Anne.

Mary comes to understand her value in the family as an exchange currency, stating that the duel between her and Anne is the “ideal situation, the clever Boleyn girl as his companion and advisor, the fecund Boleyn girl as his lover” (180). Anne has been, up to this point, acting as a typical *doppelgänger* to Mary. Her aggressive speech, mannerisms, and sexual innuendo plays the *sœur-jouissance* to the letter, mirroring Mary’s passivity and shyness. Nonetheless, Anne’s role as her double pushes Mary to the comprehension of the shackles that limit them as women and sisters.

The doubleness between the two is exhibited at its fullest during their struggles over the king’s affection, exemplifying how their polarization is consonant with the patriarchal family, and how they distance themselves continuously because of the heteronormative love plot they are supposed to follow. Mary recurrently highlights their polarization, showing how she becomes the other, a typical shadow: “Anne lived and bedded with me; but now she was substance and I was the shadow” (205). Even at the height of their personal war, in which Anne exerts a destructive role in nearly all aspects of Mary’s life, excepting the forced understanding of her true subservience to patriarchal forces, the double formed between them deviates from norm. In the Freudian-Lacanian *doppelgänger* formula, the separation of the subject and the dark double is clearly drawn. They must assimilate and destroy their doubles. Mary, however, becomes, in her own words, the shadow, the other, after having observed her sister play this role initially. The reversal of doubles, this fluidity of roles is not a onetime occurrence, but happens cyclically, multiple times in the novel, each of the sisters holding the high ground for a while. Instead of casting them into the roles of permanent doubles, the exchange of roles allows them to learn from one another, contributing to their character development and strengthening them to affirm their existence as fully formed, independent

individuals. Mary reflects on her trajectory of former royal mistress, and on Anne's precarious hold over the king, as he now veers towards a new interest, "to be a Seymour girl must be very like being a Boleyn girl, when your father and brother thrust you toward the king and you have neither the ability nor the wisdom to run away" (487). She analyzes the instances of doubling with her sister, becomes aware of the external forces that pushed her to her current predicament, more critical of her and Anne's story and outcomes.

Mary, now disillusioned by her romantic notions of love and viewing the king under a much less favorable light, decides to dedicate her time to her children, much to the chagrin of the family. She states "I want to go to Hever. I need to see my children" (377). Therefore, the two sisters begin to make decisions on their own, trying to break away from the family's oppression. Anne, the aggressive sister, strives to sever the patriarchal bonds with the *paterfamilias* while Mary, the once obedient sister, reclaims the role of the mother and rejoices in it. Both choices directly hamper the designs their parents and uncle have for them. Motherhood here is subversive of the patriarchal framework, for it pushes Mary into begin to make difficult choices of their own, and to find a way out of their family's mandates.

As Mary reclaims her motherhood in a positive framework, Anne uses her sister's children as leverage. Anne acts quickly to counteract the family's desires. She adopts Mary's son, planning to claim him as a royal heir in case she fails to produce a prince. This causes the rift between her and Mary that reaches gargantuan proportions, as she attacks Mary in what is most precious to her: her role as mother. She adopts Mary's son, ensuring power over him if he, by any chance, becomes heir to the throne. This act is a replication of the matricidal theories stated in the first chapter, the rupture between mother and daughter is mirrored between the sisters, and in this case, faithfully reproduced as each sister tries to destroy the other's role as mother. Anne disdainfully tells Mary that she can keep her firstborn bastard child, for she is only a girl. Mary compares Anne to a cuckoo, which eats all the other

fledgling birds in the nest, and strengthens her attacks by suggesting that perhaps Anne did this because she will not be able to bear a child of her own, and that her womb is aging. “You’re like a cuckoo that eats all the other babes in the nest. How far do we all have to go for your ambition? You’ll be the death of us all, Anne”. Anne, furious, vociferates: “Never say that again. It’s a curse to me. And if I fall, then you go down too, Mary. And George, and all of us. Never dare to say that again or I’ll have you sent to a nunnery and you’ll never see your children again” (244-5). At this specific moment, the sisters’ attempt to destroy each other by criticizing their roles as mothers, by reinforcing the matricidal myth, by attacking their each other’s roles as mothers, and undermining the bonds of affection with their children. Nevertheless, their negative doubling and attack on their roles as mothers force the sisters to think about motherhood and to analyze their choices as individuals who are emotionally attached to others. Indeed, what brings the sisters back together in an uneasy alliance is motherhood. When Anne is pregnant with her first child, she fears that during childbirth, if there are complications and there is a need of favoring either her or the child, she would be sacrificed in favor of a royal heir. She begs Mary to stay beside her, in fear of her life. Mary, counteracting the myth of matricide, and, now more developed as a character because of her more assertive motherhood, decides to help and protect Anne, falling back on bonds of affection for her sisters and finally mastering her choices and her life.

The sisters’ antagonism revolves around the state of motherhood. Anne rages against Mary’s fecundity. Anne vociferates “Do you think to mock me, coming to my court with a belly on you like a fat brood mare? What d’you mean to do? You mean to tell the world that you are the fertile Boleyn girl and I am all but barren?” (407). Anne, having mothered a girl, is deemed unworthy of the patriarchal wishes to conceive a male child. She takes out her anger at Mary, envious of her sister’s fecundity. Yet, as Anne once again becomes pregnant, she trusts no one else but Mary to be at her side, and summons her again to court. Mary is

understandably reticent, and her husband urges her to refuse. Patriarchal negative influence on women's roles and interactions should prevent Mary from dispensing any kind of help to her sister. Despite all this, Mary still shows concern and love for her sister, affirming more than once: "She is my sister" (368). Their link as special doubles ensures that, even with all the negative, destructive influence they have on each other's lives, they trust no one else but themselves in the moments of dire need and danger. Perhaps they bond in defiance of their phallic mother, who embodies the patriarchal power a female figure can withhold, and who does not dare to even touch Anne when she has a miscarriage. It is Mary who offers her comfort, in opposition to their mother's indifference. Their mother only turns to Anne to order her to carry on the family's plan. Mary acts in opposition, protecting Anne. Mary once again goes against the expectations by acting in opposition to the phallic mother-figure, assuming the role of a caring mother for Anne, turning their affection and love into a concrete act: "I reached out and touched her hand and felt her fingers grip mine 'I'll come and help.' 'Good,' she said quietly. 'I do need you, you know. Stay beside me, Mary'" (240).

It is Anne's death that finally allows Mary to break through the veil that blinds her eyes and enthralls her actions and development. Her previous discovery that she and Anne had been nothing but tools of bargain to the family had always been cushioned by the belief that these same patriarchal figures, the ones that had pulled their strings all along, would provide her with protection. She does not truly comprehend, up to this point, the level of disposability they hold. If they are not assets, then they are to be discarded and ostracized. When Mary questions her father, he responds "Don't you bring me into it. I had nothing to do with ordering her. She went her own way, and him and you with her" (520). As Mary reels back from what she calls her father's treachery (520), she understands, through Anne's trajectory, that it could have been her waiting for execution in the tower, that if it had not been for her risky defiance in the act of marrying William Stafford, the Boleyn family would

have cast her like dice and tossed her away when she was no longer useful. Her acceptance of her status as a shadow, as the other Boleyn girl, is what assures her survival in the end. If she had sought fame and fortune like her sister, her demise would be tied to Anne's own.

Mary's daughter, Catherine, assumes the role of comforting Anne in her last moments, when she is abandoned by all. Catherine's staunch refusal to abandon Anne to her fate is one of the main defiant acts she commits; she symbolizes Mary and her love for her sister. The doubling which so often serves to sever their sisterly bonds is what unites them in the end. When the executioner flashes down his sword on Anne's neck, Mary's last thoughts are that: "the long rivalry between me and the other Boleyn girl was over" (525), reversing once again their roles. The message she had wanted to send to Anne in the end, through Catherine, but was unable to, highlights their differences, their past hatred and, above all, their love. She tells Catherine to convey the following message to Anne "Tell her that I think of her. All the time. Every day. Same as always" (525).

Mary does not assimilate Anne in the traditional manner of destroyed doubles. She acts as the shadow to her double. She is the other Boleyn girl so many times, the docile Boleyn girl, the sweet-tempered one, the fecund sister. She is a mother of many, a mother to Anne, acting as a surrogate to their own uncaring one. It is motherhood that propels her to defy the family she was so afraid of, and in the end, it is through Mary's act of being a loving mother that allows her daughter to model her positive behavior and offer succor and support in Anne's last moments.

In the end, Mary loses her other half, her sister, her other self. But Anne opens Mary's eyes to the monster she was in bed with, to the ways she was manipulated and destroyed by their family, to the importance of the role of a mother in caring for her children, rather than being more than mere pawns in the game of thrones. The relevance of the role that Anne plays throughout their lives is not simply that of a negative double. Anne is the catalyzer that



lifts the veil of Mary's blindness, the trigger for her growth and courage, the pathway to her escape from the Boleyn clutches to be herself. She manages to choose to be Mary first, the Mary who is a sister, the Mary who is a mother, the Mary who chooses to flee from a court of corruption and death, the Mary who takes the reins of her own life. The other Boleyn girl survives, suffers, learns and carries on, without her sister. If she is hindered, and loses part of herself through Anne's death, the insight into her own individuality and freedom of choice outdo any rivalry and struggles that are thrust upon the sisters.

#### IV. The Blind Assassin of My Sister

Laura was my left hand and I was hers (530)

*The Blind Assassin*, Margaret Atwood

*The Blind Assassin* begins with a very poignant picture. Iris, in first person narration, describes an old black and white photograph, one of the few mementos she has of her lover Alex Thomas. In it, she is sitting under an apple tree, looking at him and smiling. Alex is smiling too, but his hand is thrust up against his face as if to shield himself from the camera. To the left side, there is a hand on the ground, "cut by the margin, scissored off at the wrist, resting on the grass as if discarded. Left to its own devices" (7). The disembodied hand belongs to Laura, the younger sister. Thus, begins the doubling between the two sisters, with the left-hand motif repeating itself throughout the narrative. The novel ends with this imagery, and with one of Iris's final observations: "Laura was my left hand, and I was hers. We wrote the book together. It's a left-handed book. It's why one of us is always out of sight, whichever way you look at it" (530). The doubleness of the sisters is stated quite clearly in

this citation, for the creation of the novella “The Blind Assassin” is crucial for the formation of their identities and for the plot development. The book’s cover presents a lounging femme fatale whose only apparent hand, the left hand, is hidden on the book’s spine, indicative of the importance of the motif in the novel.

The roles amongst the sisters are so interchangeable and intertwined that it is at times difficult to differentiate the two. They simultaneously play the part of authors of the novel we are reading, daughters, mothers and lovers. The symbiosis between Iris and Laura, mixed with instances of approximation and distancing, is on par with the theories discussed here on the special double between sisters. If we return to the symbolism of the eerie left hand hovering in the photograph, we can interpret it as a visual representation of the sisters forever reaching for, but never able to clasp, each other’s hand, relegating them to a continuous cycle of failed attempts at fulfillment and completeness. Along the same lines, Laura forges Iris’s signature to get away from school, and Iris admonishes her: “Handwriting is a personal thing. It’s like stealing,” to which Laura replies: “I’m sorry. I was only borrowing. I didn’t think you’d mind” (388). In another episode, after Laura’s death, Iris thinks that the scribbles in the bathroom stalls are messages left for her by Laura. In the last chapters, Laura comments that her hand has taken a life of its own, that it seems that only her hand is writing, severed from the rest of her body, as if it were her and, at the same time, her sister’s conjoined, merged hand that is penning the conclusion of their stories:

To the task at hand. *At hand* is appropriate. Sometimes it seems to me that it’s only my hand writing, not the rest of me; that my hand has taken on a life of its own, and will keep on going even if severed from the rest of me, like some embalmed, enchanted Egyptian fetish or the dried rabbit claws men used to suspend from their car mirrors for luck. Despite the arthritis in my

fingers, this hand of mine has been displaying an unusual amount of friskiness lately, as if tossing restraint to the dogs. Certainly it's been writing down a number of things it wouldn't be allowed to if subject to my better judgement. (385)

The instances in which Iris's and Laura's identities mingle the most happen with reference to the book that was published under Laura's name, a *roman à clef* embedded within the main narrative and eponymously entitled *The Blind Assassin*. The author is Iris, who decided to leave the book as a memento to Laura and who hides behind Laura's persona to avoid public retaliation for the scandalous contents and to guarantee the remembrance of Laura. In this tale, Iris narrates her extramarital affair with Alex Thomas, a communist political activist and writer. In Iris's old age, as she narrates the end of her life, the book has become quite famous, being associated with women's oppression and gathering a faithful cadre of admirers. Iris attends service after service in honor of Laura and the book, mentioning she is always "into the long shadow cast by Laura" (44). By attributing authorship to Laura, Iris has become the other sister, an unimportant and impoverished former socialite who lives with the crumbs of her deceased sister's notoriety. On the other hand, at the time that the book is published, right after the end of the Second World War, Iris avoids being socially ostracized by claiming that her sister is the author. Hence, this doubling of the sisters' identities is also beneficial to Iris, corroborating the theory that the double is not always a negative force. Returning to the citation in which Iris mentions that she and Laura wrote the book together, we can see that the doubling is beneficial for both. Sharing the authorship of book keeps Laura's memory alive and allows Iris to maintain anonymity and to publicize to the world the pain and suffering they both endured.

The last function Iris attends in honor of the book is published in the newspaper, and so is Laura's picture. The photograph motif is once more used by Iris, and she describes

Laura's aloof beauty, comparing her physical traits with her own, and finally pointing out that Laura's blank look is a "tabula rasa, not waiting to write, but to be written on. It's only the book that makes her memorable now" (49). As her sister's double, Iris has ingeniously removed herself from the spotlight and relinquished it to Laura, merging their personalities in a manner that had never been possible when Laura was alive. By awarding authorship of her novel to Laura, Iris links her sister with herself and her lover Alex Thomas. In fact, Iris knows that Laura had also been in love with Alex. Laura sees him first at the picnic where they first meet and where the emblematic photograph mentioned above is taken. It is Laura who manages to get her hands on the negative of this photograph, develops it and gives a copy to Iris. In the original picture, each sister sits at Alex's side. Laura purposely cuts off Iris from the copy she keeps and does the same regarding sister's copy. Iris asks: "And I'm not in yours?", and Laura replies: "You're not. None of you but your hand" (225).

Laura's obsession with photographs leads her to leave hidden messages in pictures, portraits, even illustrations in books. Iris first notices this when she is in their ancestral home library.

I noticed the framed photographs of Grandfather Benjamin, each with a different prime minister. Sir John Sparrow Thompson's face was now a delicate mauve, Sir Mackenzie Bowell's bilious green, Sir Charles Tupper's a pale orange. Grandfather Benjamin's beard and whiskers had been done in light crimson.

That evening I caught her in the act. There on her dressing table were the tiny little tubes, the tiny brushes. Also the formal portrait of Laura and me in our velvet dresses and

Mary Janes. Laura had removed the print from its frame, and  
was tinting me in a light blue. (199)

Iris returns to the library in the afternoon and catches Laura tinting a picture of both sisters, painting Iris a light blue. When Iris questions Laura, she claims that she is just painting the color of their souls. Laura comments that she would like to paint her grandmother and dead uncle's portraits gold, to show them in their glory, but that their souls are not that color, and that she would have to paint their grandmother a steel grey. Finally, when Iris asks her why she is painted blue, Laura replies that it is because Iris is sleeping. Like the sisters in the Psyche myth, Laura, through her messages, tries to open Iris's eyes, to show her how she is sleepwalking through life, obeying the dictates of her father and the impositions of society. She constantly alerts Iris about her passive state.

On the night before her wedding to Richard Griffen, Laura goes to Iris's bedroom and begs her not to marry him, suggesting they run away. Iris is irritated, and tells Laura that she is too young to understand that she is marrying because their father is bankrupt, because they are not used to living in poverty. Laura insists, warning Iris of Richard's penchant for violence and lasciviousness: "But you'll have to let him touch you, you know. It's not just kissing. You'll have to let him...". Iris angrily retorts "Leave me alone. I've got my eyes wide open," to which Laura answers: "Like a sleepwalker" (242). Even after Iris gets married, Laura keeps trying to alert her. Laura runs away and manages to find work in an amusement park for a week. In the article "From an Obscured Gaze to a Seeing Eye? Iris as Victim, Villain, and Avenger in the Role of Writer-as-Assassin in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*" (2017), Tara Hembrough interprets Laura's acts as representative of the "more independent, stubborn, and giving character, attempting to avoid the patriarchal Griffen landscape by escaping on the train and providing for herself by working at the fair" (7-8). Richard tracks her down and forces her to go back, and Laura tells Iris she had first tried to

join the nuns but was not accepted, and then finds a menial job which she could survive on. She tells Iris she does this to show her that they could get away from Richard, before it is too late.

“How can we ever get out of here?” she wailed. “Before it’s too late”. At least she had the sense to be frightened; she had more sense than I did. But I thought it was just adolescent melodrama. I thought I could cope with Richard, I thought I could live like a mouse in the castle of the tigers, by creeping around out of sight inside the wall; by staying quiet, by keeping my head down. No: I give myself too much credit. I didn’t see the danger. I didn’t even know they were tigers. (337)

But Iris chooses to ignore her sister’s warnings in favor of the heterosexual love plot that was devised for her to follow. After Laura’s death, Iris discovers that Laura had been molested and blackmailed by Richard. He deceives Laura by promising he will not persecute Alex Thomas in return for sexual favors. Iris discovers this only after Laura dies and leaves her more hidden messages about the abuse she suffered. Later, Iris discovers that Laura gets pregnant by Richard at the same time she does and that she tries to tell the doctors at the hospital that she has been molested, but is sent off to a mental sanatorium where she is forced to undergo an abortion.

Laura’s special relationship as a double to her sister allows Iris to interpret signs and clues that Laura left after her death. For example, in Iris’s wedding pictures that were painted by Laura, Richard and Winifred, his sister, are colored a lurid green. Iris is painted aqua blue. Laura is done in a brilliant yellow, not only her dress, but her face and hands as well. In the formal shot of the bride and groom, Richard’s face is painted a dark grey, and red flames shoot out from his face and hands, while Iris’s face is bleached so that all her features are

blurred, and the floor beneath the couple “had been entirely blacked out” leaving them floating, as if “in the deepest and darkest of nights” (464). She even tries to spill her paints in Richard’s house, defacing it, leaving her mark (315), warning Iris of the impending danger. In their last encounter, Iris views Laura as if she were illuminated, with “thorns of light shooting out of her in a prickly haze” (499), much like the golden color Laura believes represented glory or the yellow tone she paints her hand in the photograph.

The color motif used by Laura in this novel is also connected to the origin of Iris’s name. In Greek mythology, Iris is the messenger of the gods, the personification of the rainbow, and is supposed to link the gods with humanity. One of Laura’s hidden messages is connected to Iris releasing Dido from her suffering, by cutting off a golden lock of Dido’s hair and allowing her to die. Laura writes in her notebook: “So now, all misty, her wings as yellow as a crocus, trailing a thousand rainbow colors that sparkled in the sunlight, Iris flew down” (515). The tale of Iris granting Dido death also parallels the relationship between the sisters, and their doubling. So does the tale in *mise-en-abyme* in the *Blind Assassin* novel. In the latter, an apocalyptic science fiction tale is narrated, and the protagonists of this story are a blind assassin and a sacrificial virgin whose tongue is cut off and is to be offered to the gods. The sacrificial virgins symbolize both sisters: Iris, who is offered by her father to the much older and immoral Richard Griffen, and Laura who is later blackmailed and molested by him. “Two for the price of one” (522), is what Iris later observes. I view the muteness imposed on the virgin girl mirrors the sisters’ inability to communicate with each other, or to speak out about the violence committed against them. The assassin, who is supposed to have murdered the mute virgin, ends up saving her. Iris saves Laura when they were children and she tries to drown herself, but later maliciously provokes her by revealing that she is Alex Thomas’s lover.

The connection between the sisters, which occurs mainly through the motif of

authorship, extends beyond the book and the pictures. It is written on the bathroom stalls Iris visits when she goes downtown, as well as in the doughnut shop. Among the myriad of messages written in markers on the stall's door, there is always someone assuming Laura Chase's identity and penning phrases such as: "Fuck Vegetarian—All Gods Are Carnivorous" (87), and Iris believes that some of the messages are somehow left to her by Laura. She points out that Laura's favorite words are God, trust, sacrifice, justice, faith, hope, love and sister (505), and that they are somehow represented in the scattered bathroom scrawls. Iris writes: "Sometimes I think—no, sometimes I play with the idea—that these washroom scribblings are in reality the work of Laura, acting as if by long distance through the arms and hands of the girls who write on them" (431). Iris even thinks about adding some phrases of her own, as if she could communicate directly with Laura by doing so.

Towards the end of the novel, Iris's memories of their physical similarity and doubling become more descriptive. The first instance is when Iris recalls a Christmas during their childhood when they were sitting in front of glass doors and she could see their mirrored images. They are both fair skinned and have blonde, nearly white hair parted in the middle, wearing identical blue velvet dresses, white socks and black Mary Janes, and with their hands neatly folded in their laps (396). Laura wears Iris's old clothes and when Iris sees her from behind she gets a peculiar sensation, as if watching herself (402). Iris writes: "What was mine was hers: my fountain pen, my cologne, my summer dress, my hat, my hairbrush" (454). When Iris gets pregnant, she fears that Laura thinks of her unborn baby as hers too. But when she goes to tell Laura she is pregnant, Laura cryptically refers to their mother's death at childbirth, implying that it would be dangerous for Iris to have a child. I believe that Laura's references allude to the possible doubling between herself, Iris and their mother.

I analyze the figure of the mother in this novel can be read having in mind the theories on matricide discussed in Chapter 1. Iris feels sorry for Laura and for her confusion and her



mistrust of God, which is due to their mother's death. Laura frequently goes to Iris's room at night, shakes her awake and gets into bed with her because she cannot sleep. When she finally does sleep, her fitful slumber and snoring keep Laura awake. In these nightly hours, Iris feels desolate, thinking that her mother is not there because she does wrong things. To compensate for that feeling, she mothers Laura, helping her dress, brush her teeth and wash her face (142). When Iris turns ten, the memory of her mother fades away, and she can only recall what she looked like through the photographs, remembering her absence much more than her presence (146). By slowly forgetting about her mother, Iris turns away from the maternal role model to the paternal one. Her role as a mother to Laura is also affected by the annulment of the mother: she slowly starts to resent Laura, viewing her as a burden she must carry through life.

The shift to the patriarchal framework is swift and unquestioned. The mother figure in the girls' lives corroborates the change, for their mother is a passive figure, whose focus is on charity and the subservience to her husband in detriment of the daughters. The father, a shell-shocked soldier from World War I, is a drunkard and an idealist who loses his fortune because of the stubborn insistence on maintaining his family's button factory.

Reenie, the housekeeper, acts as a surrogate mother figure for the girls, a caring mother, a double of their dead and passive mother. Reenie plays the role of the strong mother figure throughout the sisters' lives, pointing out the right path to take and urging them to be strong, acting as a moral compass. After Laura and Reenie are gone, Myra, Reenie's daughter, is the one who looks after Iris in her old age. Myra acts as if she is Iris's daughter, ensuring Iris is well cared for and in good health. Iris has the impression that Myra might even be her sister, born from a possible affair between Reenie and her father when she and Laura left Avilion. Iris muses: "Myra, you are my sister. Or my half-sister. Not that we'll ever know, or I myself will ever know" (400). Both Reenie and Myra are positive mother-figures for the

sisters, and establish bond of affection and positive interaction and sorority between mother and daughter figures.

The other mother/daughter figures present in the narrative are Iris's daughter Aimee, and granddaughter Sabrina, both of whom she loses to her inimical sister-in-law, Richard's sister Winnifred. After Iris discovers how Richard had abused Laura, and his preference for young girls, she runs away from home and blackmails him into staying away from her and Aimee. Shortly after Iris publishes *The Blind Assassin*, as way of coping with her pain, Laura's suffering and suicide.

But unshed tears can turn you rancid. So can memory. So can biting your tongue. My bad nights were beginning. I couldn't sleep. Officially, Laura had been papered over. Few more years and it would be as if she'd never existed. I shouldn't have taken a vow of silence, I told myself. What did I want? Nothing much. Just a memorial of some kind. But what is a memorial, when you come right down to it, but a commemoration of wounds endured? Endured, and resented. Without memory, there can be no revenge. (525)

An investigation is conducted into what happened to Laura and the information reaches the press, tainting Richard's name. Consequently, he soon passes away from a heart attack, clutching Iris's book to his chest. Winnifred blames Iris, and in time, sets up traps to win legal guardianship over Aimee. "Winnifred blamed me, of course. After that, it was open war. She did the worst thing she could to me that she could think of. She took Aimee" (528). Her upbringing of the girl proves disastrous, and Aimee turns into a drifter and alcoholic. She does not even know who the father of her child, Sabrina, is. Winnifred also gains legal guardianship of Sabrina, leaving Iris to roam around, following her granddaughter to at least

get a glimpse of her from afar. Iris also believes that Winnifred has tainted her role as a mother to Sabrina,

I suppose you were taught the gospel according to Winnifred. In her version, I would have been a lush, a tramp, a slut, a bad mother. As time went by I no doubt became, in her mouth, a slovenly harridan, a crazy old bat, a peddler of ratty old junk. I doubt she ever said to you that I murdered Richard, however. If she'd told you that, she would also have had to say where she got the idea (528)

In the only description of an encounter between Iris and Aimee, Iris narrates how her daughter is in deplorable conditions.

I tried to keep in touch with her. I kept hoping for a reconciliation—she was my daughter, after all, and I felt guilty about her, and I wanted to make it up to her—to make up for the morass her childhood had become. But by then she had turned against me. The last time I went to see Aimee, she was living in a slummy row house near Parliament Street, in Toronto.

I tried to talk to her. I began gently, but she wasn't in the mood for listening. She was tired of it, of all of us. (446-47)

The neighbors chastise Iris for allowing her granddaughter to be ignored like a grubby waif, and when Iris enters the house, Aimee is in a semi-drunken state. She accuses Iris of never having loved her, and then claims that she knows the secrets that have been kept from her, the secrets revealed by *The Blind Assassin*. When Iris appears confounded, Aimee claims

that she knows that Laura is her mother, and that Iris's baby died and they replaced the stillborn with Aimee.

She said it was obvious; that her real mother was Laura, and her real father was that man, the one in *The Blind Assassin*. Aunt Laura had been in love with him, but we'd thwarted her—disposed of this unknown lover somehow. Then, when Laura turned out to be pregnant by him, we'd sent her away to cover the scandal, and when my baby had died at birth, we'd stolen the baby from Laura and adopted it, and passed it off as our own. (447-48)

She also accuses Iris of killing Laura, and finally attacks her in a furious rage. That same day, Aimee falls down the stairs and dies. Iris laments not snatching her granddaughter that day, and not telling her about the story she is narrating to the readers,

Perhaps I should have stretched out my own arms. I should have hugged her. I should have cried. Then I should have sat down with her and told her this story I'm now telling you. But I didn't do that. And I now regret it bitterly. (449)

Matricide hovers over Iris and her mother/daughter figures. First, her own mother dies while giving birth, and is an absent passive role model who left, as a legacy, orders for Iris to take care of Laura. One of the reasons Iris marries Richard is because her father implies that it is necessary to guarantee her sister's future. The second figure is Laura, whom Iris mothers, but whose roles are later reversed, with Laura trying to protect Iris from Richard and warn her against him. Reenie, the surrogate mother for the sisters, is removed from the picture when Iris marries Richard. Iris loses both Aimee and Sabrina, failing twice as a mother and grandmother. She mourns the fact that Aimee believes that Laura is her mother, and that she

does not have a chance to relate the real story to her daughter. Nonetheless, there are positive portrayals of the mother as well. Myra is faithful to Iris, and hovers over, mother-like, when there is no familial obligation or link between the two. It is as if she inherited the mother's role from Reenie to take care of Iris, to look after her. The doublings between the mothers/daughters/sisters are filled with conflict, but underlying the aggressive dynamics is love, sorrow, regret, and most importantly, for Iris, transgression.

It is due to the love Iris feels for her sister, mothers (both Reenie and her biological mother), daughter and granddaughter that she writes *The Blind Assassin*: to refuse the role of the mute virgin, to recognize her flaws, her errors and her love for the women in her life. She vindicates Laura with her published novel, which becomes a bond between the two of them, and assimilates her sister's identity to her own in the author's persona, producing a work that denounces the violence committed against them. The book becomes notorious, guaranteeing that Laura's memory would not be forgotten. As a last act of love and defiance, Iris reveals that the whole book, narrated by her, is a memento to her granddaughter Sabrina. She finally tells the truth about Aimee's parentage: she is Alex Thomas's daughter, the man who was simultaneously loved by Iris and Laura. Iris believes this frees Sabrina from the corruption associated with Richard Griffen and, since Alex Thomas was an orphan, Sabrina's legacy from her real grandfather "is the realm of infinite speculation. You're free to reinvent yourself at will" (530). With this final act of rebellion, which is propelled by Iris's losses and loves, Iris rewrites female genealogy for her granddaughter and opens a new world of possibilities. It is as if Laura and Iris, sisters and doubles, are both grandmothers to Sabrina, united in their grief and love—their legacy a book and memories for the future generations of women. They both write all the texts together, using their left hands, the transgressive hands, the hands that "are supposed to be bad" (530), and rewrite their own stories and the ones that were forced upon them. But their special doubleness and their writings are reappropriated by Iris and

Laura. The sisters reclaim their identities and subjectivities through their reflections on their differences and similarities, reinforce their sororal partisanship through mutual support, and transform their writings into an empowering act and positive legacy.

#### V. Matching Doubles

Such a strange being. Such a strange thing, having a sister. And even stranger,  
to be a sister to such a sister as this. (156)

*Dust*, Elizabeth Bear

In *Dust*, a space opera set in a dystopic world, the sister pair is already set as a matched, twinned double from the beginning. When Ser Perceval and Rien meet for the first time, Perceval says: “We were born to be a matched set. A matched and balanced pair” (27). Rien, raised in secluded ignorance, had no knowledge about her origin or that she has a sister. Once she meets Perceval, however, her sense of affinity and identification is instantaneous. There is no conflict linked to envy, competition or attention mongering. Their lack of rivalry seems, at first, connected to the fact that they spent all their lives apart, and, consequently, have not shared the tempestuous interactions linked to sister pairs who grow up together. Furthermore, a closer look at the narrative shows that, in the context of this science fiction setting, familial ties do not bear much consequence in personal relationships; for instance, Perceval’s parents are brother and sister.

Hence, Rien’s immediate sense of connection to Perceval is untainted by the typical negative interactions of sisters who breathed down each other’s necks while growing up together. Rien’s feelings towards Perceval, at the beginning of the novel, are of “possessiveness and protectiveness” (25). She cares for Perceval when she is wounded, helps her escape from her enemies, and rushes to her rescue once she is kidnapped at the end of the novel. Even though Perceval is, in reference to the mythical stories of King Arthur, the errant

knight, it is Rien who takes front and acts to ensure their survival. Rien muses that “she had been the strong one; she had been the savior” (177). This is a relevant development because, when they meet, Rien is at a physical disadvantage in relation to Perceval. Rien is only human, a servant, while Perceval is an Exalt, a genetically modified human with superior strength and skills.

If we consider the traditional theories on the double, we can see that the sisters’ affinity and connection challenge the idea that the double represents a strange, uncanny entity. In Rien and Perceval’s case, neither of the sisters represents a lack, they are both complimentary and add to each other’s subjectivities. Instead of assimilating one another, they share their knowledge and strive for protection and care. In fact, Perceval shares an intrinsic part of herself with Rien, not consuming or destroying her sister, but gifting her with power, turning Rien into her equal. Perceval colonizes Rien, that is, she shares her nanotechnological colony of robotic symbionts with her sister and Exalts her.

When Rien becomes an Exalt, she has access to the enhanced physical and mental prowess that comes with the nanocolony. This is highly problematic, because, for her, the Exalts are heartless monsters. Now that she is one, that she has discovered a sister she admires, she begins to question the true nature of being an Exalt. She is confused by her partially human and partially machine state. The way other Exalts use their power to destroy and tyrannize terrifies Rien. She begins to question herself, wondering if, since she “was Exalt, would she become a monster too?” (87). These existential conflicts are solved by her positive doubling with Perceval. Her admiration and the sense of completeness she develops over possessing a sister are fundamental factors for her character development. Instead of projecting a lack on her sister, Rien feels proud and safe to hold this connection with Perceval. The sisters here are not at odds, but act in concert and partnership. Eventually Rien comes to terms with being an Exalt, mirroring herself on Perceval’s example. Differently

from the previous novels, Rien attains a sense of wholeness by cultivating a positive and constructive relationship with her sister double.

Over the course of the story, the sisters eventually come to share feelings of intense love and desire. At first, Rien is baffled by this, pondering: “Such a strange thing, having a sister. Being a sister. And even stranger, to be a sister to such a sister as this” (156). When she expresses these sentiments to Perceval, instead of performing the traditional rejection which permeates sister relationships, Perceval reciprocates them. The desire Percival and Rien feel is not externalized in a figure of *jouissance*, but in each other. More importantly, they fulfill this desire through a positive relationship with each other, without the need to destroy their pairs. The sisters trust one another. Rien affirms she loves Perceval and forgives her for all her errors, redeeming Perceval from the overwhelming sense of guilt and shame she carries for having been used as a pawn by her enemies. Rien feels safe in the knowledge that she loves “Perceval as she had not known she could love” (176).

Their sisterly bond is also connected to the sense of motherhood. When Rien takes care of Perceval, in the beginning of the novel, she goes to great pains to provide her with extra food, comfort, and to bind her wounds. When they escape captivity, Perceval also feels maternal in relation to Rien. When they are attacked by strangers, she tries to cover Rien’s eyes, thinking “they could be of an age, but she could not help but thinking of Rien as a child, in need of protection” (64). Their maternal feelings towards each other contribute for their positive interaction, and fulfill Rien’s needs for an absent mother. When she finally meets Perceval’s mother, she is offered to be adopted into the family as they recognize her importance in Perceval’s life.

The positive portrayals of motherhood can be read considering the Irigarayan notions of rewriting female genealogy, and reclaiming the mother/daughter dynamics. The sisters’ love, protectiveness and maternal feelings also contribute for a shift of the focus on



parthenogenesis and the law of the father to the sisters and a possible law of the mother. When the sisters act as positive, loving mother-figures to one another, they break a traditional cycle that casts mothers as non-entities and women as subordinate character without choice. They assert their agency and power of choice through positive female bonding and the reinterpretation and reimagination of the mother/daughter roles and figures.

The love between the sisters serves as a buffer between Perceval and the AI character, Jacob Dust. Dust kidnaps Perceval and begins to alter her hormonal system to induce her to believe she loves and trusts him, to force her to do his will. Even though Perceval is subjected to Dust's manipulation, her belief in her feelings for Rien halts the invasive process. Perceval holds on to Rien's memory as a tool of resistance: "Rien, whom she had decided to love, of her own free will. Rien, who she loved for a thousand reasons, all of them good. Rien, whom she chose" (297).

When Perceval is finally forced to give in to Dust's demands, she is also grounded on the knowledge that she loves Rien, that she is doing this to save both her sister and the planet-ship. She allows Dust to integrate his symbiont to hers, adding to her psyche and taking away a part of her humanity, the necessary sacrifice to gain knowledge to conduct the ship away from the stars entering supernova. It is important to observe that Perceval uses the verbs "surrendered" and "possessed" to describe her integration with Dust showing her unwillingness to accept his terms.

Through Rien's sacrifice, Perceval becomes free of Dust. Similarly to what happens in the previous novels, Rien is also sacrificed in a manner, although she does not die in the literal sense. She integrates with another AI character, Samael, and then offers up her symbiont colony, along with her psyche and memories, to Perceval. However, Rien gives up her life willingly to save and redeem Perceval. As she sacrifices herself to Perceval, she destroys Dust's influence and retains enough willpower to merge the AIs and herself into one

entity called Angel, which integrates with Perceval's psyche but does not control her mind. Angel retains all the memories and knowledge of those that form it, including a part of Rien and her love for Perceval. Their last exchanged words before Rien is completely consumed are her feelings of love and devotion. Perceval, unaware of what Rien is about to do, asks her to marry her. Rien answers "I'll marry you, if you kiss me one more time" (335), a phrase which both alludes to and subverts the traditional sealing kiss of the heteronormative love plot.

As Rien kisses and merges with Perceval, her last thoughts are of enlightenment and understanding of the world around her, even in relation to the characters she thought of as monsters, and she reaches the understanding that death befalls everyone. She also views her sacrifice as a willing one, to save the ship, its inhabitants, and her sister and love Perceval. As Perceval absorbs Rien, she describes her sister's persona and how she could feel Rien's quick wits, intelligence, hurts, braveries, love and stubborn determination. Rien's loss deeply wounds Perceval, but it is through Rien's sacrifice that Dust is integrated to Angel, guaranteeing Perceval's freedom. Rien attacks Dust from an angle he never expected, from inside Perceval. Perceval can feel Rien's actions, noting that she does not destroy Dust, but modifies him, infecting him with duty, affection and love,

Perceval might have been frightened if Rien had not been with them. Rien, who...unpick[ed] and rework[ed] him, mak[ing] him into something else, and then bootstrapped...[him] up through Pinion and through Perceval. Rien, whose guiding touch she could feel as Samael slammed into Dust from a direction the angel never expected: from the inside. Rien, who used their combined strength and resources not to consume Dust...But to revise him. Revise them both, in fact. Infect them.

Complexify them, as Pinion scattered into pieces on the deck,  
 shadow-bright crumbling into powder, sifting through the air  
 like sand, converting back to the nanoparticles of its colony, its  
 guiding principle stripped out and subsumed. The gestalt wasn't  
 trying to eat Dust. It meant to taint him. With duty, and  
 affection, and the bitter, soft creak of snow, compressed under  
 struggling wings. To support him, reinforce him...To taint him,  
 with Pinion...with Rien. Rien, who whispered in Perceval's  
 head

—You were my knight in shining armor. —

—and who, lost in the angel she'd birthed, fell to ashes in  
 Perceval's hands (335-339)

The destruction of one of the sisters' pair at the end of *Dust* is perhaps the most productive, subverting instance of all previously discussed doubles. The merging with one of women in the double joins the sisters eternally, for a part of Rien's psyche, memories and love are inherently present in Perceval's mind. Differently from the other pairs, Rien sacrifices herself for love, and thus destroys Dust's domain over Perceval, thwarting the heteronormative love plot Dust tries to enforce on Perceval. Rien enables Perceval to ascend to the role of the rightful captain of the ship, becoming their world's savior through her martyrdom. Her last words as Rien to Perceval, in reply to her sister's request that she marry her, are: "You were my knight in shining armor" (335), but it is Rien who is her sister's keeper. When Rien merges herself with Perceval, she allows the sister pair to effectively reinterpret the incorporation of the double. Perceval gives birth to a new consciousness, one that mingles her own, Rien, and all their enemies in a way that will aid Perceval and yet allow

her to retain her own persona. The entity Angel is a manifestation of an alternate kind of motherhood, given birth by Perceval and Rien in concert, as sisters and lovers. They rewrite female genealogy, in which the sacrifice of the feminine double contributes to the empowerment of the other, of a new and productive entity. Angel is not Athens, who annuls her mother's participation in its formation. Angel is genderless, multiple, shifting and part of both its mother's identities.

#### VI. Two Sisters, Double Resistance

A sister can be seen as someone who is both ourselves and very not much  
ourselves—a special kind of double

Toni Morrison

If we return to the issues of matricide and feminine subjectivity, we can trace the similarities and the singularities in the novels discussed in this work. The conflicts between the sisters in the first two novels, *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *The Blind Assassin*, are mirrors of the problematic interactions of mother and sister. However, it is through a positive reclaiming of motherhood, through mothering each other and their own children, that these sisters reach out to one another and mend their struggling relationships. In *Dust*, for instance, the sisters also rewrite maternal genealogy when they act out of love for one another and engender a new entity named Angel. These positive portrayals of motherhood put the mother figure on the fore, and effectively counter the myth of parthenogenesis and the erasure of the mother's subjectivity.

As special doubles, the sister pairs allow for a new and fresh interpretation of the concept. The double does not need to be the representation of a lack, or a sinister figure that needs to be destroyed or assimilated so that the subject can remain healthy. The double

formed between the sisters escapes from the traditional formula by presenting a fully formed character with subjectivities and choices. The sister double adds, transforms, creates. Even when one of the sisters is ultimately sacrificed, the double she forms with her surviving sister allows them both to take a step away from their expected roles and to subvert the outcome expected from them.

Mary, in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, survives the chaos thrust upon the Boleyn family and manages to save her children and get away from the venomous Tudor court. Iris, in *The Blind Assassin*, accomplishes the feat of vindicating her Laura and ensuring that her memory is cherished and unforgettable, while also writing their stories as memoirs for her granddaughter. Perceval, in *Dust*, gains freedom through Rien's sacrifice, and forever carries a piece of her sister's psyche within her own. The sister doubles in the novels analyzed are a tool of transformation and resistance, offering new possibilities of maternal and sororal agency.

## Chapter 3

### Body Politics and Resistance

#### I. The Body Theoretical

I view our bodies as sites of struggles (28)

*Gender/Body/Knowledge*, Susan Bordo

The female body is a recurrent cultural trope at the center of contemporary discussion on gender issues and the shifting dynamics of power. Patriarchal agendas on normativity and gender binarism have tried to apply regulations to the body as a means of domination. On the other hand, scholars such as Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and Susan Bordo have gone beyond the traditional, normative theories and proposed new conceptions of the body. The main objective of this chapter is to construct a discussion about the resignification of the female body in a positive and constructive manner and to discuss how these issues are approached by the novels analyzed in this dissertation.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Michel Foucault analyzes the body as a mechanism of control. He creates the term “biopower” to explain how bodily control involves the regulation of the life processes of society, also called the social body. These regulations control events such as birth, death, sickness, disease, health and sexual relations. Another aspect, which Foucault labels “disciplinary power,” explains how the human body is objectified, manipulated and trained. The author reveals “a policy of coercions that act on the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behavior. The human body enter[s] a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it... Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (138-39). It is not,

however, only the body that disciplinary techniques target. Foucault presents disciplinary power as productive of certain types of subjects as well. He describes the way in which the central technique of disciplinary power—constant surveillance—is initially directed towards the body and subsequently takes hold of the mind to induce a psychological state of “conscious and permanent visibility” (201).

I employ Foucault’s theories on bodily control to analyze the female body and to discuss how control over both mind and body docilizes and disempowers the subject. The methods of control over the body, colored by the implications of gender, rise as a central issue to counter negative influences and carve out a positive space for the interpretation of women’s bodies.

Considering Foucault’s theories on the body, I argue that reimagining the body effectively empowers women’s voices and is a form of political resistance. The reimagination and positive portrayal of the women’s body contemplates non-normative interpretations of women’s subjectivities. Casting a productive, transformative gaze on the body questions the assumption that women’s identities are merely specular reflections for the masculine signifying economy. Discussing the theories about rewriting women’s bodies and narratives as a means of political and cultural empowerment, I aim to show how the sisters’ bodies become a locus for the resignification and development of their subjectivities, as well as a tool of resistance.

This thesis’s reinterpretation of the body’s multiple subjectivities draws on Julia Kristeva’s notions on the “abject body.” Kristeva first used the term in her essay “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection” (1982) defining it as a source of resistance. The author analyzes bodily manifestations that are generally considered negative and recasts them as a form of resistance. The refusal of certain types of objects, for example, food, is seen by Kristeva as a means of protection, a refusal of an externally imposed assimilation (2-3).

Anorexia can be seen, then, as a manifestation of bodily abjection. The rejection of food, in the case of anorexia, may be seen as a transgression that establishes identity (4-5). I use Kristeva's empowering ideas of women's bodies to discuss how the sisters' bodies struggle against docility and normatization.

Abjection can also be traced back to the denial of the maternal body. Through Kristeva's theories on the abject body, I propose a reclaiming of the maternal body as another form of subversive empowerment. I reconceptualize the maternal body to analyze the sisters' relationship with mother-figures, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. When the sisters reject the maternal body, they establish bodily boundaries and deny a part of themselves. The rejection of the maternal body is further complicated by Kristeva's views on the mother/girl-child relationship for this rejection becomes a negative internalization, which creates a permanent loss, privation or lack in the girl's identity. I argue that this lack manifests itself in the polarization of the sister's psychological features and their cyclical conflicts. When the sisters deny their mother figures, they reject not only their first identity matrix, but also their own bodies. In contrast, when the sisters view the maternal and female bodies in a positive way, they are empowered and liberated from negative imagery and impositions. Thus, the abject, as defined here, is the use of the body as a tool of resistance. The resistant usage of the body is performed through rejections of external impositions or the reconceptualization of negative bodily acts into empowering performances. The bodily acts I analyze are specifically connected to the sisters' bodies, such as: motherhood, anorexia, abortion, obsession with cleanliness and bodily shifts and transformations.

In *Gender, Body and Knowledge* (1988), Susan R. Bordo and Alisson M. Jaggar discuss the body and bodily resistances. The authors offer a cultural approach to the body (35), analyzing, under a Foucauldian light, the contemporary normatization and obsessive practices imposed on the body. The sisters' control over their physical bodily images allows



them to use their bodies as Bordo and Jaggar envision them, as representations of struggle that do not conform to docility and normatization. In *Unbearable Weight* (1993), Bordo highlights how women's resistance deals with the bodily disorders of anorexia and bulimia, demonstrating their negative cultural effects culture on the contemporary female bodies. Sandra Almeida summarizes the effects of culture on the body, calling attention to the power of the masculine economy on the gendered female body. She proposes a rewriting of the female body as a locus of cultural inscription, as a space of individual agency, transgression and rupture of conventional limits (105-6).

I apply Kristeva's theories on the abject body, and Bordo and Jaggar's approaches on the body as a tool of resistance to analyze the sisters' bodily manifestations as means to establish their subjective boundaries. I also use Irigaray's notions of reimagining the female body to further analyze bodily resistances. These approaches allow me to reinterpret the sisters' bodies and their bodily experiences under a constructive light that resignifies the traditional views offered by Kristeva on phenomena such as anorexia or post-partum depression.

In *Dust*, the characters' complete control over their physical bodily images allows them to use their bodies as representations that do not conform to docility and normatization. I claim that their mutable body freedom is a powerful tool of resistance and resignification. In *The Other Boleyn Girl*, Anne and Mary Boleyn's bodies are also bodies that struggle against normatization. When Mary becomes pregnant with the King's child, she loses him as a lover, as her body undergoes transformation. Her pregnant body distances itself from a stereotypically pleasing image, which is determined by the masculine gaze. Initially lamenting her bodily changes, Mary outgrows her disappointment at being rejected and gladly embraces the changes motherhood brings about in her body: her swollen breasts and belly, the weight gain and the stretch marks. She reinterprets her own pregnant body as a

positive affirmation of her subjectivity, as shown in this passage “My own breasts ached in longing”, while thinking of her newborn babe (421). The sister pair in *The Blind Assassin* in turn undergo bodily transformations which empower them as well and in Iris’s case, she fights for the reappropriation of her sexuality and bodily pleasures.

The link between the mother’s body and the abject body is central to this dissertation, and complements the theories on motherhood and matricide. In *Bodies that Matter* (1990), Judith Butler deconstructs compulsory heteronormative gender roles. Focusing specifically on gendered bodies, Butler affirms that abject bodies oppose established norms and question stereotypical assumptions on gendered bodies. For the author, gender identity is simply “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender* 33). Anorexia, obsession with cleanliness and rejection of masculine desire “establish an originary complicity with power in the formation of the ‘I’” (15). I adapt these concepts of the abject body to Butler’s questioning of imposed gender roles and performances.

Of interest to this dissertation are Butler’s contrapositions to Kristeva’s theories on the maternal body. She claims that Kristeva assumes essentialist views on the abject and maternal bodies, and that Kristeva does not consider the particularities of ontology for women’s bodies, especially the mother’s body. Butler claims that Kristeva undermines her own emancipatory ideals because her views do not go beyond traditional views on gender roles and impositions. According to Butler, Kristeva safeguards the notion of culture as a paternal structure and delimits maternity as an essentially precultural reality (*Bodies* 108). She insists that Kristeva does not question the concept of the maternal body as a sign that bears a set of meanings prior to culture itself. To counteract what Butler considers shortsightedness, she proposes that we focus on pre-discursive practices, considering the

maternal body under the light of the uninhibited pleasure principle, which precedes the formation of the Symbolic dichotomy of the subject/object.

Butler's reinterpretation of the abject body, through the reimagining of the maternal body, is on par with Irigaray's views on women's empowerment. Additionally, the shift of focus from the discursive Symbolic practices that limit maternal and female bodies to the materiality of the body allows for the possibility of interpreting female bodies under a new light. The philosophy of embodied subjectivity studies the way we experience our bodies. Bodily experiences generate specific subjectivities which involve emotional and affective factors. The living body, or embodied subjectivity, is determining for the sense of self and of subjectivity. The theorization on the female body through the concepts of embodiment, which discusses the materialism and corporeal practices that affect identity, brings to the fore individual bodily experiences, such as pregnancy and sexuality. Bodily experiences, in this chain of thought, are not given metaphysical concepts. Embodied subjectivity considers both the psychological, emotional and physical experiences of the subject, developing an organic hypothesis of the combination of matter and meaning. Elizabeth Grosz offers a compelling view on this subject matter, claiming that the theorization of the body considers, but also goes beyond, conceptual materiality. Grosz claims that embodied experiences actively transform the body and the subjectivity and identity facets that are linked to it ("Darwin" 24).

New materialist notions develop perceptions on embodied subjectivity and its material aspects through the experiences of shifting boundaries, transgressive gender performances, gender bias, racism, ageism and other bodily manifestations. For this study, I focus specifically on the bodily issues of gender, sexuality, pregnancy, maternity and gender performance. These views challenge the reductionist, binarist and oversimplified concepts that are traditionally applied to the female body.

Pregnant embodiment is one of the theories offered by embodied subjectivity. The bodily experience of pregnancy challenges the notions of bordered subjectivity and courts transgressive theories of the double, such as, for example, the pregnant mother and the child she carries can be analyzed as one subject, instead of separate entities. Pregnant embodiment is a form of body politics that challenges the patriarchal order by rewriting women's subjectivity. Drawing from Irigaray's critique of phallogocentric Western thought, pregnant embodiment brings the discussion back to the figure of the mother and matricide. Imogen Tyler claims that the subjectivity of a female pregnant body "expose[s] the failure of philosophical models of being, self and subject" ("Reframing" 8). Therefore, maternal embodiment offers a viable theoretical framework to rethink subjectivity, establishes constructive perceptions on women's bodily experiences and challenges traditional views on women's bodies and subjectivities.

The reimagination, rewriting and positive reinterpretation of women's and maternal bodies is analyzed under two precepts: the cognitive aspects of the bodily imaginary (thoughts, language, imagination) and the materiality of embodied subjectivity (pregnancy, sensorial experiences, pain). I argue that both cognitive experiences and the material features of the body are connected to the establishment of a gendered identity.

Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1984) rejects the rigid bodily boundaries of the physical and non-physical. The concreteness of bodily existence and its biological narratives is as relevant as the historical and cultural narratives of the body. Haraway's fluid boundaries add to the Irigarayan concepts of fluidity. The concept of a fluid cyborg body is employed in my reading of the sisters' bodies and narratives, especially in the case of *Dust*.

Haraway also questions "the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender," stating that we "might consider more seriously the partial, fluid...aspect of sex and sexual embodiment. Gender might not be global identity after all, even if it has profound

historical breadth and depth” (180). Her statement is relevant not only to analyze the cyborg bodies in *Dust*, but also for *The Blind Assassin* and *The Other Boleyn Girl*, for all of them are connected to the themes of gender and maternity. The gender fluid cyborg body proposes an alternative to the binary, reductionist views on gender, and I employ these alternative ideas on gender to reconceptualize the sisters’ bodies in a more positive light.

## II. Mother and Sister Sing the Body Electra

“We are all Electra; certainly, we are all Electra’s daughters. We, and our mothers before us,  
have all conspired in Clytemnestra’s murder.” (71)

“Mother Hating and Mother-Blaming: What Electra did to Clytemnestra”,  
Phyllis Chesler

In this section, I analyze the characters Electra and her mother Clytemnestra, in Sophocles’s and Euripides’s homonymous plays, *Electra*. Sophocles’s text presents a vengeful, heroic Electra and a conflicted, outspoken Clytemnestra. Euripides’s version of the myth focuses on Electra as a neurotic anti-heroine and portrays both her and her mother Clytemnestra and her under a more humane lens. I examine these versions of the daughter/mother pair under the concepts of sororal partisanship, bodily resistances and alternate gender performances. This pair offers both a critical portrayal of matricide and allows the analysis mother figure’s voice.

Euripides depicts Clytemnestra’s grief, sadness, and her explanation for her choices as a mother. In both texts, Electra is apparently shunned by Clytemnestra after her father Menelaus’s death, and she harbors a deep hatred for her mother and her consort-lover

Aegisthus. As I have already discussed in the first chapter, the Oresteia cycle validates the act of matricide, and condemns patricide. In Sophocles's text, Orestes is acquitted by the jury in Athens at the end of the narrative, and becomes the avenging hero who restores patriarchal stability. In Euripides's version, Orestes is depicted as an indecisive, weak character. Hubris and vengeance, in the Euripidean text, are all transferred to Electra, a reversal of roles that emasculates Orestes and empowers his sister. Electra assumes a double role, engaging in a gender performance that has been described as a mix of masculine wits and female craftiness. Many critics claim that she is a split persona, with the body of a woman and the wits of a man (Synodinou 305-9).

However, I argue that the binarist view of Electra's mind and body is shackled by traditionalist patriarchal dictates. I propose to interpret Electra under a gender fluid perspective. Electra can be analyzed under the paradigms of matricide, motherhood and alternative gender performances. Her anti-heroic acts and her participation in matricide is a direct result of the cycle of separation anxiety and misidentification that occurs in sororal relationships. Euripides's portrayal of Electra serves to question the need for matricide.

Although Electra ultimately condones matricide, her acts are juxtaposed by Clytemnestra, especially in the Euripidean version. I argue that the doomed queen offers an insight into the mother's version of the story, a mother who avenges the murder of her first daughter, Iphigenia. Furthermore, in Euripides's play, Clytemnestra stops Aegisthus from slaying Electra and goes to Electra's house to bless her grandchild. I use the mother/daughter comparison to suggest how, even amidst a narrative of patriarchal vengeance and matricide, the decision of exerting maternal bonds creates constructive interactions. Furthermore, Clytemnestra's and Electra's shifting gender performances question the imposed dichotomy of a man's mind versus a woman's body. Both characters present bodily and mental characteristics that are gender fluid.

Bethany Nickerson calls attention to the differences between the two characters in the Sophoclean and Euripidean narratives (10). In the first version, Clytemnestra has the advantages of thinking and acting in a gender-fluid way. She is empowered by the talent of rhetoric and free speech, traditionally associated with men, but she also demonstrates passion and hope, which are qualities linked to women (11). Nickerson claims that Clytemnestra's power is linked to her ability to use language well. I argue that Clytemnestra's empowerment through the act of language challenges the patriarchal view of the dichotomy body/mind or reason/emotion. When Clytemnestra assumes the role of a persuasive orator, she is demonstrating that women can claim language as their own and use it as an effective tool to express their subjectivities and choices. Furthermore, Clytemnestra's connection to her emotive side displays a well-formed individual, who defends her actions in a justified manner, which encompasses both the emotional and rational spheres.

Clytemnestra attempts to explain her choices to Electra. She states that her grief as a mother requires retribution for Iphigenia's sacrifice. Clytemnestra states that Agamemnon could have sacrificed one of Menelaus's sons, instead of Iphigenia, to gain divine favor:

This father of yours, whom you are always mourning, Had  
 killed your sister, sacrificing her  
 To Artemis, the only Greek who could endure  
 To do it—though his part, when he begot her,  
 Was so much less than mine, who bore the child.  
 So tell me why, in deference to whom,  
 He sacrificed her? For the Greeks, you say?  
 What right had they to kill a child of mine?  
 But if you say her killed *my* child to serve

His brother Menelaus, should not he  
 Pay me for that? Did not this brother have  
 Two sons, and should they rather have not died,  
 The sons of Helen who caused the war  
 And Menelaus who started it?  
 (Sophocles, *Electra* 529-42)

Electra's responses to her mother's arguments are not based on rhetoric, but rather on emotional outburst that revolve around the claims that it was godly will that determined Iphigenia's death. Clytemnestra tries to reason with Electra. She asks her daughter for empathy and tries to demonstrate how she acted as a wounded mother. Clytemnestra is unwilling to stand back and be a passive agent to patriarchal violence. Although Electra refuses to believe in her mother's claims, she highlights another aspect of their mother/daughter conflict by accusing her mother of abandoning her children in favor of a traitorous lover. I interpret Electra's anger at her mother as an example of separation anxiety, denouncing Clytemnestra's preference over the heteronormative romance over sorority. Clytemnestra's choice to keep Aegisthus as a lover is corroborative to the heteronormative love plot. However, I view her actions of saving her daughter from death, and her attempts at mending their relationship, as examples of sororal partisanship.

In Euripides's play, Clytemnestra is present in only one scene. She comes down to the castle to visit Electra and her fictional grandchild. In the beginning of the play, Electra is married off to a poor farmer to ensure she bears no royal children. It is later revealed that Clytemnestra is responsible for this situation. She chooses to act in this way to spare her daughter from being murdered by Aegisthus. I see the decision to protect her daughter, sparing her from Aegisthus's plans to destroy her, as a positive act of motherhood. Although



she knows that Electra is shamed and destitute, Clytemnestra intercedes to spare Electra, preferring to subject her to poverty rather than death.

Furthermore, Clytemnestra also engages in sororal partisanship when she decides to visit her grandchild. Electra's invented child is a lure to bring her mother out of the castle. Clytemnestra, through her motherly bond, chooses to come to Electra to bless her grandchild and perform spiritual rites of protection.

As they meet, they once again discuss Agamenon's demise. Euripides's Clytemnestra tries to argue in favor of her point of view. She claims that her father gave her to Agamenon to protect her and the children they had, not to slay them. In Euripides's version, Clytemnestra states that she understands Electra's wrath, and that she suffers for the murder she committed and for the situation her children are in. She even attempts to reconcile Electra to Aegisthus, trying to mend her tempestuous relationship with her daughter. The Euripidean Clytemnestra possesses the skill of rhetoric, and, when she associates the power of persuasive speech with maternity, Clytemnestra engages in positive sororal acts. She is willing to forgive Electra and to accept her bond as a mother and a grandmother to her daughter's child, "But I will go to make the tenth-day sacrifice to the gods for the child" (Euripides, *Electra* 1133).

I argue that, when Clytemnestra is represented as an articulated and vengeful mother, she is a threat to patriarchal establishment, and that her positioning an eloquent, forgiving and protective mother, she subverts the traditional renditions of the angered, uncontrolled phallic mother. I also claim that Clytemnestra challenges the view of the mother as a dark embodiment of negative, instinctive feelings. She is a mother, a maternal body who bore children, and yet, she can speak her own mind using cohesive language and expresses her maternal emotions through speech. I also argue that that Clytemnestra's murder, performed under the guise of the request for her grandmother's blessing, is a denouncement of the horror and injustice of matricide.

Another of my aims is to demonstrate that Clytemnestra uses her mother's body as tool of resistance. Maggie S. Hoyt, in *Giving Birth to Empowerment: Motherhood and Autonomy in Greek Tragedy*, analyzes the symbolisms of nursing and childbirth. Hoyt calls attention to Clytemnestra's lines, pronounced as her children are about to murder her, "Stop, my son, and have respect, my child, for this breast, at which you many times drowsed while sucking the nourishing milk with your gums!" (*Choephoroe* II. 896-8). Hoyt also points out the significance of Clytemnestra bearing her breast right before Orestes strikes her. The author states that Clytemnestra "appeals to the effort of nourishment" (22). I view Clytemnestra's actions as an act of resistance, a denouncement of matricide through her body. She uses her body as a text, to counter external cultural writings. By flaunting her breast, Clytemnestra is recurring to a visual representation of her ties to motherhood in relation to Electra and Orestes, performing maternal embodiment as an act of resistance.

Electra is also engaged in rebellious gender performances. Nickerson points out how the Sophoclean Electra subversively performs mourning. She uses her body as an instrument to radicalize her sorrow, by inflicting bodily harm on herself (29-31). I interpret this act as a subversive performance of abjection, in which Electra uses the only text she has access to, her body. Electra uses self-immolation to refuse external cultural inscriptions. Through this violent, abject action, Electra literally writes her own story on her body. Electra's self-mutilation and Clytemnestra's performance of motherhood through bodily acts are subversive tools of resistance. The subjective embodiment of their feelings of pain, loss and alterity can be viewed as a model and metaphor to study the performance of the sisters' bodies.

Furthermore, Electra uses the opportunity of mourning to speak publicly, one of the few moments women can manifest themselves outside the private life to express their political position (Nickerson 30-1). Therefore, Electra also makes intelligent use of language, refusing to be silenced. Electra's hubris, desire for empowerment and her resentment are

desires that counter the views of women as passive subjects. The poor farmer she was forced to marry has no control whatsoever over her, Electra is a free and fierce wife, contesting the traditional role of a submissive, married and passive woman (Nickerson 35-7). Electra's speech disrupts those who try to dominate her. In this sense, Electra and Clytemnestra empower themselves through language for they challenge patriarchal impositions over women, and express their own identities and subjectivities by refusing to be silenced.

Clytemnestra and Electra are both empowered by refusing patriarchal dominance and subverting the act of language to further their own goals and desires. The Euripidean Clytemnestra creates a possibility for a mother who suffers patriarchal violence to explain her acts and try to reach out to her daughter and bridge their differences. I argue that Clytemnestra's and Electra's gender performances subvert normative roles for women characters. In this chapter, I draw attention to how these characters use their bodies as texts for their performances of subjectivity and as tools of resistance and apply the concepts of the body as a locus of rewriting and empowerment for the analysis of the sister pairs.

### III. Motherhood and Resistance

My twin, my sister, my lost love,  
I carry you in me like an embryo  
as once you carried me.  
"My mother's body," Marge Piercy

I begin this second section by employing Kristeva's theories on bodily abjection, but follow Butler's suggestion of rethinking the maternal body in a non-binary way. I also use Bordo and Jaggar's concepts of non-docile bodies, which act as tools of resistance. I believe

all the theoretical stances above corroborate Irigaray's instigations of reimagining women's narratives and bodies to carve out a space for women's subjectivity. Furthermore, I employ these feminist theories to go beyond the maternal body, showing that women's bodies' subjectivities include, but also go beyond, motherhood. The exploration of new possibilities of embodied subjectivity also includes the alternative motherhoods discussed in the first chapter, in which the sisters act as mothers to one another as positive, special doubles.

In *The Other Boleyn Girl*, Mary Boleyn, the girl who was given to a king and used by her family as a political tool, recovers her sense of identity and agency through her pregnant body. As Mary's body changes, she is set aside by the king and exchanged for her sister. However, Mary refuses to accept the negativity directed towards her pregnant body and reclaims her own agency through it. The resignification of pregnant embodiment acts in concert with the Irigarayan encouragement to interpret women's body under a positive portrayal. When Mary redefines the birth of her first child as a positive act, she develops her sense of selfhood and individuation through motherhood. Mary chooses to love her daughter, and her other children who come later. Engaging in this positive act of motherhood, she breaks the pattern of destruction her phallic mother exerts. Mary chooses to be a force of love, care and protection.

Mary's character development and agency are empowered through her positive views on maternity. Her positive experiences of pregnant embodiment reconfigure the theories on matricide and contest the violence perpetrated against the maternal body. When Mary has her first child, a girl, the Boleyn family is severely disappointed and makes no qualms to express their displeasure. Nonetheless, despite her family's disapproval, Mary develops feelings of love, affection and joy towards her daughter. This passage shows her positive feelings towards maternity and her defiance of the heteronormative gender anxiety of producing a male heir: "She was a girl. Despite all those months of hoping and whispered prayers and

even special Masses said in Hever and Rochford church, she was a girl. But she was *my* little girl” (122).

Besides being rejected by her family, Mary also suffers from the King’s displeasure. King Henry states that he would like to have a “boy off” her (123), openly stating that Mary is a simple tool for his desires. However, these criticisms no longer have a negative effect focused on Mary. She is emboldened by her maternity, as shown in this passage: “[her] mind was on the baby in her cradle, and the other half on the ache in [her] milk-heavy breasts” (123). Mary’s embodied experience as a mother changes her, propelling new feelings that are connected to her subjectivity. She chooses to focus on her daughter and, for the first time, mentally isolates herself from her family’s pressure and the King’s impositions. She develops a sense of satisfaction and empowerment through motherhood. Her growth as a character through motherhood is exemplified in this next passage: “There was a sense of this place being a refuge for us, a secret room where men and their plans and their treacheries would not come” (123). Through her embodied experience of pregnancy and motherhood, Mary counters negative influences of matricide and violence against women.

Even after Mary mothers a second child, a son, for the delight of the king and her family, Mary, she still suffers harsh criticism about her maternity and maternal body. Her mother comes to berate her, asking “What in God’s name is wrong with you? It has been three months since the birth, and you are as white as if you were sickening from the plague. Are you ill?” Mary replies that she “cannot stop bleeding” and that she is afraid that she “will bleed to death”. She “look[s] to her [mother’s] face for some sympathy. She was blank and impatient.” Her mother criticizes her by calling her “fat and dull” (156), and the family force Mary to go back into court under duress, bleeding and hurting as if her “belly was filled with poison” (160). Mary endures the pain and humiliation by affirming herself through her motherhood, demanding to see her children in exchange of fulfilling the Boleyn’s wishes,

taking her own agency into her hands, as she claims in this passage “But they could not play me” (156).

Mary is also able to foster her sororal partisanship through her subjective development as a mother. She tells Anne that she wants her daughter to be happy. She also expresses that, differently from their phallic mother, she wishes to be close to her daughter, and that she wants to be tender to her, “I didn’t know I’d feel this way over her. But I do, Anne. She’s the most precious thing in the world. I can’t think about anything but caring for her and seeing that she is well and happy. When she cries it is like a knife in my heart, I can’t bear the thought of her crying at all. And I want to see her grow. I won’t be parted from her” (128). I view her actions as oppositional to their phallic mother.

Shortly after Mary becomes a mother a second time, she verbally spars with her mother about her ideals on maternity. Her mother cannot understand Mary’s love and affection for her children. She tries to relate positive experiences of maternity to her mother, much like Clytemnestra does with Electra. Mary explains how maternity has changed her, how much she cares for her children, reporting a constructive account on the subjectivity of motherhood. She confronts her mother about her feeling of abandonment and asks: “Did you not miss me? Or if not me, then Anne? Did you not miss us then? Did you never think that you would have liked to see your children?” (157). This moment of interaction with her mother is a crucial moment of character development for Mary. Through her empowerment as a mother, she analyzes her phallic mother and her limitations, questions her destructive actions and reflects on her own positive choices in relation to her children. The indifference with which her mother treats her is transformed by Mary into a strength to act out her own positive motherhood.

When Mary has her third daughter, Anne, Mary has now full control over her relationship with her child. She rejoices when she can “put the baby to her breast and feel the

familiar, wonderful sensation of a beloved child feeding” (416). She can “order her to be brought to [her] at any time of day or night”. For the first time, Mary is mother to a “child in a way that the other two had never been” (421), exerting her motherhood in an independent and assertive manner.

Mary’s experiences as a mother and her character development branch out as sororal support for Anne. Mary chooses to stand behind Anne and the birth of her sister’s daughter, Elizabeth, as an act of support. When Anne suffers sequential miscarriages, Mary acts as a mother-figure to her sister in opposition to the phallic mother who abandons and shuns her daughters. The strengthened sisterly bond, in return, emboldens Mary’s choices.

Contrary to their initial positioning as negative double and rivals, motherhood generates a space where the sisters can interact positively, identify and construe new configurations of identity. The resignification of their sisterly bond is constructive for both characters, especially Mary, who is no longer conformed to being a passive, docile subject. The act of motherhood is transformative for Mary. She becomes a fully formed subject, whose choices counteract the oppressive control exerted over her body and identity.

Anne is a character who, like Clytemnestra and Electra, empowers herself through language. She has the wits traditionally associated to men and refuses to be silent and play the role of the obedient, passive daughter and wife. Mary states that Anne’s intelligence is held in high regard at the court, that she has “the sharpest mind in the kingdom, and if [she] were a man [the king] would have [her] for cardinal” (226). Like Clytemnestra and Electra, Anne’s intelligence and sharp use of language is an example of a gender fluid performance. She is a woman, and possesses a maternal body, but she is also an eloquent, well-versed, and outspoken individual. Her empowerment through language is subversive in her refusal to remain silent, in her denial of accepting the limitations of her gendered status. Her brilliance in words is one of the main reasons she attracts the King’s attention, who is both fascinated

and frightened by it. Although her rise to power is connected to her gendered body and her child-bearing capabilities, it is directly associated to her rhetoric and powerful use of language.

The subsequent persecution she receives for being an intelligent, outspoken woman is a consequence of patriarchal forms of subjugation and control. Her family and the King demand her silence, unquestioning obedience and compliance. However, Anne struggles against the attempts to silence her, fighting back with her intelligence and eloquence. Her resistance is shown in the following passage: “If everything that is me—my wit and my temper—has to be denied, then I have set my own self aside. If I cannot be me, then I might as well not be here at all” (486). Anne’s authenticity and her strength in the understanding of her own sense of self, guarantee her development as a fully formed subject. She challenges gender stereotypes and defies the passivity of conformed silence. She is a female subject whose body and language serve as tools of resistance, confrontation and subversion. Anne’s perseverance bolsters Mary’s character development. When Anne is sentenced to execution, Mary reflects on her sister’s trajectory. She understands Anne and identifies with her choices, as show below:

There were long years of rivalry and then a forced unity and always and ever, underpinning our love for each other, our sense that the other must always be bested. How could I send her one word which would acknowledge all of that, and yet tell her that I loved her still, that I was glad I had been her sister, even though I knew she had brought herself to this point [but that] I totally and wholly understood? (525)

Through her empowerment as a mother, Mary experiences character development, acquires a better sense of understanding of her own subjectivity, is emboldened by the ability



to make her own choices and extends sororal partisanship to Anne. Anne's refusal to conform to gender stereotypes and her assertive behavior that keeps her own sense of identity inspire Mary, aiding her sister in her struggles. The freedom of thought, speech, positive maternity and a reconceptualization of themselves as active and performing subjects empowers the sisters to fight back patriarchal dominance.

#### IV. Bodies that Resist, Bodies that Write

I write for the women who cannot speak, for those who do not have a voice because they/we were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We've been taught that silence would save us, but it won't.

*Conversations with Audre Lorde*, Audre Lord (90)

The sister pair in *The Blind Assassin* undergo a specific experience of specularization. Losing their mother at an early age, they are exposed to a series of violences from patriarchal figures. Iris compares her lack of agency to a feeling of being a "tabula rasa, not waiting to write, but to be written on" (49). The sisters are subjected to men's domination since early childhood and suffer different experiences of abuse at the hands of their father, their tutor Mr. Erskine and Iris's husband Richard Griffen. The sisters react to the attempted acts of control and violence that attempt to erase their subjectivities and defy patriarchal dominance. I claim that their sororal partisanship counters the negative influences they experience.

The sisters are viewed as objects to be exchanged by men in return of favors and money. Their father determines Iris's marriage to Richard, stating that it is the only way they can save the family business and escape poverty. Once Iris marries Richard, she realizes that he is extremely abusive, aggressive and imposing. Soon after the marriage, Richard cons Norval Chase, dismantling the Chase button factory. Norval reacts badly to his bankruptcy, drinking himself to death. Iris and Laura are left with no inheritance and become completely dependent on Richard.

When the sisters realize that they have been robbed of all agency, and that Richard constantly tries to annul their choices and subjectivities in a cruel and violent way, they begin to resist. Their initial reaction occurs through their embodied subjectivities. Laura and Isis both begin to suffer from anorexia. The sisters' anorexia can be interpreted as a form to rebellion, as a means to fight back, a transgressive act against the impositions they suffer. Anorexia, according to Kristeva, does exemplify a form of abject bodily resistance. However, the sisters develop their experiences of abject defiance in different ways.

Chung-hao Ku, in his article "Eating, Cleaning and Writing: Female Abjection and Subjectivity in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*" (2004), elicits the difference between both sisters' bodily abjection. Laura persists on rejecting food, while Iris replaces her obsession with anorexia for one with cleanliness and purity. Ku affirms that Iris's anorexia is an attempt to reestablish her bodily frontiers in counterpoint to her aggressive husband's "sexual invasions" (96), and that, when Iris discovers cleanliness through constants baths as another source of bodily abjection, she recovers her subjectivity in a more moderate manner than Laura, who continues to starve herself (97). Laura does not encounter another form to act on her bodily resistance, while Iris develops another tool to express her subjectivity through cleanliness.

Another embodied subjectivity that differentiates the two sisters is their connection to their sexuality. Repeatedly abused by Richard, Iris decides to take control over her body's sexuality and her feelings to begin an extra-marital affair with Alex Thomas. Iris actively chooses to explore her body with Alex and discovers sexual pleasure through her encounters with him. Additionally, Iris begins to craft, along with Alex, a parallel story in which she actively takes part as both an author and a metaphorical character. As Iris begins to resist the normatization of her body and employs it as a tool of resistance, first by anorexia, then by embracing her sexuality, she goes from being written upon to being an active participant in her own story. Her character development continues, even as Richard continues to abuse her. The narrator describes the violence that Iris suffers as being "written on" (383) repeatedly. Richard robs her of her agency by writing his story of patriarchal violence on her body. Her sense of oppression and subjugation is demonstrated below, which translates into an embodiment of the negative forces she is subjected to:

Sometimes—increasingly, as time went by—there were bruises, purple, then blue, then yellow. It was remarkable how easily I bruised, said Richard, smiling. I sometimes felt these marks on my body were a kind of code, which blossomed, then faded, like invisible ink held to a candle. But if they were a code, who held the key to it? I was sand, I was snow—written on, rewritten on, smoothed over. (383)

When Iris takes back control over her own body, she understands that she holds the key to her own embodied subjectivity. Iris rewrites these cultural inscriptions by reclaiming agency over her body, sexuality and subjectivity. Her initial step is to recover bodily control through her sexuality.

Laura is also subjected to psychological and physical violence. She accepts Richard's blackmail and abuse to spare Alex. The discovery that Alex had already been dead for some time, along with his involvement with Iris, are other types violence she endures. She is also robbed of her agency when her sexual abuse results in a pregnancy and is forced by Richard to perform an abortion. However, I claim that Laura struggles and resists the role of the victim. The verbal and written clues she leaves to her sister are proof of her refusal to be "written" upon. By leaving her trail of signals to Iris, she ensures that her story will be passed on and will not be forgotten, contributing to its writing as well.

Hence, the development of the sisters' actions does not revolve around men, but rather between themselves, defying the erasure of women's agency through the performance of the heteronormative love plot. Laura acts to safeguard Iris, and Iris in turn denounces the abuse her sister suffered and is empowered enough to protect her daughter Aimee from Richard's clutches. The sisters reclaim their subjectivities by aiding one another, counteracting the negative patriarchal forces that surround them.

The act of refusing to be written upon and taking agency of writing their own stories is an important development for the sisters. As Iris writes and publishes Laura's life and losses, she empowers herself through their sisterly bond of identification and sorority. Iris begins to pen her own story, no longer dependent on Alex. Discovering her sexuality and taking control of her own body is Iris's choice, and she is empowered by it. In her relationship with Alex, Iris acts as a co-author to his stories, but she learns that she needs to have a voice of her own, to write with her own hand. After all, the name "Alex" means to aid. The metaphor of the silent virgins and their mutilated tongues is confronted and rejected by Iris. She claims her own independence by becoming an author. When Iris acquires the skill to tell her own story, she can also write her sister's experiences. Tara Hemborough states that Iris's role as a narrator allows intergenerational liaisons between women and that her texts

enables a positive outcome for female successors (“From an Obscured Gaze to a Seeing Eye? Iris as Victim, Villain and Avenger in the Role of Writer-as-Assassin in Margate Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*”).

Laura’s sacrifice propels Iris into action. Her first act is to free herself from Richard’s bodily, psychological and physical abuse and to protect her daughter. She moves out to live on her own. The second liberating act of empowerment translates into her writing. Iris claims that the story she writes about Laura ascertains that Laura’s experiences are still memorable, “It’s only the book that makes her memorable now” (49).

By empowering herself through the act of writing, Iris constructs multiple narratives: she writes about Laura, she registers her feelings to better comprehend them, she writes to reflect about her life and old age and she records her memories as a legacy to the granddaughter she never meets. She informs in the writings she has left her granddaughter, Sabrina, that she is not blood kin to Richard. Sabrina is, in fact, Alex’s granddaughter. By revealing this alternate history, Iris is offering Sabrina redemption from her history of patriarchal violence, and giving her the freedom to write her own story free of constraints and guilt:

Since Laura is no longer who you thought she was, you’re no longer who you think you are, either. There’s not a speck of Griffen in you at all: your hands are clean on that score. Your real grandfather was Alex Thomas, and as to who his own father was, well, the sky’s the limit. Rich man, poor man, beggarman, saint, a score of countries of origin, a dozen cancelled maps, a hundred levelled villages—take your pick. Your legacy from him is the realm of infinite speculation. You’re free to reinvent yourself at will. (530)

Through her acts of bodily freedom and writing, Iris recovers her agency and subjectivity. She transgresses the violence she endures by translating them into texts. Her writings redefine sororal partisanship and female empowerment into transformative and transgressive acts, acts that she shares with her readers. Her identity is developed at the transient borderlines of her embodied subjectivity and her experiences with her sister and with her writings, story-telling, her textual bodies and her written legacy. She offers her subjectivity as an interpretative act of resistance that empowers others, ending the novel with her textual body in evidence: “But I leave myself in your hands. What choice do I have? By the time you read this last page, that—if anywhere—is the only place I will be” (538)

## V. The Cyborg Body

I thought, we are the new children of the earth, of the earth’s revenge. Once we stepped out of mud, now we step out of moist earth, out of DNA new and old, an imprint of what has gone before, but also a variation. By our difference we mark how ancient the alphabet of our bodies. By our strangeness we write our bodies into the future.

*Salt Fish Girl*, Larissa Lai (259)

Contemporary studies have started to pay attention to a new type of body, the cyborg body. This new conception of body abounds in science fiction and speculative works, offering the possibility of innovative interpretations within the fields of body politics. A cyborg body is a body that is genderless, that transgresses boundaries, that is volatile and

migrant. Donna Haraway describes cyborg bodies as a locus which offers “potent fusions” and “dangerous possibilities” (13). The author does not see gender as a global identity, but rather as a theoretical shackle to oppress and control subjectivity. The cyborg is a political strategy to rethink and overcome gender binarism.

The cyborg bodies present in *Dust* illustrate Haraway’s point. In the novel, oppression does not occur because of gender, but in relation to social status. The world is divided into two groups: the humans and the Exalted. The latter are genetically modified humans whose bodies are prepared to receive a colony of nanotechnological organisms, consequently turning these humans into cyborgs. The cyborgs are half human and half machine, with uncanny abilities to control their blood pressure, bodily temperature and oxygen levels. They are also able to shift their appearance, adopting outlandish skin colors (such as blue or purple), skin texture (creating scales or metallic skin) and appendages such as angel-like wings. Gender is also mutable. An individual can maintain the gender binary by opting to be either male or female, or challenge the gender binary by adopting a genderless form or assuming a hermaphrodite identity that enmeshes both genders. In this context, all characteristics, gender included, are just minor constituents of identity. The cyborg bodies question the notions of a binary gender, allowing for the rejection of the constrictive gendered body.

Characters that do not possess a cyborg body are merely human, “Means” who are relegated to the servant caste. One must be chosen to become a cyborg. Thus, the cyborg bodies overshadow gender conflict, imploding gender barriers. This special body allows for power, not of the physical kind, but of choice. The power to decide upon one’s own life, appearance and trajectory, regardless of gender, is a transgressive ideal that opens a new path into the rewriting of female genealogy. Rien, half-sister to Perceval, symbolically becomes a cyborg through her sister’s kiss. Rien is awarded a newfound body, freedom and choices. Her

cyborg body empowers her, transforming her into subject who can now resist, fight and make her own choices.

Rien's novel cyborg body presents a new challenge: the conflict of possibility. The cyborg body makes it possible to transgress the boundaries between organism and machine, configuring a "border war" (Haraway 18). The shifting cyborg body allows for a rupture with the feminized body, breaking free of gendered subjectivation. It refuses a female body that is vulnerable and victimized, a body that is disassembled, reassembled and exploited (26). Hence, Rien is no longer a feminized body, but a body with power, the power of choice and mutability. She is at the crux of the war between soldiers and scientists, in the border between physical and mental prowess. Rien represents the struggle of the two ideals, matter over mind. Her cyborg body, along with her sister's, presents a new alternative to the conflict. Their conjoined forces, empowered through their free and mutable bodies, create a springboard for the sisters to become empowered agents. Rien is no longer a Mean, inscribed upon culturally, she is rewriting her story. Perceval discovers a friend, companion and ally in Rien, and is enabled through her sister's strength to become an independent subject.

Perceval, the crippled angel sister, is challenged throughout the novel to reconfigure her own boundaries. Her wings are cut off in the beginning of the novel, and Jacob Dust, an AI character, animates a set of chains that adhere to Perceval's back and replace her wings. The metallic wings allow Perceval the ability to fly once again. They also act as a shield and grant her a useful weapon. However, the wings do not act only in accordance to Perceval's will, they are also controlled by Jacob. When their decision clash, Jacob forces the wings, named "Pinion" by Rien, to obey his commands. He directly thwarts Perceval's choices and robs her of agency, through invasive bodily control. Jacob interferes with Perceval's cyborg body and subverts it into a mechanism of domination. A foreign entity, a male character who follows a traditional patriarchal viewpoint, ironically corrupts the transgressive power of the



cyborg body and shackles it, symbolically, through wings which should provide liberty. Nevertheless, Perceval does not accept this invasive control as a docile, passive body. She resists and struggles, as shown below,

“Get off me”, she said. She grabbed at the wings and hauled on them, but here, on the ground, they were not constrained to an aerodynamic shape. Pinion melted away under her fingers, slipping like water through the gaps, and she was left back-arched, scrabbling after smoke. “Who are you, damn you?”

(154)

The power to change one's identity through cyborg body politics offers the sisters more than freedom and agency. A strange phenomenon occurs when a subject possesses a cyborg body. He or she has the power to consume another cyborg's memories and personality when they kill them. The act is referred to in the novel as “eating” or “consuming” another Exalted. Their memories are added to the surviving Exalted's psyche. The metaphor to the child devouring Chronos or to Zeus swallowing Metis is undeniable, but the Exalts in *Dust* do not annul their devoured subjects like their counterparts in Greek mythology. The cyborgs have direct access to the memories and psyches of those they consume, intermingling their subjectivities with them. The blurring of boundaries connects the subjectivity of identity beyond corporeal change. The sisters in *Dust* develop a split subjectivity in a different manner than the one I have proposed through motherhood. They do not carry children in their wombs; nonetheless, they become two, or three, or multiple personalities, blending their original personas to the others they consume. The conservative notion of identity is directly challenged, for the borders of personal feelings and memory are torn apart by the cyborg body. When a cyborg consumes the other, he or she experiences the feelings of love, pain, hate, frustration and suffering that accompany the foreign memories. The ability to fracture

and reconstitute their identities is key to the plot development, because it is through consumed memories that the sisters are enabled to save their planet and their communities.

Susan Stanford Friedman states, in her influential text *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Mapping of Encounter* (1994), that identity is unthinkable without borders. Then what to make of a body with no borders, either physical or mental ones? The answer lies in the grey zone offered by the cyborg body. When appearance and gender can be shifted at will and the boundaries of one's own memories do not exist, then these cyborg individuals must thrive on the border war within themselves. Their bodies are abject, split within a myriad of subjectivities, and effective tools of resistance which challenge gender sanctions and rewrite female genealogy. Cyborg bodies' possibility of change challenges the status quo of individuality, gender issues, and even political or ethical beliefs. A sentient cyborg can experience another's memories and feelings firsthand. These individuals ignore traditional boundaries to create their new concepts, establishing an innovative form of identity, an identity which can rewrite other bodies' contributions to its own subjectivity.

The subversive and productive acts of the cyborg body are illustrated by Perceval's interactions with Jacob. He convinces Perceval to consume him as he claims it would lend her the necessary knowledge to save the planet-ship. However, Jacob takes advantage of the situation to try to merge his psyche with Perceval's, using the cyborg's migrant borders to take over her mind. It is Rien's interference and sororal partisanship that saves Perceval. She sacrifices herself by allowing Rien to consume her and all the memories contained within her, as an act of love, not as form of control. She refuses to allow Perceval to be culturally inscribed upon by Jacob, and joins her fight against him through sacrifice. The sister's death, in this novel, is a transformative, transgressive and empowering act that springboards constructive possibilities for female genealogy. When Rien surrenders her cyborg boundaries, she "gives" her memories to Perceval and her act of love transforms Jacob as well:

She felt the unpicking, as they tangled inside her, as they unwound Pinion from her soul and stripped it away. She felt them strike against Dust, strike against places where she and her were integrated, and expected to break his claim against her like water splashed aside by a hand. But they were all there, And they pushed through her, ran like a river, shoved barriers aside, flooded her with their conjoined strength and scoured clean channels on her mind. (334)

All boundaries cease to exist when different personalities, excluding Perceval's, intertwine to become a single entity known as Angel. The proposal of an alternate motherhood is adaptable to Angel: Rien and Perceval, through an act of love, give birth to a new creation. Angel is a new cyborg body, and it is aware that it is composed by many different selves (341), but acts as a single being to save the planet-ship. Angel is a part of Perceval, but has not integrated her into its miscellaneous merging of personalities. Her own identity borders are preserved and allow her sentience of the others within her. She feels both pain at Rien's loss and at the same time she senses Rien's "quick wits-so smart, so full of thinking—and all her hurts and braveries. And her love, her longing, her stubborn determination: they made Perceval's breath hurt, her eyes sting" (334).

Perceval is now a different kind of cyborg body. She resents Angel for consuming Rien, but at the same time is grateful for the freedom she was given. Perceval loses her sister. But this loss is attenuated through the sisters' sororal creation of Angel. Perceval's symbiotic existence with Angel illustrates the multiplicity of the cyborg identity, how it is fractured, varied, shifting. The cyborg border also allows for a constructivist and positive view of one of the sister pair's death. It is an empowering act of loving sacrifice, an active choice of sororal support and empowerment. The feminist cyborg's mutable existence allows readers

and critics to review their thoughts on identity, offering a new panorama of interpretative possibilities. Binarist and gendered ways of thinking are challenged, and cyborg bodies serve as a basis for a body politics which surpasses barriers and limits. The sisters in *Dust* offer a creative approach to body and identity issues which allow critical theory to go much beyond gender, binarist stigmas and prejudice. Rien and Perceval are empowered to write their own stories and transform an act of sacrifice into an act of sororal partisanship and love. Differently from Athena's birth, Angel is an entity that belongs to and is part of both its mothers, recognizing their love and sorority.

I view the cyborg body as a merging of subjective contributions, performed by the conjunction of different subjects' bodies and minds. Taking the composite subjectivity of the cyborg body as a basis, the mother's contribution to subjectivity can be recast under a positive light. The concept of the multiplicity of subjectivities enables the validation of the mother's identity and body. The cyborg's contribution to maternity enables the concept of the maternal body to shift from being a negative, strange and wild entity to a productive, positive influence. The concept of an alternate cyborg motherhood offers the possibility of tracing a different narrative for the formation of the subject, one that effectively combats matricide and presents a positive portrayal of alternate motherhood that recognizes the importance of the mother's subjectivity in all its forms.

## VI. A Body of Writing

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.

*The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène Cixous (875)

To recast women's body as a means of resistance, as a tool to subvert victimization and a form to combat patriarchal violence is an effective method that empowers the discussion against binarism and essentialism. The refusal to allow women's body to be written upon is a starting point for the recovery of women's agency and subjectivity. Reclaiming women's bodies legitimizes the freedom to construct independent narratives, unsilences oppressed voices and validates the subjectivity of alternate experiences. As Almeida states, it is necessary to reinterpret women's body under a transformative and empowering agency, denying empty ideologies which mine actions and bury the subject under paralyzing manners of victimization (106).

The sisters analyzed in this study retake their bodies as their own. Mary acquires her own sense of identity through her maternity. Iris fights against the violence committed against her and her sister, through the reclaiming of her own body, agency and desires. Rien and Perceval's feminist cyborg body unites them in a strong bond of love and sacrifice, and transgresses the boundaries traditionally imposed on gendered subjects. Their alternate cyborg maternity creates a new entity that merges different subjectivities with their own. The sister characters discussed in this dissertation are empowered, strengthened and changed by their positive bodily experiences. Different interpretations of women's bodies contribute to contemporary studies by offering the possibility of rethink the gendered body in innovative and transformative ways.

FINAL REMARKS:

Thoughts on Sorority, Empowerment and Critical Thinking

The connections between and among women are the most feared, the most

problematic, and the most transforming force on the planet

*On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, Adrienne Rich (274)

An interest on the lack of sorority between sister characters gave birth to this dissertation. The absence of support, the schism of affective links and the blatant rivalry which often permeate the relationships between female characters provide the basis for this work. It is especially troublesome that this negativity surrounding sister's bonds is a recurrent literary theme. The main objective of this dissertation is to discuss in the novels *The Other Boleyn Girl*, *The Blind Assassin* and *Dust* and how the rivalry between sisters is a culturally manipulated construction, and that the act of sororal partisanship that enables the sisters to develop their independence and agency as fully formed, free thinking female subjects.

Through the examination of the sisters' relationships, actions, and identity formation, I discuss issues related to matricide, motherhood, sororicide, sorority, feminine bodies and identities which counter binarism, gender oppression and essentialism. By analyzing these themes in relation to the novels studies I address alternative views of gender fluidity, subjectivity, maternal embodiment and alterity.

This study is an effort to contribute to the positive reinterpretation of feminine characters' subjectivities in the novels discussed here. The sisters' trajectories and their development as independent subjects empower their resistance against sexist control. My discussion focuses on the issues of motherhood and maternity, body issues (pregnancies, eating disorders, sexuality, gender), sorority, sororicide, maternity, matricide, rivalry and bonds of affection that relate to the sister pairs in the novels: Mary and Anne, Iris and Laura, Rien and Perceval. I emphasize the empowerment that derives from the development and refinement of the sisters' perceptions of themselves and the world around them. The process of recognition of their own flaws and the negativity they project on female figures is the beginning of a healing process that mends their connections to other women. By reflecting on

their own personal choices, and struggling against heteronormative patriarchal impositions, the sisters move on from docile subjects to women who actively struggle to be free of social impositions and acquire their own subjectivity. The empowerment of the sister characters effectively occurs when they begin to reach out for support from other women, and concomitantly also become active participants in sororal partisanship.

The following quote from *The Blind Assassin* exemplifies the process of character growth the sisters undergo through the discovery that mothers are not stereotypes that mirror unattainable ideals or patriarchal role models: “What fabrications they are, mothers. Scarecrows, wax dolls for us to stick pins into, crude diagrams. We deny them an existence of their own, we make them up to suit ourselves-our own hungers, our own wishes, our own deficiencies. Now that I’ve been one myself, I know” (116). The moment Iris recognizes the artificiality imposed on mother figures is the instance in which she gains freedom to exist on her own, with her flaws and deficiencies. She is an imperfect mother who tries to comprehend and make sense of her space in the world. She is enabled to question artificial feminine roles and to decide what they mean to her.

Laura’s refusal to adopt stereotyped gender roles show her awareness of her own subjectivities, and eventually serve as examples for Iris. Laura reaches out to her sister continuously throughout the narrative, repeatedly offering sororal support. When Iris claims that the two sisters wrote the novel together, she is recognizing Laura’s support and empowering their narratives as declarations of sorority and resistance.

In *The Other Boleyn Girl*, Mary Boleyn reclaims her subjectivity through maternity. The act of being a loving mother frees her from her patriarchal family’s expectations and mandates. Mary is empowered and traces a path of her own, takes her decisions into her hands and determines her own outcome. Ties of affection and love enhance her sororal partisanship towards Anne, partially healing their lifelong rivalry and opposition. Mary stands

in the stead of the mother figure the sisters never had, offering support and strength she can. She is drawn to protect and support Anne, especially during Anne's pregnancies and miscarriages. The following scene depicts Mary's sorority and her refusal to embrace patriarchal dictates: "My mother nodded and went from the room without touching her daughter, without another word to either of us. Anne's empty gaze came back to me...I kneeled at the head of the bed and held out my arms. Her expression never altered but she leaned slowly towards me and rested her heavy head on my shoulder" (402). While their phallic mother rejects Anne, Mary steps in as the surrogate mother-figure and offers succor, protection and support to her sister. She identifies and empathizes with Anne through motherhood, recognizing her pain and loss. Anne accepts her support, establishing their sisterly bond and enabling the construction of a positive links.

When the Boleyn sisters' mother rejects her daughters, she perpetuates the theories on matricide. Mary refuses to follow her phallic mother's example and defies the family and their control over her life by empowering sororal relations. Mary's defiant stance and her maternal actions contribute to a reinterpretation of feminine bonds of love and affection, turning the outcast daughters and sisters into positive representatives of constructive maternity and female genealogy.

In *Dust*, Perceval and her entire world survive through Rien's sacrifice of love. When Perceval withstands her greatest challenge, she holds on to Rien's memory as a shield and a tool of resistance. Rien is the only character that Perceval has identified with, and who she actively chooses to cherish and love: "Rien, whom she had decided to love, of her own free will. Rien, who she loved for a thousand reasons, all of them good. Rien, whom she chose" (297). The fact that Perceval exerted her agency in choosing to love Rien counter the patriarchal chains that Jacob places on her. She is freed from the external manipulating forces through her integration with Rien, constructing a new being that contains parts of Rien and is



symbolically enmeshed with her own persona. Their sorority is manifested through support, love and protection, resulting in the creation of a new relationship that joins the sisters forever.

In consonance with Perceval's sororal actions, Rien is an independent agent. She chooses to support and care for her sister. She also chooses to sacrifice herself to protect Rien and save their community. The freedom to act out her own decisions and to foster sororal partisanship is a clear declaration of empowerment for sororal partisanship which stands as resistance against heteronormative patriarchal views.

Rewriting, reimagining, and reinterpreting sister characters, narratives and voices is an effective manner to counter the discriminating forces that permeate our culture and to validate the construction of positive bonds between women, as shown in the analysis of the novels that form the corpus of this work. This scholarly research tackles the problematics of sisterly bonds in all their complex structures, engaging in a discussion that focuses on the trope of sister characters and their relationships through cultural, feminist, gender and psychoanalytical theories.

I affirm that the sisters' development rises as a defiant act of reimagination which is loaded with potential. My reading of *Psyche's* sisters demonstrates their sororal support in the warnings they give *Psyche*, encouraging her to perform a rebellious interpretation of herself. *Ismene* and *Laura* attempt the same with their sisters, inciting them to open their eyes, to reclaim their own subjectivities. *Mary's* act of love for her children and her sister is another example of rebellious sorority. I point out how empowered sororal agency appears as hidden tales, such as *Metis's* erased story, which mirrors so many other suppressed narratives that involve mothers, sisters and daughters. Sometimes a silenced character needs another to give her voice, like *Iris* who wrote for *Laura*. At other times, sororal agency requires that the bonds of love and sacrifice take on another level of interpretation, with new visions on what

it means to be part of your sisters, an integral part of sorority, as exemplified by Perceval and Rien's cyborg integration. These defiant acts of sorority guarantee that, even if one of these voices disappears or dies, there are others to carry on their messages, their meanings and the histories.

I believe this dissertation has offered an alternative view on the conflicted dynamics between sister characters as depicted in literary works. To understand how their rivalry and enmity is established in relation to their choices as independent subjects denounces the negative impact that normative impositions have on their psyche, body and subjectivities. More importantly, to investigate the sisters' relationship and to highlight their moments of sorority, empathy and identification offers a means to subvert and resist the cultural inscriptions to which they are bound.

Finally, I encourage my readers to be open-minded when they think about literary mothers, daughters and sisters. We must foster sorority, for someday it may, as Adrienne Rich's quote in the introduction of this section affirms, be a transformative force that can shake, shift, readapt and challenge the world. This dissertation shows that the negative cycle surrounding feminine bonds as discussed in the novels analyzed can be theorized to lead to renewed understanding. Listening to what the sister characters have to say and to what their alterities and subjectivities express may serve as the beginning to decode a pattern of patriarchal control and domination. To reestablish the importance of motherhood is consistent with the feminist views of combating the gendered subject. The analysis of the special double formed by the sisters defies traditional views and establishes a rebellious, positive and feminist interpretation of the double. Theories on cultural textual bodies, gender fluidity and the maternal and sexual embodied subjectivity claim a space to discuss feminist body politics and counter the traditional views on the subject. To apply these theories to the study of sister characters and to highlight acts of sorority between them is to validate them as fully formed

subjects that are free from gender oppression, who recognize the importance of motherhood, maternity and alterity. These empowered subjects employ their acts of sororal resistance as a contribution to the rewriting of female genealogy.

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