



## II POETRY

### INTRODUCTION

Armed with the call for female selfhood and gender equality advanced polemically in her prose, yet ever mindful of the fundamental vulnerability shared by every human being, Louise Labé reframes these issues in her poetry via a stunning exposition of a woman's journey through love undertaken within and against the Petrarchan universe dominating the literary climate of her time. The elegies and sonnets represent two formally different but complementary articulations of her struggle to interrogate and revise the subjectivity of the conventional Petrarchan male speaker by exploiting the very obsessions and language of his discourse. Battling the pull of narcissistic self-absorption even when in the grips of the most intense emotion and the most wounding loss, Labé's lyric speaker reaches outward to seek genuine connection with the male beloved and with her male and female counterparts both in the real world and in the mythological world that serves as its metaphor. For Labé, the female subject is ultimately formed and validated through the joint labor of self-expression and interactive communication.

I shall develop the analysis of these lyric works in two ways. Given the challenge presented by the length and density of the three elegies, I shall first guide the reader through an interpretive overview of each text with the goal of highlighting those Petrarchan subversions that appear in more concise form in the sonnets. With respect to the sonnets themselves, after a brief overall contextualization and critical discussion of the inaugural poem written in Italian, my textual analysis will turn specifically to Annie Finch's innovative new translations and how they communicate and celebrate Labé's compelling lyric ethos.<sup>1</sup>

## THE ELEGIES

Although the elegiac genre is strictly speaking a non-Petrarchan form — since the *Canzoniere* contains no elegies — the Petrarchan presence remains central to Labé's three elegies for several reasons. First of all, the French text that furnished Labé's basic and most immediate model, Clément Marot's group of love elegies entitled *Suite de l'adolescence Clémentine* (1534), already attested to that author's liberal appropriation of Petrarchan diction and conventions. Moreover, the complex physical and spiritual symptoms not only of unattainable love, but of abandoned or lost love, as famously depicted by the classical love elegists, had been broadly incorporated into Petrarch's own lyric verse, as well as their bent toward narrative recounting or novelization — a feature that assumes new force in Labé's elegies through the intricate yarn the speaker spins of her own personal history.

Annie Finch's translations of the speaker's saga (to my knowledge only the second translation of these three texts in their entirety) maintain the form and flavor of the original through their faithful and often ingenious adaptation of Labé's decasyllabic rhyming couplets.<sup>2</sup> Finch also has created titles for each elegy — as she has for each sonnet — an original move aimed at increasing their immediacy and appeal to the reader.

Elegy 1 ("All-Conquering Love") begins with a dramatic presentation of how Labé's speaker comes to assume her creative gift not only through the intercession of Phoebus Apollo, god of poetry, but through the acknowledgment of her female predecessor and counterpart in unreciprocated love, Sappho, invoked indirectly through the geographical epithet of her origins on the island of Lesbos:<sup>3</sup>

The lyre he gave me once chanted the verse  
of love on Lesbos, in the olden times;  
now, in the same way, it will sing of mine.  
[Il m'a donné la lyre, qui les vers  
Souloit chanter de l'Amour Lesbienne:  
Et à ce coup pleurera de la mienne.]<sup>4</sup>

(ll. 14–16; emphasis added)

Labé's assertion of the Sapphic model restages the fundamental Petrarchan dynamic in its iteration of unattainable passion; yet it simultaneously proposes an alternative response to the languishing despondency of the Petrarchan male speaker. This response lies in the female speaker's assumption of expressive power through the agency of her female predecessor, an act realizing the narrator's call for self-empowerment through writing

Labé, Louise; Baker, Deborah Lesko (Editor); Finch, Annie (Translated by). Complete Poetry and Prose : A Bilingual Edition. Chicago, IL, USA: University of Chicago Press, 2006. p 167.

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in the dedicatory letter.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the development of elegy 1 as a whole can be seen as a troubled and complex struggle between conventional Petrarchan passion in all its vanquishing force and the voice of the ambivalent female subject seeking support and validation.

Specifically, in the first half of the elegy Labe's speaker juxtaposes a rehearsal of her own fatal *amantamento* and a subsequent plea addressed to her female audience. After dramatically evoking her amorous entrapment with the standard Petrarchan diction of fire, warfare, victimization, and Cupid's visual attack, she plaintively calls out for the understanding and empathy of her women readers:

Oh, Women who read these words,  
 Come sigh with me for the sorrows you have heard!  
 And maybe one day I'll do the same for you,  
 helping your pitiful voices to sound more true  
 as you tell about your pain and your sad trial,  
 lamenting in vain for times gone this long while.  
 Whatever hardness lodges in your heart,  
 Love will always conquer it through his special art, . . .  
 So never think that anyone should blame  
 the women whom hot Cupid has enflamed.  
 [Dames, qui les lirez,  
 De mes regrets avec moy soupirez.  
 Possible, un jour, je feray le semblable,  
 Et ayderay votre voix pitoyable  
 A vos travaux et peines raconter,  
 Au tems perdu vainement lamenter.  
 Quelque rigueur qui loge en votre coeur,  
 Amour s'en peut un jour rendre vainqueur. . . .  
 N'estimez point que lon doive blamer  
 Celles qu'a fait Cupidon inflamer.]

(ll. 43–50, 53–54)

Here the striking dichotomy between an encouraging cry for solidarity from her equally vulnerable women peers on the one hand, and an unmistakable fear of their negative critical judgment on the other hand, involves more than the speaker's anxiety in respect to her deliberate breach of conventional female decorum. This duality figures more subtly and more deeply her quest to seek parallel access to the experience of grief heretofore privileged specifically as a male phenomenon in the Petrarchan tradition, and her effort to valorize the integrity and expression of female grief not through

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the male lover's downward-spiraling self-absorption, but through the shared participation of women in a process of communal mourning."

And yet the difficulty of this quest for validation against the backdrop of the reigning male ethos haunts the speaker in the second part of the elegy. In presenting two detailed examples of women caught in the erotic vulnerability and nonreciprocity characterizing the Petrarchan universe, she brutally shows that neither one accedes to the ennobled status of her male lyric counterpart in her crisis of grief. First, the Babylonian queen Semiramis, lauded for her manlike persona in military battle, is progressively and derogatorily feminized as the narrator relates and questions her fall into an incestuous infatuation with her own son — an infatuation so consuming that she loses her very sense of self: "Your love has, finally, estranged you from you,/yourself" (*Ainsi Amour de toy t'a estrangee* [l. 89]). Finally, a woman overwhelmed in old age by the type of unreciprocated passion she long ago instilled in others is pathetically depicted in foolish cosmetic attempts to forestall her own physical decay and reattract the object of her desire: "she tried to . . . camouflage /the wrinkles and the furrows, and to chase /the marks age had engraved deep in her face" (*Voulant chasser le ridé labourage, /Que l'age avoit gravé sur son visage* [ll. 101–2]). What most strikes the reader is that although in both cases the women in question take on the *structural* position of the conventional male lover, either in the self-alienation caused by an invincible but sinful desire, or in the languishing after an uninterested lover, they do not take on the Sapphic lyre to "speak" and validate their plight — as Labé's speaker courageously tried to do in the first segment of the poem. Semiramis and the old woman therefore stand finally as the narrator's poignant exempla of the conventional devaluation of female grief as seen outside the privileged circle of male affective expression.

If elegy 1 moves beyond the speaker's personal *infortunamento* to evoke the overarching problematics of inscribing female loss in lyric verse, elegy 2 ("Such Endless Waiting") reengages the Sapphic and Petrarchan models in a striking return to the confessional mode inspired by Ovid's *Heroides*, one in which Labé's speaker reassumes her own position as desiring subject through an impassioned epistolary address to a departed male beloved. But her inscription of loss in the context of a feared abandonment allows the speaker to distance herself throughout the poem from the Petrarchan paradigm of radical unattainability by grounding and validating her grief not in a solitary psychic drama but in a prior *lived* love experience. Even as she employs a broad array of classic Petrarchan images and conceits early on to convey her plight in the face of her lover's absence (comparisons of herself to a ship longing for port and a slave longing for freedom, vacillations between jealousy toward an

imagined rival and disbelief that any such rival could supplant her), the speaker consistently uses diction that insists on the reality of their shared relationship: she addresses him directly as "Ami"; she invokes his written promise of a quick return, his vow of fidelity to her, and their mutual past love, with the unifying first-person-plural pronoun: "our former love" (*Notre amour passee* [l. 27; emphasis added]).<sup>7</sup>

The second half of elegy 2 presents two other key subversions of Petrarchan rhetoric that strengthen and valorize the position of the female subject. After first having the speaker playfully authorize her own beauty, talent, and fame uniquely via the praise won from learned men ("gens savans" and "gens d'esprit"), thereby elevating her own position in respect to any female rival, Labé strikingly deflates the idea that her narrator shares any real affinity with the idealized Petrarchan lady with whom the male lover can seek only a spiritual union:

So come, taste well what others now desire,  
rest at the goal to which so many aspire.  
You know that elsewhere there's no one like me!  
I don't say others might not have more beauty —  
but no woman will ever love you more  
than I do now, or bring you higher honor.  
[Goute le bien que tant d'hommes desirent:  
Demeure au but ou tant d'autres aspirent:  
Et croy qu'ailleurs n'en auras une telle.  
Je ne dy pas qu'elle ne soit plus belle:  
Mais que jamais femme ne l'aymera,  
Ne plus que moy d'honneur te portera.]

(ll. 69–74)

Indeed, rather than entreating her lover to aspire to a higher plane in the Neoplatonic mode frequently adopted by the Petrarchan male poet, Labé's speaker seductively invites him to return and "taste" the prize of the real-life woman who openly speaks ("I don't say" ["*Je ne dy pas*"]) to the possibility that she may not be the most beautiful, but that her own capacity to love him and to bring him honor — through the very identity she has forged by self-expression in the public and private worlds — goes unexcelled. In thus portraying her speaker as a vibrant and responsive subject, Labé asserts the legitimacy of a woman's claim to take on the first-person role of the suffering male lover and validates the voice of her loss.

An additional legitimization of that voice occurs at the very end of the poem, when Labé has the speaker first envision her own death should her

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lover not return, and then record the actual inscription to be engraved on her tomb:

MY LOVE, I BURNED FOR YOU UNTIL DESIRE  
 CONSUMED MY BODY. THEN THE FLAMES GREW  
 HIGHER.  
 I'M STILL BURNING UNDER THE ASHES OF THIS  
 PYRE.  
 ONLY YOUR TEARS CAN EVER QUENCH THE FIRE.  
 [PAR TOY, AMI, TANT VESQUI ENFLAMMÉE,  
 QUEN LANGUISSANT PAR FEU SUIS CONSUMÉE,  
 QUI COLIVE ENCOR SOUS MA CENDRE EMBRAZÉE  
 SI NE LE RENS DE TES PLEURS APAIZÉE.]

(ll. 101–4)

What is particularly telling here is that although Labé exploits the Petrarchan convention of the speaker's death (real or metaphorical) at the hands of love, she does so in a way that is fundamentally un-Petrarchan. Whereas the traditional male lover attempts to find solace in the hope that his own death will allow him to reunite with the beloved in heaven, Labé's speaker rejects the imperative to look to any such spiritual union or transcending afterlife. Rather, her one request to her lover is that at her grave he himself shed the tears that alone could help relieve her suffering — that is, that he take part in an active *mutual* mourning that would constitute an authentic validation of her loss.

The appeal for empathetic solidarity carries over to the start of the third and final elegy ("Oh, Women of Lyon"), where Labé's speaker reengages her plea to her female co-citizens:

Oh, women of Lyon, whenever you read  
 these writings of mine, so full of love and need —  
 all the worries, grudges, tears, sobs, and regret  
 that the piteous music of these songs has set —  
 please don't condemn me for simplicity  
 because of my youthful weakness. If it be  
 that I'm in error . . .  
 [Quand vous lirez, ô Dames Lionnoises,  
 Ces miens escrits pleins d'amoureuses noises,  
 Quand mes regrets, ennuis, despits, et larmes  
 M'orrez chanter en pitoyables carmes,

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## Poetry 139

Ne veuillez pas condamner ma simplesse,  
Et jeune erreur de ma folle jeunesse,  
Si c'est erreur . . . ]

(ll. 1–7)

Perhaps the best-known excerpt of any of Labé's three long narrative poems, these lines seem to figure a cyclical return to the concerns and vicissitudes of elegy 1. Yet the reprisal of Labé's appeal to her female audience introduces important transitions in her speaker's perspective toward the three dominant concerns of the earlier poem: the conflictive interplay between external validation and external judgment; the autobiographical narration and aftermath of Love's brutal attack; and the role of exempla as didactic elaborations. First, in unmistakably reinvoking the renowned "youthful error" (*giovenile errore*) confessed by Petrarch in the opening sonnet of the *Canzoniere*, she puts into question with the simple three-word conditional clause "Si c'est erreur" (If it be that I'm in error) whether her own experience in love even constitutes any wrongdoing.<sup>8</sup> She then further dilutes the traditional Petrarchan link between erotic passion and transgression by reviewing a litany of other vices and sins to which women and men are mutually susceptible, thereby seeking to forestall condemnation by her readers of either sex and to assert her speaking voice without the stigma of shame.

As Labé's speaker moves to displace any blame for her personal imperfections onto *Amour*, god of love, she invokes female exempla not to focus on their narratives of amorous woe, but rather to expand and to dramatize the story of her own *innamoramento* introduced more apologetically in elegy 1. Interestingly, with a self-comparison to the female warriors of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* ("You might/have compared me to great Bradamante with ease,/or to Roger's sister, the renowned Marphise" [*Pour Bradamante, ou la haute Marphise, /Suer de Roger, il m'eust, possible, prise* (ll. 41–42)]), she aligns herself in part with her earlier example, Semiramis, whose manly military talents could not fight off *Amour*'s assault—but with an essential difference: whereas Semiramis remained silent and paralyzed in the opening elegy, Labé's speaker here implicitly assumes and valorizes the voice of the warrior queen and empowers it as her own.<sup>9</sup>

In the extended presentation of the narrator's perilous encounter with love in the second half of the elegy, Labé inscribes the female subject's unapologetic appropriation of the full range of the Petrarchan male speaker's "privileged" suffering: psychic disruption, physiological torment, and self-alienation experienced relentlessly over time. But even within the space of

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that suffering, the poet seeks to challenge its unremitting isolation in two crucial ways. The final exempla employed in the service of this challenge are no longer those of victimized women alone, but those of the mythological couples Jason-Medea and Paris-Oenone, whose stories feature in part the abandonment of the female figures by their male partners — an abandonment recalling the desertion feared by the speaker in elegy 2. Here, as there, the speaker is not content to accept anguished solitude as the sole stance available to the female lover:

Those women deserved the love that they had earned,  
and loving, to have been loved in return.  
If those who are loved can leave love in the past,  
shouldn't we who aren't loved let it go, at last? "<sup>14</sup>  
[Si meritoient elles estre estimees,  
Et pour aymer leurs Amis, estre aymees.  
S'estant aymé on peut Amour laisser  
N'est il raison, ne l'estant, se laisser?]

(ll. 89–92)

The first two lines above assert unmistakably the right of the female exempla to be loved in return — to claim a mutual sharing of love that defies the dynamics of Petrarchan subjectivity. Moreover, in using the nonspecific pronoun "on" (those) in the rhetorical question that follows, Labé asks her readers to appraise why *anyone* — whether male or female — would not grow weary of unrequited love, thereby suggesting her resistance to its privileged status in the reigning lyric discourse.

In a final rhetorical gesture of challenge, Labé ends her last elegy by addressing directly the god of love himself in a series of imperatives designed to incite change in the very tradition in which he plays such an important metaphoric role:

If you really want me to love to the very end,  
make him whom I love most, my all, my friend,  
...  
let him feel, in his blood, his bones, and in his soul,  
an equal — or a hotter — desire boil.  
Then your burdens won't weigh as heavily on me,  
since someone who shares them will keep me company.  
[Mais si tu veus que j'ayme jusqu'au bout,  
Fay que celui que j'estime mon tout,  
...]

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## Poetry 111

Sente en ses os, en son sang, en son ame,  
 Ou plus ardente, ou bien egale flame.  
 Alors ton faix plus aisé me sera,  
 Quand avec moy quelcun le portera.]

(ll. 97–98, 101–4)

Here the poetess dismantles and transforms the posture of the female speaker in the concluding lines of both previous elegies. She can no longer be resigned, as at the end of elegy 1, to the vision of love as ongoing nonreciprocity; nor can she find satisfaction in elegy 2's image of the lover grieving with and for her at her own tomb. Rather, by daring to envision her relationship with her partner as an all-encompassing and "equal" (if not "hotter") flame, and by figuring their love as a shared burden, Labe's speaker challenges Amour to make good on his own glorification of mutual love posited in his conversation with Jupiter in discourse 4 of the *Debate*, and in so doing introduces the model for amatory experience she will explore further in the sonnets.

## THE SONNETS AND THEIR NEW TRANSLATION

In contrast to the sustained narration of the elegies, Louise Labe's celebrated twenty-four-sonnet cycle offers a series of fascinating short vignettes that expand the overarching dialogue between the female poetic speaker and her male lyric heritage. Relinquishing the attempt to impose any strict linear progression or evolution on her verse, Labe rehearses throughout her collection the full array of motifs and settings through which she simultaneously appropriates and subverts Petrarchan poetics, from the violence of Love's attack, to the anguish of loss and separation, to the appeal for female empathy and noncensuring judgment, to the creation of scenarios of achieved and consummated *mutual* love.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, even as she is nurtured by her filiation with the ancient Sapphic lyre, the poetess explicitly acknowledges her own lyric origins in the world of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* not only by adapting the sonnet form privileged in his volume, but by composing her own inaugural sonnet in Italian (aptly entitled by Finch "The Sting"). A brief look at portions of this incipit in juxtaposition with the famed opening of the *Canzoniere* illuminates the struggle for independence and innovation enacted throughout Labe's sonnets.<sup>12</sup>

"The Sting" begins:

Not even Ulysses, or someone as wise as he,  
 would guess that a face like yours — so full of grace  
 and honor and respect — such a divine face —

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could bring suffering like the pain you're causing me.  
 [Non havria Ulysse o qualunqu'atro mai  
 Più accorto fu, da quel divino aspetto  
 Pien di gratic, d'honor et di rispetto  
 Sperato qual f' sento affanni e guai.]

(ll. 1–4)

Whereas the Petrarchan speaker begins with a renowned plea for the compassion of his audience ("Voi ch'ascoltate in rime sparse" [You who hear in scattered rhymes]) in face of an at first unspecified youthful error ("mio primo giovanile errore"), Labé's speaker invokes immediately the living agent of her pain against the backdrop of a mythological allusion to Ulysses.<sup>13</sup> Presented grammatically in a kind of negation, the opening invocation of this powerful male figure known for his mental acumen subverts the notion that *male* intellect (and attendant *male* expression) have any innate superiority in understanding, assimilating, and communicating the trials of love — thus arming the female speaker with yet another validation of her right to take up the Petrarchan "lyre." Labé's rich reference to the *Odyssey's* wise and heroic wanderer, which reinscribes Petrarch's own frequent use of the journey metaphor, works on several other levels to suggest the values and direction she will embrace in her love experience. First, despite her admission here and further on of the acute anguish that Amour's attack on her has produced — dramatized by the conventional and paradoxical image of the scorpion, whose sting can be assuaged only by its own venom (ll. 10–11) — Labé's speaker at no point links this pain to the repentant stance and pervasive sense of spiritual divagation that overwhelm the Petrarchan narrator throughout his opening poem, displacing even the indirect mention of his fateful amorous fall. Implicitly set against this errant and futile wandering provoked by the yet unvoiced image of the inaccessible Laura, the prolonged and tumultuous voyage of Ulysses ends in reunion with his long-waiting, long-suffering mate, Penelope. This intertext activates the implicit hope that even in her suffering, Labé's speaker might reenact such a reunion at the conclusion of her own journey.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, whether or not such a hope comes to fruition, in the final lines of her inaugural sonnet Labé affirms an affective posture and itinerary for her speaker that diverge sharply from the stance of the male speaker not only at the end of Petrarch's opening poem but throughout the *Canzoniere*:

I am wounded. I ask you only to kill the pain,  
 but *not* to *extinguish* the burning I crave to feel,  
 this desire whose broken life would break my own.

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[Chicgo li sol' ancida questa noia,  
 Non estingua el desir a me si caro,  
 Che mancar no potrà eb' non su maou.]

(ll. 12–14; emphasis added)

In stark contrast to the disillusioned Petrarchan lover, who recognizes that "whatever pleases in the world is a brief dream" (*Che quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno* [l. 14]), and in the inaugural sonnet elides the very *desir* that fuels his shame and that in numerous subsequent poems he openly struggles to conquer, Labé's speaker here embraces the notion of a desire that might transcend or exist independently from emotional suffering, an outward-flowing force providing her with the very impetus to go on with her life. Perhaps more than anything else, it is this valorization of erotic desire as such a life-perpetuating force that constitutes Louise Labé's central innovation, one that permits her — despite and through the deprivation at the heart of her lyric tradition — to preserve intact a sense of both selfhood and otherness, and a vision of their unification in a rich and mutually fulfilling relationship.

The new conceptualization of male-female love experience proposed by Labé in the twenty-three French sonnets following her inaugural poem finds a vibrant vehicle of communication in Annie Finch's exciting new translations. In addition to her invention of titles for each poem, what distinguishes Finch's translations of the sonnets from those of her predecessors — in both collected volumes and anthology selections — is that they follow the actual Petrarchan sonnet rhyme schemes and their variations used by Labé. Previously, translators working with rhyming verse have opted to use the English sonnet rhyme scheme, or else a looser variation of the Petrarchan scheme, because it requires fewer rhymings on a single sound. And yet one of the main characteristics of Labé's own language is the insistent repetition of sounds — rhymes, assonances, and alliteration — a repetition that underscores the accelerating intensity of emotion in her poetry. Finch's expressive diction — and her ability to avoid the artificiality inherent in imitating such a repetitive rhyming pattern — creates a set of translations conveying the integration of affective immediacy and technical virtuosity that is both the hallmark of the original poems and the center of their appeal to the contemporary reader.

I would now like to introduce Annie Finch's rich dialogue with Labé's sonnet sequence by examining several examples that highlight at once the poetess's articulation of female suffering and her creation of a new poetics of reciprocity challenging the traditional Petrarchan paradigm. In sonnet 3

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("Long-Felt Desires"), the translator movingly adapts the presentation of the speaker's anguished passion in the two opening quatrains:

Long-felt desires, hopes as long as vain —  
 sad sighs — slow tears accustomed to run sad  
 into as many rivers as two eyes can add,  
 pouring like fountains, endless as the rain —  
 cruelty beyond humanity, a pain  
 so hard it makes compassionate stars go mad  
 with pity: these are the first passions I've had.  
 Do you think Love could root in my soul again?  
 [O longs desirs, ô esperances vaines,  
 Tristes soupirs et larmes coutumieres  
 A engendrer de moy maintes rivieres,  
 Dont mes deus yeus sont sources et fontaines:  
 O cruautéz, ô durtez inhumaines,  
 Piteus regards des celestes lumieres:  
 Du cœur transi ô passions premieres  
 Estimez vous croître encore mes peines?]

(ll. 1–8)

Here Finch elects to tone down the enumerated apostrophes and exclamations so frequent in Labé's work without sacrificing the almost desperate sense of the speaker's pain. The intense character of this suffering is communicated by a refocusing of more rhymes not on the poet's water and light images, but on the quality of the speaker's emotional experience ("run sad," "go mad," "the first passions I've had"). Furthermore, the visceral pull of "first passions" (recalling the Petrarchan *inamamento*) emerges in the replacement of the apostrophe in Labé's line 7 by the speaker's poignant affirmation of vulnerability and by her image of passion's "rooting" in the soul — a harsher rendering of Labé's original verb of organic growth ("croître," l. 8).

In her recasting of the tercets, where this "rooting" of passion is graphically described, Finch's choice of diction to fulfill the rhyme scheme is particularly apt in defining the qualities of the *inamamento*'s wound:

If it arched the great bow back again at me,  
 licked me again with fire, and stabbed me *deep*  
 with the violent worst, as awful as *before*,  
 the wounds that cut me everywhere would *keep*  
 me shielded, so there would be no place free  
 for love. It covers me. It will pierce no *more*.

Labé, Louise; Baker, Deborah Lesko (Editor); Finch, Annie (Translated by). Complete Poetry and Prose : A Bilingual Edition. Chicago, IL, USA: University of Chicago Press, 2006. p 177.

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[Qu'encor Amour su moy son arc essaie,  
Que nouveaux feus me gette et nouveaux dars:  
Qu'il se despite, et pis qu'il pourra face:

Car je suis tant navree en toutes pars,  
Que plus en moy une nouvelle plaie,  
Pour m'empirer ne pourroit trouver place.]

(ll. 9–14; emphasis added)

Although the rhyming of “deep” and “keep” juxtaposes two words that function as different parts of speech and are apparently unrelated in meaning, it stresses both the profound internal rupture and sustained action of Love’s attack. Likewise, although Finch modifies the syntax of Labe’s final line in order to incorporate two more blunt affirmations of the speaker’s state, she maintains the corresponding rhythmic fragmentation of the original line. Furthermore, in rhyming the concluding word “more” with line 11’s “before,” she shows the speaker’s acceptance that both past and future have been engulfed by the power of her passion in the present moment.

Two poems later, in sonnet 5 (“Bright Venus”), the perspective of the speaker’s suffering changes in that she reaches out directly for the potential comfort and partnership of Venus, goddess of love, as an antidote to her nocturnal isolation from the rest of sleeping humanity: “Listen, bright Venus—*errant* in the *air*! / Listen to my clear voice move, as I sing . . .” (*Cler Venus, qui eres par les Cieux, / Entens ma voix qui en pleins chantera* [ll. 1–2; emphasis added]).<sup>15</sup> The translator begins with the plaintive imperative that does not occur until line 2 of the original, at the same time maintaining Labe’s hypnotic internal rhyme in the first line. By thus insisting on the centrality of the imperative, Finch stresses the desire of the speaker to connect with her female celestial counterpart—a desire nevertheless conflicted, as Tom Conley has suggested, because it is infused with anxiety as to whether the “errant” goddess possesses the focused empathy to fulfill this bond.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Finch continues to emphasize this subtle interplay between the speaker’s appeal for a complex emotional connection and Venus’s uncertain capacity to provide it in lines 6–8, by rhyming the speaker’s accelerating expression of tears with her longed-for projection of the goddess as compassionate witness—but a witness anticipated even now as “troubled” by the expression of the speaker’s voice: “and as you look you’ll see much, much more *weeping*. / More tears will dampen my bed, with your eyes *watching*, / though they *trouble* the sight of witnesses so rare” (*Mon œil veillant s’attendrira bien mieus, / Et plus de pleurs te voyant gettera* [emphasis added]).

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## 146 Louise Labé

Sonnet 7 ("Soul and Body") provides a particularly beautiful translation of the Neoplatonic theme of the transmigration of souls evoked frequently in Labé's poetry. Although the experiential point of departure of the poem involves separation from the male beloved, here the poetic speaker uses this motif as a vehicle to address him directly, to invite her absent partner into conversation, and to include the implicit support of the rest of humankind in her reflection. The translation once again captures Labé's validation of otherness in its own diction and dialogic strategies. Whereas the original sonnet opens with the impersonal pronoun "on," Finch uses the more informal, collective first-person-plural pronoun:

We know this: everything that feels life *move*  
dies, if the soul and body separate.  
Now, I'm the body, and you are my own soul mate.  
So where have you gone to now, my life, my *love*?  
[On voit mourir toute chose animée,  
Lors que du corps l'ame s'utile part:  
Je suis le corps, toy la meilleure part:  
Ou es tu donc, o ame bien aymée?]

(ll. 1–4; emphasis added)

This opening takes away the slightly austere abstractness that the reader may sense in the original poem. Furthermore, the slant rhyme between "move" and "love" suggests the speaker's passion as an intense movement toward the other. Finch develops this dynamic push toward unification by repeating the verb "move" twice more in lines 8 and 11, as well as by ingeniously varying and reformulating the original French imperatives and assertions of need dominating the rest of the poem: "Don't make me stay here soulless while you rove" (l. 6); "Don't wait! This body of yours has reached a terrible state!" (ll. 6–7); "I need you now; I need how you move above /me" (ll. 8–9); "Come easily, so it's not dangerous /for us to meet again" (ll. 9–10); "don't be too hard on me" (l. 11).<sup>17</sup>

The final imperative "Restore," newly added to Finch's translation of the final tercet, is an especially effective verb, rhymed as it is with the sonnet's closing word "before" — for it speaks not to a crisis of inaccessibility but to the reconstruction of a togetherness once possessed.

*Restore*  
your beauty to me gently — so it will prove  
gentle, although it was so cruel before.  
[Non de rigueur: mais de grace amiable,

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Qui doucement me rends ta beauté,  
Jadis cruelle, à present favorable.]

(ll. 12–14; emphasis added)

Given that the imperative form used in the translation has more insistency than the subjunctive form ("rende") in the French text, this anticipated restoration paradoxically involves not simply the relationship as it was "before," but the creation of a more stable, mutually satisfying union, no longer threatened by the "cruelty" of rupture.

Even in its thematization of a separation much more definitive in kind, the moving and well-known sonnet 14 ("The Point of Death") still records — against the Petrarchan grain — the lyric speaker's attempt to assess and preserve a precious past *lived* experience. In affirming her desire to continue living as long as she can actively express the beauty and mourn the loss of that experience, the female subject celebrates the power of memory and its preservation in the act of writing, thus enacting the very imperative of Labe's dedicatory letter. Finch's translation seizes poignantly the prioritization of lived (rather than unattainable) experience driving the poem, rephrasing the speaker's regret in line 2 over "l'heur passé avec toy" (literally, "happy time spent with you" — the word "heur" incorporating connotations of both time and happiness) into sorrow over the more sharply defined loss of a fully reciprocal and unconflicted union: "mourning our *shared hours*, gone now, so long gone" (emphasis added). The translator likewise reiterates the speaker's simultaneous embrace of the empathy of others, clarifying Labe's elliptical reflexive structure in line 4 ("Pourra ma voix, et un peu faire entendre") by speaking of "a voice *someone* might hear" (emphasis added).

In the two final stanzas of the poem, which detail the projected loss of expressive power that alone would cause the speaker to renounce life, Finch's rhyming of "death" and "breath" and her enjambment immediately following "breath" ("I'll never want to reach the point of *death*! / Though when my eyes grow dry and this voicing *breath* / is broken" ["Je ne souhaite encor point mourir. / Mais quand mes yeus je sentiray tarir, / Ma voix cassee . . ."; ll. 9–11; emphasis added]), create an effect of physical breathlessness, as if the speaker were indeed about to exhale her final sigh. At the same time, the unlikely revisionary rhyme of "powerless" and "press" in her lines 11 and 13 ("and my hand is *powerless* / . . . then, I'll *press* / death to come cover my clearest day with night" ["Et ma main impuissante / . . . Prirey la Mort noircir mon plus cler jour"; ll. 11, 14; emphasis added]), suggests paradoxically that the loss of expressive power unleashes one more act of strength: it sets into motion the human drive toward death.

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Finally, beyond the various presentations of suffering and separation in which the female speaker nevertheless seeks alternatives to narcissistic languishing, Labé's most frequently anthologized poem, sonnet 18 ("Kiss Me Again"), places the celebration of lived experience squarely in the present and projects its continuation into an earthly future. In this famous "kisses" sonnet, inspired by the Roman poet Catullus's famous song to his Lesbia, Labé invites the reader to delight in a scene of lovemaking upon which her speaker will then articulate her own set of values in respect to erotic love:

Kiss me again, rekiss me, and then kiss  
me again, with your richest, most succulent  
kiss, then adore me with another *kiss*, meant  
to steam out fourfold the very hottest *hiss*  
from my love-hot coals. Do I hear you *moaning*? This  
is my plan to soothe you: ten more *kisses*, sent  
just for your pleasure. Then, both sweetly bent  
on love, we'll enter joy through doubleness.  
[Baise m'encor, rebaise moy et baise.  
Donne m'en un de tes plus savoureux,  
Donne m'en un de tes plus amoureux.  
Je t'en rendray quatre plus chaus que braise.

Las, te plains tu? ça que ce mal j'apaise,  
En te'n donnant dix autres doucereus.  
Ainsi meslans nos baisers tant heureux  
Jouissons nous l'un de l'autre à notre aise.]

(ll. 1–8; emphasis added)

These lines have been widely discussed for their use of the erotic stage to illustrate the author's emphasis on mutuality and reciprocity — from the repeated imperative "Kiss me" to the quickening rate of exchange in these embraces.<sup>16</sup> The translation embodies this hyperbolic repetition and acceleration. After imitating literally the first line in which the word "kiss" is used three times as a verb, Finch eschews Labé's taste for mere numbers ("one," "four," "ten") and repeats the noun "kiss" three more times in various positions in the upcoming lines. Her rhyming of this mantra with the "hiss" exuding from the metaphoric "hot coals" of the lover's passion creates an onomatopoeic effect of intensely smoldering fire. As if to push the sensual overtones to the limit, she also does not translate the speaker's flirtatious question in line 5 in its primary sense of complaint but rather gives it an erotically charged resonance — "Are you moaning?" Labé's culminating imperative for

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mutual pleasure conveyed in multiple reflexive structures at the end of the second quatrain emerges in the translation in slightly different fashion: a call for joy in "doubleness" that anticipates the "*double vie*" advocated in Labé's own line 9 ("Lors double vie à chacun en suivra") and in its alliterative glossing by Finch as "two loving lives to tend" (emphasis added).

Given that the final four enigmatic lines of the sonnet are meant to reveal what kind of "double life" Louise Labé has in mind, they form one of the more important challenges to any translator of this otherwise deceptively straightforward poem:

I'll tell you *something honest* now, my love:  
it's very bad for me to live apart.  
There's no way I can have a happy heart  
without some place outside myself to *move*.

[Permetts m'Amour penser *quelque folie*.

Tousjours suis mal, vivant discrettement,  
Et ne me puis donner contentement,  
Si hors de moy ne fay quelque saillie.]

(ll. 10–14; emphasis added)

Rather than translating the key words "*quelque folie*" directly as "madness," Finch intriguingly communicates them through the unexpected expression "something honest." But if "folie" fundamentally represents desires that do not conform to the tenets of logical reason and conventional social propriety, such desires — although perhaps viewed from the outside as "mad" when voiced by a sixteenth-century woman — indeed constitute the basis of what for Louise Labé is true honesty and authenticity in being. To express herself honestly, Labé's speaker decries the artificial nobility of living "apart" from her lover and rejects traditional Petrarchan solipsism by voicing her need in the final line for "some place outside myself to move." Just as she does in sonnet 7, Finch uses the slant rhyme between "love" (l. 11) and "move" (a verb derived from Labé's culminating noun "saillie" [a "sally forth"]) to provocative effect. For the poetess, love is once again a *move* outside the self toward the other, and this dictum here becomes both the speaker's most fervent desire and her ultimate and most compelling expression of "honesty."

The parallel "honesty" in all of Annie Finch's new translations conveys not only Louise Labé's distinctive contribution to Petrarchan poetics but also that courageous spirit of directness and vulnerability that enhances her modernity and appeal in our twenty-first-century world. The productive paradox of the translator's work is that in patiently and artfully going back to

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recuperate the original rhyme schemes of Labé's verse, she herself restores the immediacy of perhaps the first fully defined early modern female subject and the gift of her hard-earned wisdom. In so doing, Annie Finch has left for us her own authentic gift.

*Deborah Lesko Baker*

## POETRY TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

As I have grown to know Louise Labé's poems from the inside out, and grown with them myself through the process of translation, I feel I have found a paradoxical reason that Labé has won so many admirers and disciples over the centuries. Labé is strengthened as an individual, made more complex, by her focus on her feelings toward another. Her elaborate metaphors and frank self-reflection in the face of intricate feelings are as heroic, in their own context, as Emily Dickinson's. Labé's passion, her courage, her playfulness, and her pain reflect struggles not only of the emotions but of the spirit.

Labé wrote just after the height of the Petrarchan influence on Renaissance love poetry, when disillusion with the Petrarchan tradition of the idealized woman and her frustrated lover had begun to set in. She used a female poetic voice both to explore the validity of the Petrarchan tradition for expressing female passion and to critique that tradition. Whether she is entreating kisses in her famous sonnet 18, voicing classic paradoxes in sonnet 8, lamenting male impotence in sonnet 16, or casting herself in a forest encounter with Diana in sonnet 19, she plays with and off the traditional Petrarchan love sonnet, teasing and adding fresh twists to the old imagery. But always, whether in the role of nymph, martyr, philosopher, mocker, or seductress, she is unflinching in claiming her own passion.

Labé's play with the Petrarchan tradition is rendered more piercing by her skill in its conventional forms. She found a material obdurate and resistant enough to exercise her skill and shape her emotions in the Petrarchan or Italian sonnet form, with its complex and repeated rhyme schemes (the basic form, rhymed *abba, abba, cdcdcd*, and its variations). However, Labé's previous translators have avoided translating Labé's sonnets into the Italian sonnet form, choosing instead the English sonnet. Perhaps this is because the English language has fewer rhyming words than Italian, and the English sonnet form, used most famously by Shakespeare, requires only two words to rhyme on any one sound (the basic form is *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*).

When I started this project I decided to render Labé's poems in accordance with their original designs. I felt it important to translate each of

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