

Louise Labé

The Sonnets



'Stained glass window depicting Louise Labé - inspired by "The Spring" by Eugène Grasset'  
Lucien Bégule (French, 1848 - 1935) *Wikimedia Commons*, contributed by *Thierry Wagner*

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## **Translator's Introduction**

Louise Labé's sonnets, published with other verse in Lyon in 1555, set her alongside Maurice Scève, as an heir to Petrarch's form and content, and exemplify the secular humanist advance of the French Renaissance. She asserts her literary skill, her wit, and her strength of mind, in sonnets which, while conceding nothing in terms of quality to those of her male peers, grant a fresh perspective on male-female relationship. In her own words:

*'The time having arrived...when the strict laws of men no longer prevent women from applying themselves to the arts and sciences, it seems to me that those who possess the means should employ this noble freedom, so coveted by our sex in the past, to pursue such things; and show men the wrong they have done us, in depriving us of the benefit, and the honour that might bring us....'*

*From the Dedication, introducing the 1555 edition.*

**1. 'Non havria Ulysse o qualunqu'atro mai' (Italian)**

Never was Ulysses, or any other,  
more struck by so divine an aspect,  
so full of grace, honour and respect,  
apart from which I endlessly suffer.

Yes, Love, your eyes, in all their beauty,  
have so pierced my innocent heart,  
warmed and nourished by your art,  
that, without you, there's no remedy.

O, harsh fate that renders me as one  
stung by the Scorpion, and seeking  
an antidote to that creature's venom,

I ask, merely, that you ease each breath,  
not quench what's dear to me, this longing,  
the lack of which would see my death.

**2. 'O beaus yeus bruns, ô regars destournez,'**

O clear brown eyes, O sidelong gaze,  
O burning sighs, O flowing tears,  
O dark nights, so full of idle fears,  
O renewed in vain, the brightening days.

O sad complaints, O obstinate desire,  
O lost time, O wasted suffering,  
O thousand deaths, a thousand snares bring,  
O sullen ills that thwart my fate entire.

O smile, O brow, O hair, arm, hand and finger,  
O plaintive lute, O viol, bow and singer,  
so many flames to pierce a woman through!

Of you I complain, of all these tongues of fire,  
that touch my heart so often, with desire,  
without one single spark scorching you.

### 3 'O longs desirs, ô esperances vaines,'

O long-felt desires, O hopes uncertain,  
sad sighs, and these customary tears  
engendering in me so many rivers,  
of which my eyes are source and fountain:

O cruelty, O harshness so inhuman,  
piteous gaze of those furthest stars:  
O first passion, gone from my heart,  
do you seek to increase my pain again?

Let Love try his bow against me.  
Let him hurl every fire, every dart:  
scorn me more fiercely than he could endure:

for I am so pierced, through every part,  
there's not a single place to lodge, in me,  
another wound, and so hurt me more.

#### 4. 'Depuis qu'Amour cruel empoisonna'

Since cruel Love first poisoned me,  
setting his primal fire in my breast,  
forever scorched by his divine fury,  
that not a single day brings me rest,

whatever trouble, and enough, he brought,  
whatever impending ruin or distress,  
whatever thought of all-conquering death,  
with none of that is my heart distraught.

The fiercer Love assails us, and at length,  
the more he'd have us renew our strength,  
and so refreshed, re-enter the lists again:

never because he favours those who long,  
but merely to seem stronger among the strong,  
he being one who scorns both gods and men.

**5. 'Clere Venus, qui erres par les Cieus,'**

Bright Venus, wandering the sky,  
listen to my voice, singing clear,  
as your light illuminates me here,  
of its long labours, with anxious cry.

My watchful eye will soften, again,  
and shed more tears as I gaze on you,  
more tears over my damp bed ensue,  
your gaze bearing witness to its pain.

Weary human spirits now sink deep  
into that sweet rest, granted them by sleep.  
I can endure my ills in the light of the Sun:

but when almost close to death I lie,  
wearied, turning to my bed, then I  
must cry my pain, till the night is done.

## 6. 'Deus ou trois fois bienheureus le retour'

Twice, three times, welcome the return  
of that bright Star, and happier still  
what his eyes honour when they will.  
Let her the sweetest daylight earn,

so she might boast well of her fate,  
who would kiss Flora's finest gift,  
taste the honey Aurora ever sipped;  
and let it on my lips there hesitate.

Such goodness to me alone is owed,  
for all my tears, my time lost in woe,  
but on seeing him, I'll feast there so,

so employ the power of my eyes,  
to gain advantage over him, that I,  
in a while, must gain his overthrow.

**7. 'On voit mourir toute chose animee,'**

We know that all things animate must die,  
when from its body the soul does part:  
I am the body, you the better part:  
'Where are you then, beloved soul?' I sigh.

Do not leave me spiritless, to roam,  
arriving then, to rescue me, too late!  
O, do not leave your body to its fate;  
yield it a place, grant it a valued home.

But let it not, friend, any danger know  
from this encounter, this loving show,  
accompanying it not with severity,

or harshness, but an amiable grace  
gently restoring sight of your beauty,  
once cruel, yet now in sweet embrace.

**8. 'Je vis, je meurs: je me brule et me noye.'**

I live, I die, I burn and drown.  
I'm boiling hot, suffering from cold.  
Life's too soft for me, too hard to mould:  
I feel great pain for all the joy I've found.

All at once, I smile, and I lament,  
in pleasure, sorry torment I endure:  
my joy, it stays, yet flees evermore:  
The instant I flower, I am spent.

So Love leads me on, so changeably,  
that when I think to feel the greater pain,  
without a thought, he sets me free;

yet, when I think my joy is come to me,  
that summit, I desired, in view again,  
renews that primal torment in my brain.

## 9. 'Tout aussi tot que je commence à prendre'

As soon as I begin, at last, to enter  
that rest, on my soft bed, I desired,  
my sad spirit, from myself retired,  
towards you flies, in wild surrender.

Then I imagine that my tender breast  
holds that good, to which I so aspire,  
for which my sighs so burn with fire,  
I often think to die of my distress.

O sweet sleep! O night of happiness!  
Pleasant repose, full of tranquility,  
in every night, bring me such a dream.

If my sad loving soul cannot possess  
its greatest good in actuality,  
grant it, at least, that deceiving gleam.

**10. 'Quand j'aperçoy ton blond chef couronné'**

When I see your fair hair all crowned  
with green laurel, and your sad lute sing,  
the trees and rocks blindly following,  
when I see you so renowned,

with ten thousand virtues surrounded,  
higher in honour than all of grand estate,  
eclipsing the highest glories of the great,  
my heart cries out, by passion confounded:

so many virtues render you beloved,  
and esteemed by all, as now is proved,  
could they not help you to love, also,

adding to such commendable virtue  
the fame of one who renders mercy too,  
from my love, gently firing your love so.

**11. 'O dous regars, o yeus pleins de beauté,'**

O sweet glances, O eyes with beauty filled,  
little gardens stocked with amorous flowers,  
where Love's dangerous barbs haunt the hours,  
so that in seeing you my gaze is stilled!

O vile heart, O harsh cruelty,  
you hold me in such a straitened fashion,  
many the languid tears I've shed in passion,  
feeling the heart tormented within me!

Thus do my eyes obtain such pleasure,  
thus from his eyes receive such measure:  
yet, my heart, the greater the joy you see,

the more you languish, greater the pain also:  
do you think me the more at ease though,  
feeling my eye and heart so contrary.

## 12. 'Lut, compagnon de ma calamité,'

Lute, my companion in calamity,  
irreproachable witness of my sighs,  
truthful recorder of all my cries,  
you have so often grieved with me,

many a piteous tear so troubled you,  
that some sweet melody you commence  
is suddenly turned to sad lament,  
feigning a tone you've sung full true.

And if you seek to undertake the contrary,  
you slacken, to silence you constrain me:  
yet, my tender sighs still witnessing,

granting favour, as sadly I complain:  
I am forced to take pleasure in my pain,  
and from sweet ills hope for a sweet ending.

### 13. 'Oh si j'estois en ce beau sein ravie'

Oh, were I clasped in that fine embrace,  
by that one for whom I seem to die,  
to be there with him, there to lie,  
all my brief days, free of envy's face.

If holding me, he'd only say: 'Dear friend,  
with each other let us be content,  
certain no tempest, wind and ocean blent,  
while life lasts, our union shall end.'

If I could hold him tight, and cling,  
like the ivy round the tree, encircling,  
let death come then, envious of my ease.

If he thirsted, to kiss me instead,  
so that on his lips my spirit fled,  
rather to die so, than to live, would please.

**14. 'Tant que mes yeux pourront larmes espandre,'**

As long as my eyes can shed their tears,  
grieving for the hours spent with you,  
and my voice resist the sighs and fears,  
so as to be heard, and receive its due:

as long as my hands can touch the strings  
of my graceful lute to sing your graces:  
as long as my soul one desire embraces,  
to wish for naught but you above all things:

I shall not long for death's last sigh.  
Yet when I feel my tears run dry,  
my voice gone, my hand incapable,

and my spirit, in its mortal sway,  
can reveal no sign of love at all,  
I'll beg death to darken my clear day.

**15. 'Pour le retour du Soleil honorer,'**

To honour the return of the sun,  
Zephyr reveals to him a sky at peace.  
Water and earth now awake from sleep,  
which from murmuring kept the one,

in its sweet flow, and from display  
the other, of many a lovely flower.  
The birds in the trees adorn the hour,  
easing the pain of all who take their way.

Nymphs, in a thousand games, they pass  
in the moonlight, pressing down the grass.  
Zephyr, will you grant me your hour, instead,

so I might be renewed, by your company?  
Make my own Sun return to me, so led,  
you'll see whether he augments my beauty.

**16. 'Après qu'un tems la gresle et le tonnerre'**

After the hail and thunder, in full force,  
batter the Caucasus with all their might,  
comes a fine day, and the returning light.  
When Phoebus has run his earthly course,

and regained the ocean, in swift array,  
his sister rises, her horns in sight.  
When the Parthian quits the fight,  
he unstrings his bow, to flee away.

Once I saw and consoled you, in pain,  
challenging my slow-burning flame,  
yet now you have kindled me apace,

and I am at the point you wished me,  
you quench your fire in a watery place,  
and are colder than I could ever be.

**17. 'Je fuis la vile, et temples, et tous lieux,'**

I flee from town, and temple, and the rest,  
where, pleased at hearing you complain,  
you could, compel me, at some pain,  
to grant you of what I treasure best.

Masques, games, tourneys are mere plays;  
without you there's nothing to admire:  
struggling, all the while, to quench this fire,  
and find another object for my gaze,

and distract myself from thoughts of love,  
a most lonely woodland grove I prove.  
But having wandered many ways, I see,

if I would find deliverance anew,  
I must live far beyond sight of me,  
or be sure to stay as far away from you.

**18. 'Baise m'encor, rebaise moy et baise:'**

Kiss me, kiss me again, and then kiss;  
grant me one of your most glorious,  
grant me one of your most amorous:  
I'll return you four, as hot as this.

Alas! Do you complain? So, let me ease  
the pain with ten more and more sweetly;  
then, mingling our kisses, happily,  
let us enjoy each other, as we please.

A dual life to each the hour shall give,  
each in the self and in the lover live.  
Love lets me some madness shape:

I'm ever in pain, living so discreetly,  
never shall I be content completely,  
unless from out myself I can escape.

**19. 'Diane estant en l'espaisseur d'un bois,'**

Diana, being in the darkness of a grove,  
after rendering many a creature dead,  
took breath, by a Nymph garlanded.  
There, as many a time in dream I rove,

passing with never a thought, I heard  
a voice say: 'Nymph, so sore afraid,  
why do you not seek Diana's glade?'  
To my unarmed state it then referred:

'What do you seek, sister, along the way,  
who made your bow and arrows their prey?'  
'I was troubled, by a passer-by', I said,

'and hurled my arrows at him, yet in vain,  
and the bow; but gathering them again,  
he fired, till I, a hundred times, had bled.'

## 20. 'Predit me fut, que devoit fermement'

It was prophesied that, some fine day,  
I would love deeply one whose figure  
was described; and with never a picture,  
I knew him, finding him, on my way.

Then, seeing him in love, fatally,  
I had mercy on his misadventure,  
and so went against my nature  
as to love him, and just as ardently.

Who would have thought that it could grow,  
this thing that heaven and destiny did sow?  
But when I see the sky with clouds oppressed,

with winds so cruel, in so foul a storm,  
I think it was Hades must have blessed  
me with this shipwreck where they swarm.

## 21. 'Quelle grandeur rend l'homme venerable?'

What stature renders a man admirable?  
What weight? What height? What colouring?  
Who possesses eyes the most melting?  
Who first deals the wound incurable?

What song is for a man most suitable?  
Who pierces deepest, singing of his pain?  
Who plays the sweet lute best, again?  
What nature is the most amiable?

I would not claim perfect discernment,  
since Love, it is, dictates my judgement;  
but this I know, of this I am most sure,

all that beauty to which I might aspire,  
all the art that might improve on Nature,  
could find no way to add to my desire.

**22. 'Luisant Soleil, que tu es bien heureux,'**

How happy you are, shining Sun,  
ever viewing your loved one's face:  
and you, his sister, in Endymion's embrace,  
fed on kisses, and many a honeyed one.

Mars views Venus, adventurous Mercury  
glides about, among a host of places,  
while Jupiter, everywhere, those traces  
of his hot youthful pleasure can see.

Here is the heavens' powerful harmony,  
binding celestial spirits mutually:  
yet, separated from their love,

their changeless harmony and order,  
would fall apart, to variable error,  
and as I, they, in vain, would move.

### 23. 'Las! que me sert, que si parfaitement'

Alas! What use that you, so perfectly,  
once praised the gold of my hair,  
the beauty of my eyes did compare  
to twin suns from which Love, swiftly,

fired the darts that caused your torment?  
Where are those tears, so quickly over?  
And that death by which you'd honour  
your true love, and your sworn testament?

Was this the goal then of your malice,  
to enslave me in the guise of service?  
Forgive me, friend, if now you see

my outrage, my anger and disdain,  
yet I intend, wherever you may be,  
as I, you'll suffer martyrdom and pain.

**24. 'Ne reprenez, Dames, si j'ai aymé:'**

Do not reproach me, ladies, if I've loved,  
if I have felt a thousand torches' fires,  
a thousand ills, a thousand fierce desires,  
if my time a time of tears has proved,

as long as you cease to curse my name.  
If I've failed, the agonies are mine,  
so do not those bitter barbs align,  
but think that Love, the very same,

without Vulcan's ardour as excuse,  
or beauty like Adonis' to accuse,  
will make you love more violently,

owning, compared to me, less reason,  
possessed by fiercer, stranger passion.  
And take care you're not sorrier than me.

**The end of the Sonnets of Louise Labé, Lyonnaise**