

Pierre De Ronsard



Selected Poems

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Translator's note:

Most of the Classical references mentioned in the notes are well known, and easily found in Ovid's Metamorphoses. For a free hyper-linked copy of the Metamorphoses please go to my main website, [Poetry In Translation](#).

Les Amours de Cassandre: XX

I'd like to turn the deepest of yellows,
Falling, drop by drop, in a golden shower,
Into her lap, my lovely Cassandra's,
As sleep is stealing over her brow.

Then I'd like to be a bull, white as snow,
Transforming myself, for carrying her,
In April, when, through meadows so tender,
A flower, through a thousand flowers, she goes.

I'd like then, the better to ease my pain,
To be Narcissus, and she a fountain,
Where I'd swim all night, at my pleasure:

And I'd like it, too, if Aurora would never
Light day again, or wake me ever,
So that this night could last forever.

Note: Jupiter, disguised as a shower of gold, raped Danae, and as a white bull carried off Europa. Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection. Aurora was the goddess of dawn. Ronsard's

Cassandra, was Cassandra Salviati, the daughter of an Italian banker.

Les Amours de Cassandre: XXXVI

At the sorrow I'm made to feel by Love,
Phoebus you used to lament, like me,
When you sang, in exile, passionately,
Near Ilium on the banks of Xanthus.

You bewitched the rivers, flowers and woods,
With your lyre, in vain but beguilingly,
Yet not what your soul felt, the beauty
That dealt what was festering in your blood.

There you turned the flowers pale, with your hue,
There the streams filled with tears for you,
There you lived in hope, but all in vain.

Love grieves me for that same name, this hour,
Near Vendôme, on the banks of Loir,
Like a Phoenix born again from my pain.

Note: Cassandra of Troy refused Phoebus Apollo's love. Ilium is Troy, and the Xanthus is one of its two rivers, the Scamander. The Loir is a tributary of the larger Loire, in the Vendômois. The Phoenix was the mythical bird that rose again from the ashes of its own immolation.

Les Amours de Cassandre: XLIII

Now fearfulness, and now hopefulness
Pitch camp in every part of my heart:
Neither, in war, can take the victor's part,
Equal in fortitude and forcefulness.

Now filled with confidence, now doubtfulness,
I promise deliverance to my captive heart,
Trying in vain to fool myself by art,
Between hope, and doubt, and fearfulness.

Shall I not see that hour before I die,
When I shall cull the flower of her springtime
Who makes my being languish in the dark?

Shall I not see myself clasped in her arms,
Breathless and exhausted by love's charms,
Die a sweet death in her embraces' arc?

Les Amours de Cassandre: XLIV

I'd like to be Ixion or Tantalus,
Fixed to the wheel or down there in the lake,
And press that beauty naked in my embrace,
That's equal to the angels' there above us.

If it could be so I'd make no fuss,
All fate's suffering would seem sweet today,
Not even if I'd to be a vulture's prey,
Nor he who must roll the boulder, Sisyphus.

To see or to touch the curve of her breast
Would lift my lover's fate above the rest,
Raising me on high like an Asian prince.

I'd be a demi-god, kissed by her desire,
And breast on breast, quenching my fire,
A deity at the gods' ambrosial feast.

Note: Ixion was tormented on a wheel in Hades, Tantalus by water and food just out of reach, Prometheus by having his liver torn by vultures, Sisyphus by being forced eternally to roll a boulder to the top of a hill and see it roll back again. Ambrosia was the food of the gods.

Les Amours de Cassandre: XCIV

Whether her golden hair curls languidly,
Or whether it swims by, in two flowing waves
That over her breasts wander there, and stray,
And across her neck float playfully:

Whether a knot, ornamented richly,
With many a ruby, many a rounded pearl,
Ties the stream of her rippling curls,
My heart delights itself, contentedly.

What delight it is, a wonder rather,
When her hair, caught above her ear,
Imitates the style that Venus employed!

Or with a cap on her head she is Adonis,
And no one knows if she's a girl or boy,
So sweetly her beauty hides in both disguises.

Note: Venus loved Adonis. The styles
are taken from Classical art.

Les Amours de Cassandre: CXXXV

Sweet beauty, murderess of my life,
Instead of a heart you've a boulder:
Living, you make me waste and shudder,
Impassioned by amorous desire.

The fresh blood that would set you on fire
Has failed to melt your icy nature,
Savage, cruel, liking nothing better,
Than suitor-less icily to retire.

Oh, learn to live, so fierce in your cruelty:
Don't keep it all for Dis, your sweet beauty,
We have to capture a little joy in loving.

We must deceive him softly, sweetly, Death:
Since down there, below, under the earth,
The body's no more than ash, void of feeling.

Note: Dis is also Pluto, the god of the
underworld.

Les Amours de Cassandre: CLII

Moon with dark eyes, goddess with horses black,
That steer you up and down, and high and low,
Never remaining long, when once they show,
Pulling your chariot endlessly there and back:

My desires and yours are never a match,
Because the passions that pierce your soul,
And the ardours that inflame mine so,
Court different desires to ease their lack.

For you, on Latmos, fondling your sleeping boy,
Would always wish some languid ploy
As restraint for your flying chariot:

But I whom Love devours all night long,
Wish from evening onwards for the dawn,
To find the daylight that your night forgot.

Note: Selene, the Moon, loved
Endymion on Mount Latmos, while he
slept.

Les Amours de Cassandre: CLX

Now, when Jupiter, fired by his lusts,
Wants to conceive the jewels of his eyes,
And with the heat of his burning thighs
Fills Juno's moist womb with his thrusts:

Now, when the sea, or when violent gusts
Of wind grant way to great ships of war,
And when the nightingale, in forest far,
Renews her grievance against Tereus:

Now, when the meadows and when the flowers
With thousands upon thousands of colours
Paint the breast of the earth so bright all round,

Alone and thoughtful among the secret cliffs,
With a silent heart I tell over my regrets,
And through the woods I go, hiding my wound.

Note: Juno, the great Goddess, was sister and wife of Jupiter. Tereus was the King of Thrace who raped his sister-in-law Philomela: she was changed into a nightingale.

Les Amours de Cassandre: CLXXII

I'd like to burn all the dross of my human clay,
So that I could take my flight to heaven,
Making myself divine, like Alcmene's son,
Hercules, joining the gods, all ablaze.

Already my spirit, longing for better ways,
Paces through my flesh, rebelliously,
And already brings the victim fuel to feed
His immolation in your vision's rays.

O holy pyre, O flame that's nourished by
A fire divine, may your fierce heart now burn
My familiar surface so completely, I,

Free and naked, might with a single flight
Rise, beyond the sky, to adore in turn
That other beauty from which your own derives.

Note: Hercules, Alcmene's son,
tormented by the shirt of Nessus
immolated himself on a pyre on
Mount Oeta, and was deified.

Les Amours de Cassandre: CLXXIV

Now when the sky and when the earth again
Fill with ice: cold hail scattered everywhere,
And the horror of the worst months of the year
Makes the grass bristle across the plain:

Now when the wind mutinously prowling,
Cracks the boulders, and uproots the trees,
When the redoubled roaring of the seas
Fills all the shoreline with its wild surging:

Love burns me, and winter's bitter cold
That freezes all, cannot freeze the old
Ardour in my heart that lasts forever.

See, Lovers, how I'm treated, in what ways
I die of cold through summer's scorching days:
Of heat, in the depths of icy weather.

Les Amours de Cassandre: CXCII

It was hot, and sleep, gently flowing,
Was trickling through my dreaming soul,
When the vague form of a vibrant ghost
Arrived to disturb my dreaming, softly

Leaning down to me, pure ivory teeth,
And offering me her flickering tongue,
Her lips were kissing me, sweet and long,
Mouth on mouth, thigh on thigh beneath.

What coral, what lilies, and what roses,
In seeming, my open hand discloses,
Now, with twin caresses stroking her.

Faith, oh my faith, what fragrant breath,
What sweet odour from her mouth's excess,
What rubies and what diamonds were there.

Les Amours de Cassandre: CXCI

Those twin pulses of thickly clotted milk
Ebb and flow through their white valley,
As the salt-tide, in its estuary,
Slowly rises, and slowly ebbs, like silk.

A space is created between them there,
Like a level pass between two hills
That the snowdrift's whiteness softly fills,
When the gusts of wind have dropped in winter.

There, two gleaming rubies stand erectly,
Whose crimson rays set off that ivory,
Smoothed so uniformly on every side:

There all grace abounds, and every worth,
And beauty, if there's any on this earth,
Flies to rest there in that sweet paradise.

Les Amours de Marie: VI

I'm sending you some flowers, that my hand
Picked just now from all this blossoming,
That, if they'd not been gathered this evening,
Tomorrow would be scattered on the ground.

Take this for an example, one that's sound,
That your beauty, in all its flowering
Will fall, in a moment, quickly withering,
And like the flowers will no more be found.

Time goes by, my lady: time goes by,
Ah! It's not time but we ourselves who pass,
And soon beneath the silent tomb we lie:

And after death there'll be no news, alas,
Of these desires of which we are so full:
So love me now, while you are beautiful.

Note: Ronsard's Marie was an
unidentified country girl from Anjou.

Les Amours de Marie: IX

Marie, the man who'd change the letters of your name
Would find out *aimer*: so love me then, Marie,
Your name invites you to love, and naturally.
They'll find no pardon that Nature do betray.

If you are willing to pledge me your heart, lover,
I'll offer mine: and so we will grasp entire
All the pleasures of life, and no strange desire
Will make my spirit prisoner to another.

One must love something in this world of ours, mistress,
They who love nothing live, in their wretchedness,
Like the Scythians did, and they would spend their life

Without tasting the sweetness of the sweetest joy.
Nothing is sweet without Venus and her boy:
And when I no longer love, then let me die!

Note: The Scythians at the extreme
end of the Empire in Roman times
were regarded as living barbaric lives
(See Ovid's *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto*).
Venus' boy is of course Cupid.

Les Amours de Marie: XLIV

Kiss me then Marie: no then, don't kiss me,
But suck my heart from me with your gentle breath:
No, don't suck it from me, but to your caress
Suck my whole soul, from every vein of me.

Yet, do not do so: for what then would I be
Other than an empty phantom after death,
Bodiless on that shore where love is surely less
(Pardon me Dis) than our idlest fantasy?

Marie, while we live let us love each other too,
Love does not reign there among that pallid crew
Those ghosts whose eyelids are sealed in iron sleep.

It's not true that Dis himself loved Persephone.
The unfeeling heart can't know a pain so sweet:
Love reigns on earth above, not beneath our feet.

Note: See Marvell's 'To His Coy
Mistress' for an expression of like
sentiment.

Sur La Mort de Marie: IV

As in May month, on its stem we see the rose
In its sweet youthfulness, in its freshest flower,
Making the heavens jealous with living colour,
Dawn sprinkles it with tears in the morning glow:

Grace lies in all its petals, and love, I know,
Scenting the trees and scenting the garden's bower,
But, assaulted by scorching heat or a shower,
Languishing, it dies, and petals on petals flow.

So in your freshness, so in all your first newness,
When earth and heaven both honoured your loveliness,
The Fates destroyed you, and you are but dust below.

Accept my tears and my sorrow for obsequies,
This bowl of milk, this basket of flowers from me,
So living and dead your body will still be rose.

Note: Ronsard's later tributes to 'Marie' were written for the Duke of Anjou (the future Henri III) whose mistress Marie de Clèves died in 1574.

Sonnets Pour Helene Book I: VI

Among love's pounding seas, for me there's no support,
And I can see no light, and yet have no desires
(O desire too bold!) except, as my vessel tires,
That after such dangers I may still reach port.

Alas! Before I can offer my prayers ashore,
Shipwrecked, I die: for I only see one fire
Burning above me, one Helen who inspires
My vessel to seek its death on reefs so dire.

Drowning I am alone, my own self-murderer,
Choosing a child, a blind boy, as my leader,
So, I ought to shed tears, and blush for shame.

I don't know if my reason or senses guide me,
Steering my boat, but I still know it grieves me
To see so fair a harbour yet not attain.

Note: Ronsard's Helene, was Hélène de Surgères, a lady in waiting to Catherine de Médicis.

Sonnets Pour Helene Book I: IX

The other day you saw me, as you passed by,
While I was above you on the stair: you turned
Your gaze, dazzled my eyes, my soul so burned
At finding myself the focus of your eyes.

Your glance entered my heart and blood, just like
A flash of lightning through the clouds. I burned
Hot and cold, in a lasting fever, well-earned
By the mortal wound of your glance's piercing flight.

If your fair hand had not made a sign to me then,
White hand that makes you a daughter of the swan,
I'd have died, Helen, of the rays from your eyes:

But that gesture towards me saved a soul in pain:
Your eye was pleased to carry away the prize,
Yet your hand rejoiced to grant me life again.

Note: Ronsard plays on the
identification of Helen with Helen of
Troy, born of Leda, and Jupiter
disguised as a swan.

Sonnets Pour Helene Book I: XIX

So often forging peace, so often fighting,
So often breaking up, and then re-forming,
So often blaming Love, so often praising,
So often searching out, so often fleeing,

So often hiding ourselves, so often revealing,
So often under the yoke, so often freeing,
Making our promises and then retracting,
Are signs that Love strikes at our very being.

A sign of love is this loving inconstancy.
If in a moment feeling both hate and pity,
Vowing, un-vowing, oaths sworn and un-sworn,

Hoping that's hopeless, comfort that's comfortless,
Are true love signs, then our love's of the best,
Since we are always at peace, or at war.

Sonnets Pour Helene Book I: L

Though the human spirit gives itself noble airs
In Plato's doctrine, who calls it divine influx,
Without the body it would do nothing much,
While vainly praising its origin up there.

The soul sees through the senses, imagines, hears,
Has from the body's powers its acts and looks:
The spirit once embodied has wit, makes books,
Matter makes it more perfect and more fair.

You love the spirit, now, and yet, without reason,
You say that all passion's defiled by the body.
To say so is merely a fault of imagination

That takes what is false for true reality:
And recalls the ancient myth of Ixion,
Who fed on air, and loved a cloud's deceit.

Note: Ixion tried to seduce Juno, but Jupiter substituted a cloud for her person. Ronsard refers to Neo-Platonic metaphysics in criticising Plato's 'Idealism'. Compare John Donne's poem 'The Ecstasie'. Donne like Marvell seems to have been influenced by Ronsard and his peers.

Sonnets Pour Helene Book II: XLII

In these long winter nights when the idle Moon
Steers her chariot so slowly on its way,
When the cockerel so tardily calls the day,
When night to the troubled soul seems years through:

I would have died of misery if not for you,
In shadowy form, coming to ease my fate,
Utterly naked in my arms, to lie and wait,
Sweetly deceiving me with a specious view.

The real you is fierce, of pitiless cruelty:
The false you one enjoys, in true intimacy,
I sleep beside your ghost, rest by an illusion:

Nothing's denied me. So kind sleep deceives
My loving sorrows with your false reality.
In love there is no harm in self-delusion.

Sonnets Pour Helene Book II: XLIII

When you are truly old, beside the evening candle,
Sitting by the fire, winding wool and spinning,
Murmuring my verses, you'll marvel then, in saying,
'Long ago, Ronsard sang me, when I was beautiful.'

There'll be no serving-girl of yours, who hears it all,
Even if, tired from toil, she's already drowsing,
Fails to rouse at the sound of my name's echoing,
And blesses your name, then, with praise immortal.

I'll be under the earth, a boneless phantom,
At rest in the myrtle groves of the dark kingdom:
You'll be an old woman hunched over the fire,

Regretting my love for you, your fierce disdain,
So live, believe me: don't wait for another day,
Gather them now the roses of life, and desire.

Note: W. B. Yeats' free adaptation is the well-known poem 'When you are old and grey and full of sleep' (In 'The Rose'). The myrtle groves are those of the Underworld in Classical mythology.

Sonnets Pour Helene Book II: XLIX

That night Love drew you down into the ballroom
To dance a sweet love-ballet with subtle art,
Your eyes though it was evening, brought the day
Like so many lightning flashes through the gloom.

A dance divine, that, time after time, resumed,
Broke, and re-formed again, circling every way,
Merged and then parted, turned, then turned away,
Mirroring the curves Meander's course assumed.

Now rounded, now stretched out, now narrowing,
Now tapering, now triangular, now forming
Ranks like flights of Cranes in frost-escaping line.

I'm wrong, you didn't dance: your feet were fluttering
Over the surface of the ground, your body altering,
Its nature transformed that night to the divine.

Note: The Meander was the river in Asia Minor (*Menderes Nehri* in modern Turkey) noted for its sinuous curves. The flight of Cranes is most famously mentioned in Homer's Iliad.

Les Odes: À Sa Maistresse

Sweetheart, let's see if the rose
That in morning light disclosed
Her crimson dress to the Sun,
This evening has lost once more
The folds of her crimson tussore,
And her, as your, complexion.

Ah! See how in such short space
My sweetheart, she's filled the place
With all the beauty's she's lost!
O, so unnatural Nature,
You whose ephemeral flower
Lasts only from dawn to dusk!

Then believe me, my sweetheart, do,
While time still flowers for you,
In its freshest novelty,
Cull, ah cull your youthful bloom:
As it blights this flower, the doom
Of age will blight your beauty.

Les Odes: Ô Fontaine Bellerie

O Fount of Bellerie,
Fountain sweet to see,
Dear to our Nymphs when, lo,
Waves hide them at your source
Fleeing the Satyr so,
Who follows them, in his course,
To the borders of your flow.

Eternal Nymph, you're the grace
Of my ancestral place:
So, in this fresh, green view,
See your Poet, who brings
An un-weaned kid to you,
Whose horns, in offering,
Bud from its brow in youth.

In summer I sleep, and lie
On your grassy banks, or write
In your green willows immersed,
Seeking to spread your glory
Through all the universe,
Demanding that Memory
Keeps you alive, through verse.

The flames of the Dog Days keep
Far from your green steep,
Because your shade around

Is always close and deep,
For the shepherds changing ground,
The weary oxen, the sheep,
And the cattle that wander round.

Rejoice: forever you'll be
The Princess of Founts to me,
Singing your issuing
From broken stone, a force,
That, as a gurgling spring,
Bring water from your source,
An endless dancing thing.

Note: Bellerie was situated on his family estate La Possonnière. The Dog Days were the August days when Sirius the Dog Star was in the ascendancy. This ode is based on Horace's Ode III:xiii.

Les Odes: 'Pourquoy comme une jeune poutre'

Why like a skittish mare
Do you glance askance at me?
Why, untamed do you scare
At any approach you see?

You won't let anyone touch,
But if I had you to hand,
Be sure, it wouldn't take much
To bridle you where you stand.

Then I'd teach you how to run,
And turn and twist and move,
A teacher to spur you on
In all the arenas of love.

But among the grasses now,
You only seek meadows sweet,
Because you've not yet found
The rider you long to meet.

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