“Ne reprenez, Dames, si j’ay aymé”: Combatting Fear of Oppression in Louise Labé’s Sonnets

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Sixteenth century Lyonnaise poet, Louise Labé, is primarily famous for her sonnet series, encoded with subtle feminist references and overt celebrations of female sexual and romantic desire. However, these poems are also tinged with anxieties, focused on legitimising her poetic voice and self-expression. By closely reading several of Labé’s sonnets, a series of direct engagements with her contemporary audience, critics and predecessors becomes evident, along with the poet’s articulation of potential sources of doubt. Engagement with bodily imagery, technical approaches to voice and directives given to the reader, reveal Labé’s preoccupation with identifying and countering forms of oppression. The following analysis examines five sonnets in detail, with reference to Labé’s recognition of sources of concern and application of poetic techniques and images to challenge these.

Introduction

Louise Labé, a French poet who lived in Lyons some time between 1520 and 1566, has long been associated with issues of agency and self-expression, as well as female expressions of love and romantic desire. Recently, Labé’s status as a poet has been questioned, and historically she was maligned for perceived sexual immorality, in light of her poetic publication. In both instances, her credibility as a poet is called into question, as critics challenge the character and nature of her poetic voice. Peter Sharratt, in his introduction to a new edition of her sonnets, admits that the study of the facts of Labé’s life seems to have taken precedence over studies of the poetry itself.¹ Mireille Huchon posits that Labé was a construct, rather than a poet in her own right, serving as mouthpiece to a collective of male poets writing in Lyons at the time.² These concerns have been difficult to dispute, since we have only one collection of poems to assess and relatively few biographical details to account for its production.

However, when we read the existent literature closely, Labé herself appears to anticipate and move to counter questions of legitimacy via her poetic engagements with her intended audience and literary predecessors. Though it is not possible to determine conclusively whether or not Labé wrote the work that has been attributed to her (due to a lack of concrete evidence to support or deny her authorship), it is clear that her poetry is concerned with issues of legitimacy, oppression and desire. In this discussion, the importance of self-expression, specifically the clear enunciation of romantic and sexual desire by a female speaker, will be demonstrated through close examination of several recurring poetic techniques in Labé’s sonnets.

Throughout Labé’s published poetry, in English translations as well as in French, there is a conscious recognition of potential sources of oppression of the speaker’s poetic voice. The technical and thematic consistency of this poetic approach may not yet fully challenge Huchon’s theory that Labé was a group of male poets, rather than one female writer. However, the consistency certainly demonstrates a prevailing intention to poetically challenge any potential oppression of the speaker’s feelings and declarations of desire. Links between Labé’s works and her person have a distinctly sexualised tone, evident in the fact that the only recorded examples of public condemnation of Labé during her lifetime stem from allegations of sexual promiscuity, and not her status as a published woman. Consequently, Labé’s representations of sexuality and technical innovation which has the effect of promoting freedom of expression, despite adhering to a traditionally very formulaic and masculine poetic form - the Petrarchan sonnet will be examined in detail in this discussion.

Labé’s collection, Oeuvres de Louise Labé, published in 1555 and dedicated to a young woman named Clémence de Bourges, contains three elegies, a prose section, and twenty-four Petrarchan sonnets. This paper will closely examine a selection of sonnets, wherein the first person, female speaker addresses her intense and often violent desires for an unnamed male figure, as well as a recurring and multi-faceted fear of oppression. Oppression for Labé appears to take two main forms: physical assault by the male beloved, via indifference or activity, on the body of the female lover, and actual or perceived suppression of the female speaker’s expression of sexual and romantic desire. Although expressed in personal and direct terms, seemingly applicable only to the immediate instances of each sonnet, closer reading reveals exterior applications for these expressions. In addition, direct appeals to Labé’s contextual female audience and more subtle references to Petrarch as her immediate literary predecessor are applied to justify her poetic expression, simultaneously revealing Labé’s early feminist views.

Here ‘oppression’ refers to the restriction or lack of acknowledgement of Labé’s legitimacy as a poet and as a poetic speaker, engaging not only with literary predecessors and contemporaries, but also openly articulating a female figure’s desires. Fear of oppression and loss of voice, rather than death or physical violence, is apparent in Labé’s sonnets. She articulates and steadfastly displaces or challenges representations or sources of fear and suspicion by celebrating her poetic speaker’s self-control, desires, and ability to control the reactions of not only the beloved figure, but also her anticipated listener. As I will demonstrate, this consistency of voice strongly supports the theory that Louise Labé was no poetic fiction. Rather, I argue that she was a self-conscious poet who openly addressed those who sought to silence her.

Petrarchan Power Plays: Women and Sonnets

Louise Labé’s decision to write in Petrarchan sonnets, despite the clearly masculine slant of such poems, invites careful analysis of her motivations and subtle innovations to the style. Labé was certainly not the first woman, however, to write in such a way, and is one of a number of women from different linguistic backgrounds, but generally of wealthier social classes, to engage with Petrarch’s formula. Roberta Kreuger notes that, even though it was less uncommon for women of elite French households to read and write during the Renaissance at this time, women’s writing was still ‘often viewed either as a dangerous path toward autonomy and secret communication with lovers or as simply unnecessary, since women’s intellectual or artistic aspirations were not valued in themselves.’\footnote{N.R. Shapiro (trans.), R.L. Kreuger, C. Lafarge & C. Perry (Introduction), \textit{French Women Poets of Nine Centuries: The Distaff and the Pen}, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 2008, p. 3.} Even during this period of humanist encouragement for women and women’s education, open challenges to masculine modes of writing and canonical treatments of men and women in poetry would not have been well received. However, there was certainly room for negotiation with such terms, including exploration and adaptation of the Petrarchan sonnet form.

Diana Henderson observes that Renaissance women certainly did negotiate with masculine poetic traditions, including sonnets, and that this could have been ‘a mixed blessing, abetting a generic devaluation already rooted in male sonneteers’ ambivalence towards their poetic product.’\footnote{Diana Henderson, ‘Female Power and the Devaluation of Renaissance Love Lyrics’ in Y. Prins & M. Shreiber (eds), \textit{Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry}, New York, Cornell University Press, 1997, p. 38.} It suggests that there was room for negotiation. Two of Labé’s Italian near-contemporaries engaged in such negotiation: Veronica Gambara (1485-1550) and Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547). Henderson cites Colonna’s sonnet to Mary Magdalene and Gambara’s political and romantic poems as examples of women using sonnets ‘to praise what they perceived as explicitly female knowledge and strength, enlarging the notion of a love lyric to include \textit{agape} as well as sexual desire.’\footnote{Henderson, ‘Female Power’, p. 44.} In addition, Henderson notes that, within the traditional Petrarchan erotic plot, women poets could and did modify their speakers’ stances to emphasise ‘feminine virtues’, such as constancy, and the dilemmas experienced predominantly by women, such as Colonna and Gambara’s celebrations of married love, as a way of retaining ‘respectability as women in a world that defined female honour as chastity and fidelity.’\footnote{Henderson, ‘Female Power’, p. 47.} Women poets were not substantially barred from publication during Labé’s lifetime, nor immediately preceding her. For example, much like Labé in Lyon, Madeleine des Roches and her daughter Catherine established their own literary salon in Poitiers, and published a substantial body of poetry.\footnote{Kreuger, Lafarge & Perry (eds) \textit{French Women Poets}, pp. 4-5.} Like Labé, however, some women writers came under fire later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on the grounds of being literary constructions, rather than poets in their own right. Poet ‘Marie de France’, for example, was thought to be the pen-name of a male cleric adopting a feminine voice, and Marie de Romieu’s poems were claimed to have been
written by her brother instead. In their own lifetimes, these poets were often not challenged on literary grounds, but were accused of presumed sexual immorality.

Marilyn Farwell identifies a clear binary in Petrarch sonnets of the Middle Ages and Renaissance between male and female figures:

The poet/lover is almost always identified as male. He is active and creative; he is the one who speaks. The female, the beloved, is acted upon, her usual response to the ardent declarations of her lover being “no.” This answer is not an expression of her own sexual choice, but, rather, it is an expression of woman’s symbolic function vis-a-vis men: to help the poet transcend the lower world of change and physicality by reminding him that the real object of his sexual passion is his own creativity.

However, this situation is reversed in Labé’s Oeuvres de Louise Labé. The active and impassioned female speaker is constantly evaded, though never actively denied, by her silent male beloved. The result of this is not the realisation of the speaker’s romantic desires, but affirmation of the depth and sophistication of her feelings, as well as her eloquence and integrity. Labé’s speaker undergoes the suffering that Farwell claims is typical of a Petrarchan lover:

The pains of the lover are articulated in great detail, but little is said about the lady. In Petrarchan poetry the lover is a ship tossed at sea, a hart wounded by an arrow, an actor on a stage; the lady is at best described in idealistic physical detail and at worst as the cause of all the poet’s pain.

As will be shown in the close readings, this is very much the case with Labé’s female lover and male beloved. However, there is an additional subtle and potentially subversive undercurrent to this canonical inversion.

Krueger posits that if women’s extant writings from this time in France comprise only a fraction of those which have been preserved, then the women’s poetry often strikes out in new ways with surprising innovations. Labé was certainly not alone in engaging with poetry with a directly romantic focus. Her Lyonnaise contemporary, Pernette du Guillet (c.1520-1545), also of privileged social standing, had a collection of poems published posthumously by Labé’s own publisher, Jean de Tournes. Karen James claims that these works differ from Labé’s

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11 Labé attracted condemnation from Philibert de Vienne, a famous writer at the time, who described her as a courtesan in: P. de Vienne, Le Philosophe d’e Court, Lyons, Jean de Tournes, 1547, p. 72.


14 Kreuger, Lafarge and Perry (eds), French Women Poets, p. 4.
poetic style inasmuch as, ‘the female lyric subject of the Rymes gently, humorously, yet firmly, asserts her right to speak and be heard.’ But arguably, Labé achieves a similar, though less humorous, result in the poetic voice that characterises her sonnets, as will be demonstrated in this paper’s close readings.

James claims that the thriving literary society of sixteenth century Lyons is likely to have welcomed Pernette du Guillet, but would not have offered any models of female lyric subject to follow in the process of creating her own poetic voice. This may not have been strictly true for Labé, whose lifetime coincides with the popular Lyonnaise publication of Sappho, a woman who wrote poetry in the first-person voice of an actively desiring female speaker. Huchon, one of Labé’s most noted sceptics, observes that publisher Jean de Tournes had a strong interest in Sappho, evident in his preface to Ovid’s Epistles, which features a poem titled ‘A Letter from Sappho to Phaon’, which may have contributed to his decision to publish Labé’s work.

Popular circulation and critical discussion of Sappho’s poetic engagement with love and desire may have offered Labé a model upon which to base her own engagement, which was then directed toward other topical styles, namely Petrarchan sonnets, which she viewed as fertile ground for subtly displacing conventional and canonised representations of male and female romantic and sexual desire, as well as voice. Since Labé does not directly quote Sappho’s poetry, the Ovidian fiction, nor refer to the poet by name, this assertion stems from similarities in poetic tone, rather than an overt acknowledgement in the sonnets themselves. Labé’s speaker passionately describes her romantic feelings (and the suffering incurred as a result), and the indifference of the silent, desirable male beloved, like Ovid’s Sapphic speaker, who bemoans Phaon’s infidelity. Rather than wholeheartedly applying and following Petrarch’s model of male lover/female beloved, Labé’s female lover perhaps has more in common with Sappho’s active and desiring female lovers, but offers a feminist engagement with the popular masculine poetic style.

16 James, Pernette du Guillet, p. 18.
17 Sappho had been first introduced to Lyons via the works of Ovid; the first editions of the Heroides and Metamorphoses began to circulate in 1508, becoming popular in the 1550s. See: Huchon, Louise Labé, pp. 96-97.
19 Ovid’s Sappho is depicted alone but passionately speaking to the reader via her epistle. Despite the romantic desires central to the poem, Ovid’s version of Sappho often appears more interested in her poetic legacy:

Tell me, when you looked upon the characters from my eager right hand, did your eye know forthwith whose they were – or, unless you had read their author’s name, Sappho, would you fail to know whence these brief words come. Perhaps, too, you may ask why my verses alternate, when I am better suited to the lyric mode. I must weep, for my love – and elegy is the weeping strain; no lyre is suited to my tears.

Her articulations of desire for Phaon are paired with desire for recognition, rather than domestic bliss, and Ovid emphasises his Sapphic speaker’s need for and right to such recognition. See: Ovid, Epistulae Sapphi in Heroides and Amores (trans. G. Showerman), Loeb Classical Library, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1931, lines 1-8.
20 Ovid’s epistle ‘Sappho to Phaon’ is a fictive account by Ovid of Sappho’s alleged suicide after romantic rejection by Phaon. The distraught Sapphic speaker eloquently denounces her faithless
sonnets clearly engage with Petrarch’s conventions of form, tone, and focus, but manipulate their delivery to reflect not only rising popular interest in a famous female poet, but also an overarching concern with the desires of the individual female speaker. Both Petrarch and Sappho ultimately figure as assistive steps in articulating and validating Labé’s own interpretations of suffering and desire conveyed by an active female speaker.

Contradictory Dedication: Sonnet 1

Labé, also known as the ‘Sappho Lyonnaise’, enjoyed an extensive education. This included the learning of supposedly ‘feminine’ tasks (such as embroidery and lute playing) but also the reading of Latin and Italian, in order ‘to ride with her brothers, to throw a lance, to handle a pike, a war axe, to shoot and bow, and wield a dagger...but put aside sports when she turned sixteen.’ 21 Despite this relatively egalitarian start to life, Labé’s sonnets clearly demonstrate awareness of less egalitarian expectations of women in Lyons at the time, particularly in terms of romantic and sexual expression. The plaintive tone of some poems gives way to indignant anger in others. Her election to write in the sonnet style, despite the overwhelmingly masculine nature of such writings at this time, is indicative of an early feminist desire to access fields otherwise considered ‘unfeminine’. Lyons of the time would have been ideal for such a move - Christine de Pizan’s Moral Proverbs was not only printed in 1478, but translated from French to English in 1526, signifying popular acceptance and dispersal of a female writer’s works. 22 There was also rising literary interest in ancient Greek and Roman authors, including Sappho. Huchon cites this as motivation for constructing a “Sappho Lyonnaise” out of Labé. 23 Unlikely to be shunned for writing on the basis of sex alone, Labé was able to engage fully with Petrarch’s poetics as a means of expressing not only her female speaker’s romantic and sexual desires, but also to air related grievances.

Labé’s actively desiring, Petrarchan female speaker articulates feminist theorist bell hooks’ observation that:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonised, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible’ and is ‘an act of speech, of “talking back”, that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice. 24

beloved while demonstrating the sophistication of her feelings and poetic ability, before throwing herself from the cliffs of Leucas.

21 Thurman, I Became Alone, pp. 34-35.
23 Huchon, Louise Labé, pp. 96-97.
The first sonnet of Labé’s collection is a literal ‘talking back’ to Petrarch, since it is written entirely in Italian. Her decision to write in the form of the Petrarchan sonnet demonstrates a willingness to engage with this traditionally masculine poetic structure, and adapt it to express female sexual and romantic desire, rather than female passivity to male desire.

Labé’s relatively liberal education linguistically equipped her to read Petrarch’s poetry in its original Italian, and not only in French translations. Sharratt argues that it ‘seems certain’ that Labé knew Latin and Italian, ‘with perhaps a smattering of Greek and Spanish’.25 In her work, Labé intentionally ‘broke the rules of Petrarchan discourse and other rules as well’, since she published her poems herself…and addressed them to a man who was not her husband and who inspired a love far less chaste than fiery, and wrote an introductory epistle to a woman friend in which she attacked the monopoly men held over education and culture.26

Despite subverting these ‘rules’, Labé’s sonnets are distinctly Petrarchan. As this reading of Sonnet 1 will demonstrate, Labé consciously engages with Petrarch as not only a predecessor, but also as a potential source of conflict and challenge to her poetic voice. In Sonnet 1, Labé’s Petrarchan address is tinged with violent imagery, but the only fear expressed is that for oppression of her voice. Graham Martin produced the following English translation, emphasising Petrarchan rhymes at the expense of precise replication of the poem’s original Italian descriptions. However, this dynamically equivalent translation preserves the tone of the piece and generally retains the Italian focus on bodily imagery:

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Even a man far wiser than the wise
Odysseus could never have predicted
The many bitter sufferings inflicted
By the sweet gaze of two such handsome eyes.

For, love, you turned their beauty like a blade
Against my innocent breast and made it bleed;
And there you nestle warm, and there you feed;
But you alone can heal the wound you made.

Intolerable fate: for remedy
To this infection forced to supplicate
The very scorpion that poisoned me.

Then please, Love, I implore you, terminate
This agony of mine; but don’t dispel
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26 Jones, ‘Assimilation with a Difference’. pp. 146-147. It is uncertain what the extent of Louise Labé’s relationship with Clémence de Bourges may have been, but it is likely to have been one similar to that of friendly mentorship to the younger woman.
My hot desire, else I should die as well.27

This opening to Labé’s collection of sonnets foregrounds the poet’s anxious desire to establish herself as a figure of intellectual as well as emotional primacy. Writing in Italian, rather than her native French, Labé immediately showcases her linguistic prowess as well as her conscious engagement with sonnets as an intellectual exercise, and Petrarch as a literary predecessor. The poem satisfies all of the Petrarchan conventions for rhyme, line length, stanza breaks, and content.

Janet Smarr notes that for the many women who wrote poetry in the sixteenth century, Petrarch provided an openly acclaimed model for engagement, but the central figure of Laura, or the beloved woman, offered particular problems.28 In Sonnet 1, Labé does not adopt the approach taken by Vittoria Colonna – writing of a ‘rational rather than sensual love’ for her deceased and therefore unattainable husband – but of a handsome and aggressive ‘Love’ who victimises her speaker.29 Colonna’s love for her inaccessible beloved man is portrayed as a rational response to his ‘valour’, just as ‘the Petrarchan lover adores his lady in part for the very virtue which denies her to him.’30 Labé, however, protests the duplicity of these virtuous and desirable traits; the same ‘sweet gaze’ can be turned ‘like a blade’. Oppression is linked directly to representations of beauty and desirability, and the speaker is an ‘innocent’ victim of their natural appeal, to be fed upon and implicitly destroyed. However, the beloved is not entirely blameless in this process; the figure is presented as consciously turning his beauty against the speaker, positioning her now as an articulate and delicate supplicant, akin to Ovid’s Sappho, rather than a wanton woman demanding sexual gratification.

The opening line is also a clinical and immediate implied engagement with two male figures: Petrarch and Odysseus. While the strength of the emotions and desires expressed in the collection should not be downplayed, it is important to reflect that, in this opening sonnet, Labé’s attention is primarily directed towards ancient and more recent male literary predecessors. She locates herself within this tradition, rather than within a maelstrom of romantic desires. The focal, beloved man in the collection has not yet made an appearance. Instead Labé acknowledges her own position in this poetic canon, linguistically positioning herself on equal footing with other, educated writers, and addressing ‘Love’ as an abstract concept, agonising and ‘intolerable’ in its current state.

This is the first instance of a recurring tendency in the collection for implying male influence rather than directly naming it. In so doing, the speaker maintains a position of primacy, despite invoking forces that seek to undermine her sense of self-control and personal agency. Deborah Baker’s reflections on Labé’s sonnets concur with this assessment, particularly her observation that the poet’s ‘love sonnets expand the boundaries of [the Petrarchan poetic universe] by extending the dialogue of appropriation, resistance, and challenge already inaugurated between the female

29 Smarr, ‘Substituting for Laura’, p. 3.
30 Smarr, ‘Substituting for Laura’, p. 4.
speaker and her male lyric heritage’. By overtly engaging with this predecessor, Labé ‘will envision a new model of lyric experience that metamorphosizes the ontological selfhood of the desiring female subject’, and simultaneously displace that experienced by male presences in her sonnets. Petrarh’s position as the person to whom the poem is dedicated is purely implied, while an ancient literary male figure, Odysseus, is openly referenced. In the opening of her collection, therefore, Labé demonstrates a hierarchy of physicality and physical presence, demoting Petrarh’s influence by only acknowledging him linguistically as an exterior force, akin to those other forces that threaten to suppress her self-expression. In addition, Labé invites sympathy from her readers in her adaptation of Petrarh’s ‘beloved’ figure, naturalising her desire and suffering as entirely in response to ‘Love’s’ virtues. But unlike the Petrarhian solution of praying ‘for aid in turning from a human to a divine object of love’, Labé speaks directly to the beloved man, as well as implicitly to the canonical figures of Petrarh and Odysseus, requesting an end to her suffering, but not the elevated state of her passions.

Fear of suffering and lack of acknowledgement is displaced by a greater fear of lack of freedom of expression. Interestingly, despite the speaker’s professed fear of pain from unrequited love, the sonnet portrays this pain as a certainty not to be shied from, but directly claimed and acknowledged. The speaker enunciates her suffering in almost medical terms, prescribing her own remedy even as she lists the symptoms and their cause, suggesting a level of clinical detachment and analysis, rather than hopeless complaint. This focus on the body as a source of concern, yet ultimately as another subject to be conquered, recurs in other sonnets, further highlighting concerns of female bodily agency to be confronted by Labé in her work.

Sonnet 1 sets out three primary approaches to be continued and adapted in the rest of Labé’s Oeuvres: to confront and suppress fears of oppression and manipulation of bodily images; selective displacement of the lover’s and beloved’s voices; and direct appeals to readers and figures who would question the legitimacy of her voice. Important male predecessors and the role of a male figure in the sonnets’ construction are acknowledged, but carefully so, resulting in the generation of a position of intellectual as well as poetic primacy for Labé’s speaker, as well as the poet herself. The opening poem is also rich in emotive content and impassioned language. In so doing, Labé justifies her use not only of the sonnet style, but also challenges those who would question publication of her collection. The recurring Petrarhian anxiety that the speaker ‘cannot get what he wants because his desire is improper and sinful’ and must therefore ‘combat his own impulses’, is displaced by Labé’s demonstration that the desire here is natural and enacted by the male beloved, and that she is a victim of its violence. However, Labé does not check her speaker’s impulses. Rather, as Smarr acknowledges, ‘she accepts the erotic nature of her relationship and focuses on her own feelings rather than on the creation of an object.’ In embracing these, she shuns not only the conventional Petrarhian solution

33 Smarr, ‘Substituting for Laura’, p. 6.
34 Smarr, ‘Substituting for Laura’, p. 18.
to thwarted desire, but also contextual expectations of female erotic desire and self-expression.

The Body and Suffering

In amongst the sonnets’ declarations of love and sexual desire, Labé also consistently presents a body assaulted by emotional and physical pains. Margaret Brose observes that much feminist criticism has highlighted the prevalence of images of wounded or fragmented female bodies in cultural production, including in medieval textual spaces.36 Such a representation of her female speaker would therefore be in keeping with the traditional Petrarchan tendency of individually describing the idealised features of the beloved, as well as representations of physical distress and emotional disarray for the lover. This recurring presence indicates a lingering, complexly treated fear of loss of control, both emotional and physical, on the part of the speaker both in Labé’s sonnets and the traditional Petrarchan model. Brose claims that:

For Petrarch and his epoch this binary mode of conceptualization [binary gender system, or male versus female] was deeply entrenched, and the female body was generally represented as the site of visual and sexual pleasure. And yet, in Petrarch’s (and Dante’s and Saint Augustine’s) intuitions, representations of female figures always evidence anxieties about absence and representation, language and desire, signification and the Logos... we might also entertain the possibility that for writers such as Petrarch, anxiety about the “constructed’ nature of femaleness, and hence – and more terrifyingly – that of maleness also, may be at the heart of the appropriate dynamics of this rhetorical scenario.37

Labé enacts Petrarch’s depictions of Laura as a series of composite, desirable attributes constructed in the body of his sonnets, for her own speaker’s male beloved. Not only is the male beloved a voiceless sum of desirable, physical attributes, but the speaker herself is also consciously subjected to physical pains and turmoil, grappling for the ability to speak, and self-consciously reflecting the artifice of distinction between their roles.

The central, encoded fixation on this speaker’s violently assaulted body is for Labé’s speaker to somehow reassert control over the situation. Fear of further pain is ultimately justified, since even in the final sonnet of the series, the speaker admits that her body is still besieged with pain, and that this is also a potential outcome for her listeners if they do not heed her warnings. Curiously though, the sonnets have by now converted representations of physical pain into a source of power and control,

37 Brose discusses Petrarch’s political poems, namely ‘Italia mia’, and its representation of the female body of Italy, but notes that these techniques are also found in Petrarch’s depictions of Laura. See: Brose in Lomperis & Stanbury, Approaches to the Body, pp. 2-3.
rather than victimisation, signalling development away from an oppressed, anxious state. As a result, Labé’s speaker is able to maintain a position of primacy; she is able to enunciate her desires as well as her complaints, even in potentially oppressive situations entrenched with despair and thwarted romantic and physical desires. Helen Thomas notes that:

[In illness, the body’s authoritarian power (the laws of the body) appear at odds with the rights and desires of the ‘self’. As a consequence, the ill or dying self – as presented by these narratives – frequently articulates refrains of instability and uncertainty, together with declarations of freedom and (in)justice. Intimacy abounds throughout the dynamics of illness and disease, in terms of revelations of the self, relationships with others, (self-)censorship and resistance to power.]

References to torturous pain and situations appear liberally through her Oeuvres. Labé’s preoccupation with physical form focuses less on her own beauty than on her ability to feel, in contrast to the physically attractive but unfeeling nature of her beloved. Interestingly, it is when her body is most assaulted that it creates the strongest sense of personal agency. In Sonnet 23, when the speaker recalls the flattery the beloved figure offered her hair and eyes, the poem’s tone becomes scornful. Thomas links her discussion to Kristeva’s notion of the ‘abject’:

During illness a terrifying separation of the body from the self can be experienced. Moreover, that part of the diseased/corrupted body that appears ‘other’ evades definition as a ‘definable object’. Such undefinable ‘otherness’ echoes Julia Kristeva’s definition of the ‘abject’… [but also] its refusal to respect ‘borders, positions, rules’.  

Though not addressing an ‘ill’ body, Labé’s speaker is clearly suffering from a series of physical ailments, offering up a much more literal, aggressive representation of ‘lovesickness’. The oppressive acts and inadvertent male oppression of female sexual and romantic desires do not result in dissociation from the body, nor suppression of desire, but an almost morbid fascination with these processes. Labé appears to operate outside Thomas’s definition: the corrupted ‘other’ of the speaker’s assaulted body strengthens her resolve, and consequently, prevents oppression of the self by exterior forces. Instead of evading definition, it is by assault, imagined death and illness that the speaker is able to come to stronger terms with both her self and her representations of desire, moving beyond fear of assault, to an almost glorification of its processes and effects. Instead of coming to view the poetic body as ‘abject’, it is the enforcer of its suffering that is absorbed by these terms, ‘othered’ to the point of non-human qualities. This becomes particularly clear in Sonnet 3.

Sonnet 2 expounds on the physical merits of the beloved, while Sonnet 3 laments the speaker’s physical trials and the increasing distance between the human experiences of the lover, and the abstract disinterest of the beloved. In English, Martin maintains an exasperated tone as Labé’s speaker laments:

O handsome eyes, brown eyes, O gaze that’s turned
Away, O fervent sighs, tears unabated,
O darkness of the night in vain awaited,
O brightness of the dawn in vain returned!

O obstinate desires, O sad laments,
O wasted time, O labour of regret,
O thousand deaths that bait a thousand nets,
O blackest fate upon my harm hell-bent!

O laughter, forehead, hair, arms, fingers, hands!
O poignant lute, bow, viol, singing voice!
All flames within the furnace that destroys

This one poor woman. Almost I despair;
My heart’s a house assailed with flaming brands;
Yet not one spark to catch and make you flare.\(^{40}\)

Labé’s preoccupation with representations of the body dominates Sonnet 2, which is filled with references to the physical beauty of the beloved male subject. Brose notes that in Petrarch’s sonnets to Laura there is a heavy reliance on ‘various Ovidian myths of metamorphosis involving voyeurism, rending and scattering of bodies, and the production of narrative.’\(^{41}\) Likewise, Labé’s speaker’s and beloved’s bodies are both presented as a series of parts, rather than a collective and peaceful whole. The voyeuristic speaker is no less subject to the pains of such a process, and the central issue in the sonnet’s last line is the beloved figure’s imperviousness to change. Labé’s pervasive preoccupation with oppression of voice is linked again to male indifference to her speaker’s feelings and desires, and is now also connected to resistance to change, foreshadowing perhaps a need for amendments to social expectations of female erotic desire and how it ought to be expressed (if at all).

The physically desirable form of the beloved man, ironically, denies him any further expression of self. His voice is only permitted to ‘sing’, rather than speak, and he is given no words, even in paraphrase. Only the speaker, with her tormented body, is able to communicate her desires and activities. Baker emphasises the importance of this technique across not only Labé’s sonnets, but also her elegies. She claims that by looking at Labé’s texts, the poet appears to engage in not only ‘an ongoing interrogation of the inherited models of Petrarchan poetics that privilege an exclusively male subjectivity’, but that she also engages in ‘displacement of the self-reflexive male speaking voice’, resulting in ‘transformation of woman from object to

\(^{40}\) Martin, Louise Labé: Sonnets, p. 21.
\(^{41}\) Brose in Lomperis & Stanbury, Approaches to the Body, p. 4.
the subject of erotic and artistic discourse’. This assertion is compelling since, in Sonnet 2, despite the speaker’s insistent listing of his physical qualities, the beloved, nameless man is presented as entirely without feeling and apparently incapable of response.

Instead of then levelling open condemnation upon this unfeeling male presence, Labé subtly offers a feminist critique of the beloved man and his lack of responsiveness, and comparative lack of humanity. In so doing, the male figure, rather than Labé’s speaker, is drawn closer to Kristeva’s formulation of the ‘abject’. Proximity to this figure does not result in ‘a desire for meaning’, which would render him ‘object’ in Kristeva’s terms, but rather ‘the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses... It lies outside, beyond the set...’, namely, the abject. Proximity to the male beloved results in conflicted feelings of desire and resentment, an acknowledgement of the pain that is happening now (and that which is yet to come), as well as fear. Labé’s speaker expresses feelings more closely aligned with aversion to the abject in Kristeva’s definition. Although fixated on the features of the beloved, the speaker approaches this man in much the same way that Kristeva depicts a person approaching unpleasant food:

[T]he food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself.

It is important to remember that the unnamed male figure has no reason beyond Labé’s narrative decisions to reject the speaker’s amorous advances. Labé rejects herself, via her poetic speaker, and in so doing, performs this rebuff of emotional and physical connection before any other can force it upon her.

The female speaker’s agency and voice are implicitly supported and defended from oppression because there is no comparable male voice to be silenced by its articulation. Labé’s representation of the male beloved’s body, however, acknowledges that this is due to a form of physical oppression by the poet of the subject. In addition, Labé’s oppression of the speaker is presented in sympathetic terms, inviting a similar response from her audience and critics. Physical pain and emotional afflictions do not prevent the speaker from communicating her admiration for the beloved’s physical features; therefore, fear of physical retribution as punishment for ardent self-expression is displaced. A stronger sense of self emerges for the speaker from this process of unjust denial and pain, as well as a complex relationship with the abject. Labé’s claim that the speaker is ‘one poor woman’ further emphasises this sense of personal outrage and victimisation, but also adds to the consistent focus throughout the collection on ensuring that the female figure does not become lost, subsumed, or downplayed in favour of the male presence’s desires, or lack thereof. This construction also appeals for sympathy from readers, linking her sonnets again with Petrarch’s consistent representations of Laura as an unattainable physical object of desire, resulting in a need for elevated thought as recompense. In

42 Baker, _The Subject of Desire_, p. 163.
44 Kristeva, _Powers of Horror_, p. 3.
addition, though, Labé’s speaker’s desires are presented in much more human terms than the nameless and voiceless beloved, inviting further expression from the speaker, rather than forcing her into silence.

**Escalation of Criticism: Sonnets 3 & 23**

The feelings of victimisation enunciated and condemned in Sonnet 2 are expanded further in Sonnet 3, where the speaker indicates in the final line of the final stanza that she is beginning to shift away from despair and towards a different resolution. The inappropriate nature of the beloved’s reaction is emphasised, and Labé’s speaker adopts a thoroughly victimised and inhumanely treated role. Unlike other female poets writing Petrarchan sonnets around this time, Labé offers a different resolution. While Vittoria Colonna abstractly praised a deceased male figure, depicting him as ‘a symbol of potential glory and honour’ rather than as a ‘physical person’ (and in so doing was able to achieve a sense of attainment in her sonnets) Labé has no such access to the idealised but increasingly distanced male beloved. Labé also does not take the approach of converting the beloved male figure into a religious one, such as that taken by aristocratic French sonneteer Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549), who wrote a full blazon of Christ’s body in ‘Miroir de Jhesus Christ crucifié’, leading to a ‘rapturous union’ with Christ. Conversely, Labé’s sonnets traverse more overt criticism of the conventions that would strangle her poetic voice and oppress her erotic desires, though the former is now depicted as of primary importance.

Labé itemises her suffering, emphasising her humanity and elevated feelings, but then suggests that now there is ‘no room left in my heart’. It is a curious move to shut down this symbol for romantic attachment, especially for a sonnet so early in the series. Implicitly, the beloved man’s lack of response results in further abjection of the female speaker, highlighting cause for alarm among sympathetic readers, and advocating open expression rather than oppression of loving emotions and actions.

In so doing, Labé further indicates that her central preoccupation in this series is not fear of romantic rejection or undesirability, but rather that she fears being unable to express her experiences of love, desire, and frustration. The piece is entirely absorbed by the speaker’s painful sensations, while the male beloved is again marginalised as the abstract concept ‘Amour’, slinging arrows at the unfortunate lover, rather than appearing in mortal, feeling terms as the speaker does. Labé’s use of the term ‘inhumaines’ in French emphasises distance between the nameless man and her speaker. Ironically, despite being presented as the personification of love, he is filled with ‘anger’ in Martin’s translation:

O long desire, O futile hope, O sighs
Of grief and customary tears that cause

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45 Smarr, ‘Substituting for Laura’, pp. 3, 11. Smarr notes that Colonna’s sonnets are about Ferrante’s death, rather than their marriage or first meeting, and he is never described in earthly terms, only as a series of spiritual attributes such as ‘famous spirit’ and ‘unclothed of human body’.

A river of despair to rise, whose source
And only fountain is my weeping eyes!

O cruel inhumanities, that tempt
To heavenly pity all the watching stars,
O primal passion of the spellbound heart,
How could you make my sorrow more intense?

Then with his bow let Love again take aim
And let his anger flare and do its worst,
Firing more arrows at me and more flame:

For now so many are my wounds at last
How could he find a target there to hurt
Me more? There’s no room left within my heart.\(^47\)

The beloved figure has been elevated (or relegated) to an abstract ‘Love’, rather than a human character. His abuse is not the source of fear for Labé’s speaker. Indeed, she opens the poem almost with pride, listing her emotional and physical grievances, and even goads this distanced, uncomprehending beloved into further assaults. Sonnet 3 not only chastises this lack of understanding and mutual desire, but also challenges the notion that such desires should be oppressed at all. Now that Labé’s speaker is being violently attacked by a dehumanised representation of the beloved, she appears as even more urgently human, and in need of sympathetic defence, as well as permission to express herself. The speaker appeals for divine ‘heavenly pity’, and rails against the ‘cruel inhumanities’ that have caused her distress. In so doing she indicates a need for broader, public acceptance, which is later directly requested in another sonnet. The beloved figure, elevated beyond his physical body and into an abstract, angered concept, is unnatural in the scheme of this sonnet, in the rest of the collection, and in the face of the speaker’s clearly demonstrated physical and emotional humanity. Since the beloved is not consistently a male human, this portrayal may not have been considered radically feminist during Labé’s own time, and as a result would not have been the main basis for condemnation. Intriguingly, condemnation of Labé’s work has been focused more heavily on its sexual and romantic content, considered improper for a respectable woman to write about, rather than its selective oppression and dehumanization of a male figure.

Keith Cameron recognises this approach within Labé’s work as evidence of an opinion that stresses female involvement, rather than passivity, in love.\(^48\) Cameron notes that, for Labé, ‘love is a mysterious, unseeing force, which can control and model our behaviour and thus our lives’, and ‘is not a wholly masculine undertaking’.\(^49\) Elevation of the male beloved to a position similar to Cupid is an ironic reflection here; though a key figure of the speaker’s romantic experience, strongly aligned with love, this man has twisted the mythic figure, and in so doing, a

\(^{47}\) Martin, Louise Labé: Sonnets, p. 23.
\(^{49}\) Cameron, Louise Labé: Renaissance Poet and Feminist, p. 57.
canonised process of love. Fear in Sonnet 3, therefore, is not that the speaker will experience emotional or physical pain via rejection, but that the natural order of love and desire has been thwarted. To prevent Labé from conveying this message would be to oppress a valid criticism of such an unnatural state of affairs, and it is possible that such a reflection was intentionally worked into the sonnet in order to further facilitate acceptance of her work and its publication.

Sonnet 23 expands on this concern, aggrandising the female speaker’s passions and now openly challenging the unresponsive male beloved. In the original poem and Martin’s translation, the speaker’s tone is much more hostile than that of other poems already examined, and the sonnet is peppered with angry questions. In English, the poem also opens with the speaker’s angry dismissal of the beloved’s earlier praise for her physical beauty. The absence of any reference to the speaker’s strength of emotion, love, and sincerity suggests improper separation of physical and emotional properties on the part of the criticised male figure, in comparison to Labé’s earlier reflections on the body. Martin translates the poem as follows:

What good is it to me that once you praised
The silk perfection of my golden hair,
Or that to two bright Suns you would compare
The beauty of my eyes, from which Love gazed

And shot the burning darts so expertly?
Where are you now, tears that so quickly dried?
Or death, which was to prove you would abide
By oath of love and solemn fealty?

Or did you seek from malice to delude,
Enslaving by pretending servitude?
Forgive the thought, my dearest love, this once

When grief and anger piercingly combine:
I tell myself, wherever you may chance
To be, your martyrdom’s as harsh as mine.50

It is a curious that this Petrarchan sonnet has opened with Labé’s contemptuous dismissal of her beloved’s poetic descriptions of her physical features. The speaker has sneeringly shunned the Petrarchan itemisation of favoured body parts and their virtues, questioning the beloved’s intentions, and linking these with malicious motivations. Labé’s speaker scornfully dismisses the notion that she herself should be figured as a Petrarchan object of desire, but at the same time, acknowledges a kind of shared victimisation between herself and the beloved in the final stanza. The first three stanzas can be interpreted as Labé’s own blistering condemnation of the Petrarchan sonnet style as a means of objectifying and oppressing a female beloved, but the final line of the third stanza turns this overt criticism into a shared suffering. The assurance that ‘your martyrdom’s as harsh as mine’ indicates a sense of broader,

50 Martin, Louise Labé: Sonnets, p. 43.
communal oppression. However, Labé’s role as the speaker and delineator of this suffering offers her a subtle form of control over the situation, maintaining primacy for her voice - even in this miserable scenario.

The speaker dismisses the physical attributes that accumulated praise for her in the past, signalling the last step in her shift away from physicality as a source of concern. Rejection of her own body again flirts with Kristeva’s notion of the abject, but it is not so extreme in this case. Cameron notes that, here Labé’s speaker has seen through the artificiality of the Petrarchan conceit, to now chastise her lover for his insincerity. Fears of advancing age and wasted youth are dismissed, replaced now with intense feelings of betrayal and injustice, tinged with sarcasm, which are not settled by the end of the poem. Physical attributes pale before internal qualities, including sincerity of feeling. In this instance, Cameron asserts, it is clear that the male beloved may represent not only an imagined or actual lover in Labé’s life, but also male Petrarchan poets, as she has consistently applied conceits, conventions, and motifs applied by her male contemporaries and predecessors. Sonnet 23 is now also the culmination of Labé’s resistance of oppression of female sexual and romantic desire, in the face of an uncomprehending and unjust masculine scope for such matters, their expression, and room for female agency. The poet firmly derides the failings of the beloved to appropriately comprehend the speaker’s virtues, but consolidates this critique with the assurance that ‘your martyrdom’s as harsh as mine’. This relatively egalitarian result also appeals to notions of humanity and equality, again inviting sympathy from the audience. Sonnet 23 escalates criticism to its highest point in the Oeuvres, but Labé is quick to ensure that it does not invite immediate oppression of its content by locating it as part of the natural evolution of her discussion. The humanity and logical emotionality of the female speaker does not solicit violence upon the beloved man, despite violence done to her, but seeks an egalitarian suffering for both parties.

Importantly, this is the final poem in which a male presence is mentioned, and the terms are certainly less loving and desirous than those expressed earlier in the collection, indicating that the collection is far more than a ‘simple’ exploration of feelings of love and sexual desire. Labé’s speaker is full of questions and condemnations, tempered only minutely in the final stanza, which echoes her warning to her female audience in Sonnet 24: ‘But O take care your suffering’s not worse’. The male beloved is given no opportunity to respond, signalling Labé’s perceived triumph in subtly manipulating a traditionally male poetic form in order to express her desires and disillusionment as well as the ability for women to express such desires at all. Sonnet 23 escalates the criticism initiated in other sonnets in the series, but Labé is careful to avoid condemnation on the basis of radical feminism, as it would have been understood as, if not called at the time. Consistent emphasis on the speaker’s emotional depth and calls for forgiveness and equality continue to encourage sympathy from readers, rather than demand censorship.

**Fear of Reception in Sonnet 24**

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51 Cameron, *Louise Labé Renaissance Poet and Feminist*, p. 83.
52 Cameron, *Louise Labé Renaissance Poet and Feminist*, p. 84.
The final sonnet in the series, Sonnet 24, completely dismisses the male presence of earlier poems to instead focus on the *Oeuvres*’ female audience, to directly anticipate and shape their responses. This serves as the final confirmation that Labé’s *Oeuvres* operates beyond the scope of a simple love lament, and is instead intended as a reflection on societal and literary oppression of the female individual. This has particular repercussions for Labé herself, as well as for other women writers, and the strategies necessarily adapted to prevent this. The Petrarchan sonnet style is still dutifully maintained, but rather than appealing to an idealised individual body, Labé now addresses a proposed, virtuous female audience. The evolution of Labé’s directed audience could represent a subtle engagement with Lyons interest in the ancient Greek poet Sappho during Labé’s lifetime. Thanks to scholarship on Sappho’s life, it was known during Labé’s lifetime that much of Sappho’s work was composed for and performed to a group of women. The final sonnet in the series still applies Petrarch’s formal conventions, but has by now twisted the conventional roles of lover and beloved, and also now may refer to a famous female literary predecessor, signalling another step in Labé’s development of a forthright female speaker, refusing to be oppressed from self-expression.

Sonnet 24 addresses an entirely (intended) female readership, as Labé’s speaker focuses on the physical aspects of her desire and suffering, appealing for sympathy, but also warning her readers not to condemn her lest they too be judged one day. The female listeners are not directly named, but the speaker levels a series of warnings upon them nonetheless, focusing not only on the speaker’s own sufferings, but also anticipating those of others who fail to listen. Martin translates Labé’s address into English as follows:

Do not reproach me, ladies, if I’ve loved
And felt a thousand torches burn my veins,
A thousand griefs, a thousand biting pains.
If all my days to bitter tears dissolved,

Then, ladies, do not denigrate my name.
If I did wrong, the pain and punishment
Are now. Don’t file their needles to a point.
Consider: Love is master of the game:

No need of Vulcan to explain your fire,
Nor of Adonis to excuse desire,
But with less cause than mine, far less occasion,

As the whim takes him, idly he can curse
You with a stranger and stronger passion.

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53 Joan DeJean notes that the French reception of Sappho took place much earlier than the English, and French dominance over the field of Sappho scholarship was ‘virtually uncontested’ in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, in the 1500s, Sappho’s poetry and personal circumstances were not yet associated with homosexuality (this only became the case from 1660 onwards). See: J. DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho 1546-1937*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 1-5.
But O take care your suffering’s not worse.\textsuperscript{54}

Cameron assesses this poem as evidence that, in publishing the collection, Labé ‘offered herself up as an example and warning to other women’, as though she ‘appreciated that her task was to speak up for members of her sex’. He argues that, by revealing,

Her own version of love as seen from a woman’s point of view, she not only invigorated love poetry in general but also enabled women to identify with her and to become aware of the purity of their own emotions, of their ‘respectability’ and of their normality.\textsuperscript{55}

While Cameron’s optimistic image of a supportive, feminist figure is compelling, it is important to remember that this sonnet sits at the end of a series in which Labé has been insistently establishing a position of emotional and intellectual superiority over her literary predecessors, contemporaries, and male influences, countering potential sources of oppression. Self-interest, as well as communal benefits, is also at the forefront of this collection. In countering a series of sources of oppression, Labé now ironically turns these same countering measures towards those whom she intends to assist, articulating an almost post-traumatic representation of self-control. The violent imagery seen in the rest of the series has not vanished, but now threatens to find a new target. Labé’s adoption of a mentoring role does not allow her female audience to forget her suffering, nor its sources, hence the decision to reflect on these fearful aspects in order to reiterate the importance of maintaining agency and self-expression.

The subtle shift towards Sapphic poetics and the step away from Petrarchan poetics highlight Labé’s adaptive processes in her drive for expression. The fact that this final poem is entirely divorced from the unfeeling male beloved reiterates his inappropriate status and responses throughout the collection. No resolution can be made if one party denies the other’s voice, or the other’s means of expressing desire. Both Labé’s speaker and the male beloved are guilty of these acts throughout the sonnets, resulting in a relatively egalitarian criticism of both figures, but with a heavily skewed sympathy for the female speaker conveyed via Labé’s descriptions. The sonnet series opens and closes with appeals to male literary predecessors and female readers, indicating Labé’s self-conscious desire to engage with those who would legitimise or oppress her poetic voice.

**Conclusion**

Despite their Petrarchan roots, Louise Labé’s sonnets are not wholly focused on love and desire, but on the ability of the speaker to convey these feelings in the face of adversary. Lyons’ rising interest in the poetry of Sappho, as well as an increasing number of women poets publishing sonnets, facilitated Labé’s acceptance, but did not prevent controversy due to her overtly erotic poetic content. Labé’s

\textsuperscript{54} Martin, *Louise Labé: Sonnets*, p. 43.

\textsuperscript{55} Cameron, *Louise Labé: Renaissance Poet and Feminist*, p. 85.
engagements with Petrarchan stylistic conventions and themes, as well as popular interest in an ancient female poet, are used to build an active, desiring female speaker who does not shy away from conflict or violence in the expression of her romantic desires, as well as her need for recognition and self-expression. Labé’s poetic representations demonstrate a prevailing and sympathetic approach towards the self-expression and self-actualisation of a female speaker’s desires, even in the face of masculine indifference or outright rejection. All twenty-four sonnets are fixated on the speaker’s ability to articulate her desire for an unnamed man, in spite of a variety of opposing forces, the least of which appears to be the man’s indifference. Despite her stylistic fidelity to the Petrarchan sonnet form, Labé does not adopt approaches used by other women poets at the time, including sonneteers such as Vittoria Colonna and Marguerite de Navarre, to address the idealised figure and offer a solution to her speaker’s suffering. Labé’s model is far less subtle in its calls for increased expression of women’s poetic voices and erotic self-expression, and her concerns for oppression are directly addressed to other women.

In addition, these poems are all layered with challenges to literary, linguistic, and social means that would seek to suppress Labé’s voice and desires. Despite the processes of victimisation and abjection taking place in the body of the sonnets, there is a consistent undercurrent of self-control and appeals for sympathy. The opening and closing pieces demonstrate openly intellectually self-aggrandising and controlling approaches, but are also coyly flattering to her audience. Labé not only acts out the role of the despairing woman, but also adds a proactive twist, just as she appeals to male predecessors and attractive figures, and displaces their authority over her speaker’s voice. Labé does not act outside of stereotypes, but places enough pressure on these to suggest that even if we do not have any record of her views on the rights and roles of women, she may well have had opinions that could now be called feminist. Her sympathetic, consistent focus on her speaker’s desires and feelings, as well as her condemnation of the male figures who have caused her pain or threatened to silence her, elevate her speaker to a position of clarity not ordinarily offered to female figures in Petrarchan poetics, nor applied by some other female poets writing in similar styles in the same time period. Labé’s unabashed focus on physicality, both in her representations of the beloved man’s desirability and her own speaker’s suffering, are striking amongst other sixteenth century women’s sonnets.

By examining Labé’s poetic innovations, particularly through her representations of voice and bodily agency, the poet’s means of displacing potential challenges to her publication and reception are revealed. A recurring fear of being silenced (or otherwise unable to express her desires) features prominently across the sonnets, and yet is consistently suppressed by Labé’s focus on her articulate nature, elevated emotions, and separation from physical representation. The poet’s triumph is tempered in the final two sonnets, in which her most overt criticism of male definitions of female desire and its poetic expression are aired, and her complex support for other women’s agency in such matters, are expressed. Though not a poet typically aligned with fear of oppression as a recurring feature in her Œuvres, Louise Labé demonstrates an effective series of poetic strategies for combatting and adapting precisely this concern. Her sonnets are sophisticated engagements not only
with the idealised male beloved, but also with the speaker’s voice and self-expression, and potential sources of oppression, which Labé is determined to articulate despite canonical poetic and contextual tendencies towards censorship and rejection.