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NOTES, CRITICAL AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL, ON LOUISE LABÉ

O few names in the history of literature have escaped attention and searching criticism from students that it is certainly remarkable that one so important and interesting as that of Louise Labé should be so little known, except among a few of her more erudite fellow-countrymen.

Among English-speaking students and writers very little attention has been paid to her, though she was one of the most important poetic genuises of any age. To many, her name is unfamiliar or even unknown, and this often enough is the case with inhabitants of France.

References to her and her works in English are exceedingly scanty, and scholars seem to have passed, with hardly any notice, over the beauties of her poetry and the interest attaching to what is known of her life and surroundings.

In 1835 was published Miss Costello's work entitled 'Specimens of Early French Poetry,' and in it, among other descriptions and biographical

notices, a short and not very accurate account of Louise Labé appears, with inadequate translations of one or two of the poems. The military episode at Perpignan in 1542 is described, and a short notice of the friendship of the poetess for Clemence de Bourg, and of their subsequent disagreement, is given. The appreciation of her contemporaries is emphasized, while nothing with any scandal or malice in it is repeated. Beyond this, not much is said; though, perhaps, in a book of the character of this one, we should not expect more.

Again, in 1880 R. C. Christie, in his 'Etienne Dolet, the Martyr of the Renaissance,' devotes half a page to praise of *La Belle Cordière*. He does not quote from her works, but says of her: 'Beautiful, accomplished, and wealthy, the centre of all that was noblest in the society of Lyons in the middle of the sixteenth century, she anticipated the nineteenth in her regrets that the severe laws of men hindered persons of her sex from devoting themselves to study, and she exhorted them as far as possible to raise their minds above their distaffs and spindles, and to show themselves companions and rivals of the other sex in the pursuit of higher things, not indeed for the purpose of ruling, but of showing their capabilities for rule.'

More recently, in 1904, Arthur Tilley, in his work, 'The Literature of the French Renaissance,' devotes three pages to *La Belle Cordière*. He allows the sincerity of passion and some other notable qualities in her verse, but probably most of us will decidedly take issue with him when he refuses to admit the existence of music in it. He agrees that

the 'Debat de folie et d'amour' is full of 'charm and delicate observation.'

Again, in 1911, Sir Sidney Lee, in his book on 'The French Renaissance in England,' notices her in a few deservedly complimentary general remarks upon her poetry, and he also describes briefly without bibliographical detail Robert Greene's translation of the 'Debate between Follie and Love,' which appeared for the first time in 1587 as an appendix to the 'Card of Fancie.' This production was reprinted in London several times, most of the early issues being now *introuvables*. Greene considerably altered and compressed his original, and did not mention the name of its author.

While we have these casual notices of Louise Labé, there is no exhaustive treatment of her in English, though she holds an important position in the literature of France and of the world, and is one of the very few really great poetesses of whom we have any knowledge from history or experience. There is no edition of her works in English, and French editions for three centuries after her first appearance in print are very few, the first three being of the most extreme rarity. Copies of these are, however, to be found in the great collections in Paris, in Lyons, and in the British Museum.

So far the poetess seems to have escaped the ponderous attentions of Teutonic critics and bibliographers whose heavy hands and drill-sergeant minds have so often reduced to the state of a desiccated specimen what was once the living, breathing offspring of the brain of genius. For

this we may be permitted to feel thankful resignation. The lighter and defter French critical touch is much more appropriate to the subject. By French writers there has been built up around the name and works of Louise Labé a considerable mass of penetrating criticism, both literary and bibliographical, though she does not seem to have received the attention and appreciation to which the interest of herself and her works entitles her in these days of highly developed specialism. The feeling that this is the case is the excuse for this attempt to put into English some classified information as to who she was and what she wrote.

The exact date of the birth of Louise Labé is not known with any certainty. Most authorities are of the opinion that the date was 1525 or 1526, but one or two put it several years earlier, all agreeing, however, that she was the daughter of a prosperous cordage manufacturer named Pierre Charlieu or Charlin, later called Labé, and that she subsequently became the wife of a man engaged in the same sort of business, this relationship accounting for her designation *La Belle Cordière*, which was applied to her later in life. The period of the Renaissance did not produce in France, or indeed anywhere else, another of her sex so ardent and yet so delicate in poetical expression and conception, nor need we limit this qualification to the period in question, for to find her equal it is necessary to go back more than two thousand years to Sappho, a few gems of whose genius have been and still occasionally are unearthed in such a tantalizingly inadequate and imperfect state from the crumbling

papyri of the late Greek grammarians and commentators, which have been preserved for us by the dry air and the sand in parts of the delta of the Nile.

The world in which Louise Labé grew up was strikingly different from that of the two or three preceding generations.

About the middle of the fifteenth century, say from 1431 to 1461, François Villon, that perverse and debauched genius, had brawled and sung his dissipated life away, leaving to posterity a scanty legacy of verse, witty, pathetic, searing in its realism, *macabre* in places, which now, as time goes on, increasingly appreciated, has placed its writer in a niche as the first really great French poet. The Paris of Villon's time was the capital of a state almost ruined and torn by internal dissensions, while the town itself was badly governed, badly paved, and badly lighted, having a burgher class in consistent and strenuous opposition to the nobles and their adherents, in its efforts to keep what it possessed and to acquire more. The poor, of whom Villon, in spite of his connection with respectability and vested interests, was one, did not count at all, except when they attracted the attention of the correctional authorities, and in winter wolves on marauding expeditions, which often enough cost human life, invaded the remoter streets. Villon was to a certain extent a product of his time, but his genius was very real, and under different auspices might have been led into different paths, possibly with a loss of some of the poignant and uncompromisingly realistic qualities which are responsible for much of the power and directness

of his verse, particularly in the ballads. In any case we must accept his wayward genius as it was, and rejoice that his scanty poetical remains exist, and that in them opportunity is given for lifting the corner of the curtain of Time which conceals from us the dust and tumult, the glitter and the sordid misery, the luxury and the grinding struggle for existence in Paris at the lowering sunset of mediævalism. The contrast between this Paris and the Lyons of about 1550 is sufficiently startling. The Italian renaissance, the classical revival and the more placid state of the country combined to produce there an atmosphere of calm intellectualism and poetry which did not exist to the same degree anywhere else at the time. Intellectual pursuits were popular and widely disseminated, the great Greeks and Romans were studied and imitated, Plato and Platonism became a cult, sometimes a pose. This interesting and happy state of affairs lasted until 1562, when religious anarchy raised its ugly head and for years caused men in many of the relations of life to revert to savagery. Thus the remainder of the sixteenth century in France was not favourable to such intellectual pursuits, and at the same time the driving force of the renaissance towards culture and humanism was failing.

Louise Labé attracted attention early in life, for the first important episode of which we have any circumstantial account was the escapade of 1542, when she was said to have taken part, disguised as a soldier, in the unsuccessful siege of Perpignan, from which she returned with military honours and the title of 'Capitaine Louise.' The reason

usually given for this performance is devotion to a young man, and unless the whole story is apocryphal we may accept this explanation on the ground of plausibility and also for want of a better one.

Soon after this Louise returned to Lyons, where she continued to live, and during the year 1551 married Ennemond Perrin, a man considerably older than herself, and a prosperous maker of ropes. Thenceforward for a number of years she occupied a prominent position in the cultivated literary society of Lyons, and it was early in this period that she became known as *La Belle Cordière*. Her contemporaries, and some historians coming very soon after this period, almost always speak in high terms of her character, position, and literary attainments; and it is only somewhat later that any breath of scandal became associated with her name.

Much of the unwarranted obloquy which has been thought sometimes to cling to the name of the lady can be traced to Calvin's ill-natured designation *plebeia meretrix*, first hurled at her character in a religious controversial pamphlet about 1562. We may be certain that this description is unjustified, and is only the savage epithet which his narrow and sour intellect led him to apply to one who was the exponent of something beyond his comprehension and appreciation, exhibiting a variety of culture of which he thoroughly disapproved. There is certainly no evidence that Louise Labé was a courtesan in any such sense as were, for example, those ladies in Venice who were of so much interest to the great Odcombian pedestrian, Thomas Coriat.

The atmosphere in which Louise Labé spent the rest of her life was, as has been indicated, highly favourable to intellectual pursuits, perhaps to some extent tending to artificial refinements. Lyons was at this period the intellectual and poetical capital of France. Its central situation, and its easy access from Italy for exiles from Florence, Venice, and Genoa, to mention a few of the more important places, and the development of banking, trade, the arts, and architecture, fostered the true spirit of the Italian renaissance. Luxurious modes of life, possibly somewhat heavy, were nowhere more universal, and material prosperity was great among all classes. Printers were notably numerous, excellent and justly celebrated, and also, be it said, sometimes piratical.

Here, according to Brunetière, was formed, what was rare enough in France, a local temperament. The works of the poetess appear to have been circulated in manuscript several years before they appeared in print, and her reputation in literature was established before 1555, the date of the first printed edition.

Brunetière justly observes that, though the 'Debate between Folly and Love' has the form as if it were translated from the ancient Greek, yet it is really entirely the composition of Louise Labé, and was not surpassed by any myth from sources truly Greek. This acute and cultivated critic thinks that the fame of Louise Labé rests on the 'Debate' and on three of the Sonnets, numbered IX, XIV, and XXIV, and he lays stress on the fact that the poetess was a musician in language

as well as a producer of poetic concepts. This musical quality is obvious in all her poetry, and forms one of its most pleasing characteristics. In her handling of the theme of love, we have for the first time in the French language passion expressing itself with such candid vehemence, and yet so naïvely. For the first time the veil of Allegory is torn away without leaving any intervening pre-occupation. We can probably do no better than accept Brunetière's dictum on the relative excellence of the sonnets, and give the original text with the old spelling of the three sonnets of his choice, as examples of the best that Louise Labé left for the world in her slim volume of verse :

IX.

Tout aussi tot que ie commence à prendre °
 Dens le mol lit le repos désiré
 Mon triste esprit hors de moy retiré
 S'en va vers toy incontinent se rendre.
 Lors m'est avis que dedens mon sein tendre
 Le tiens le bien, ou i'ay tant aspiré,
 Et pour lequel i'ay si haut souspire,
 Que de sanglots ay souuent cuidé fendre.
 O dous sommeil, o nuit à moy heureuse !
 Plaisant repos, plein de tranquillité,
 Continuez toutes les nuiz mon songe :
 Et si iamais ma pource ame amoureuse
 Ne doit auoir de bien en verité
 Faites au moins qu'elle en ait en mensonge.

XIV.

Tant que mes yeus pourront larmes espandre
 A l'heure passé avec toy regretter :
 Et qu'aus sanglots & soupirs resister
 Pourra ma voix & un peu faire entendre :

Tant que ma main pourra les cordes tendre
 Du mignart Lut, pour tes graces chanter :
 Tant que l'esprit se voudra contenter
 De ne vouloir rien fors que toy comprendre :
 Je ne souhaite encore point mourir
 Mais quand mes yeus ie sentiray tarir,
 Ma voix cassée & ma main impuissante,
 Et mon esprit en ce mortel seiour
 Ne pouuant plus montrer signe d'amante :
 Priray la Mort noircir mon plus cler jour.

XXIV.

Ne reprenez, Dames, si i'ay aymé
 Si i'ay senti mile torches ardantes,
 Mile trauaus, mile douleurs mordantes ;
 Si en pleurant, i'ay mon tems consumé,
 Las que mon nom n'en soit par vous blamé.
 Si i'ay failli, les peines sont presentes,
 N'aigrissez point leurs pointes violentes :
 Mais estimez qu'Amour, à point nomme,
 Sans votre ardeur d'un Vulcan excuser,
 Sans la beauté d'Adonis acuser,
 Pourra, s'il veut, plus vous rendre amoureuses :
 En ayant moins que moy d'ocasion
 Et plus d'estrange & forte passion,
 Et gardez vous d'estre plus malheureuses.

These three sonnets would not necessarily be accepted by all readers as the best of the twenty-four, for obviously critical tastes vary, and there is merit, poetical and musical, in all ; but nobody is likely to make a *better* selection.

Sonnet XIV was translated into English by Miss Costello, and published in her 'Specimens' in 1835. Her version is as follows :

While yet these tears have power to flow
For hours for ever past away ;
While yet these swelling sighs allow
My falt'ring voice to breathe a lay ;
While yet my hand can touch the chords,
My tender lute, to wake thy tone ;
While yet my mind no thought affords,
But one remembered dream alone,
I ask not death, whate'er my state :
But when my eyes can weep no more,
My voice is lost, my hand untrue,
And when my spirit's fire is o'er,
Nor can express the love it knew,
Come, death, and cast thy shadow o'er my fate !

When this version is compared with the original it will be seen that as a translation it is decidedly free, though it has its merits. The last line is certainly not a success. We must, however, recognize the difficulties of the subject.

Blanchemain, writing in 1875, is the only writer who makes the curious suggestion that Louise Labé had a collaborator in the production of the poems appearing under her name, but his evidence is flimsy, and its citation is probably more of an excursion into literary empirics or a critical *jeu d'esprit* than an attempt to upset the apparently sounder conclusions of other writers, fortified as they are by tradition and direct evidence.

The bibliographical history of Louise Labé during the sixteenth century is short. Three editions of the 'Oeuvres' appeared in quick succession in 1555 and 1556, all published at Lyons, and then nothing for more than two hundred years, unless we count the Rouen edition of 1556, apparently an imitation

of one of the Lyons editions. Jean de Tournes published all three of the early Lyons editions, the first two being octavos and the third a sextodecimo, one of these being described on its title-page as being 'corrected.' Of these excessively rare issues the British Museum possesses two copies of 1555 and one octavo of 1556, and in the Hoe Library there was also a copy of the 1556 octavo which had previously been in the collection of Nodier. A fuller description of these early editions is as follows: 1st Edition: 'Evvres de Lovize Labe Lionnoize. A Lion par Jan de Tournes MDLV avec Privilege du Roy.' The prose is printed in Roman type and the verse in italic. On the verso of the last leaf there are four errata, and 'Achevé d'imprimer ce 12 Aout MBLV' is printed. The volume is a small octavo and contains 173 pages and one not numbered. The contents of the volume are: Dedicatory epistle; Debate between Folly and Love; three elegies; twenty-four sonnets, and twenty-four pieces in praise of the poetess, the first of which is a Greek ode. The second edition of 1556 is a reprint of this first edition, and contains the same number of pages. To the title have been added the words, 'Reuues et Corrigees par Ladite Dame.' The Privilege is printed in full at the end. The third edition, published in 1556, was in 16mo, and its title reads like that of the first edition except for the date. The pages are not numbered and Roman type is used throughout. This edition does not contain the Greek ode which in the other two issues is at page 125.

Charles Boy, in his edition of 1887, describes as

follows an edition published at Rouen in 1556: 'Evvres de Lovize Labe Lionnoize du Debat de Folie et D'Amour (sic) à Rouen par Ian Garou 1556.' This is said to have been a book in 16mo in imitation of the edition of Jean de Tournes. It is not stated where there is a copy, which, if it exists at the present day, must be of the very greatest rarity.

After 1556 there was not enough interest in Louis Labé and her works to call for a reprint until 1762, when Duplain of Lyons added an illustrated edition to that considerable number of exquisite books so characteristic of the eighteenth century in France. Of this edition in octavo apparently 525 copies were printed, of which twenty-five were on large paper, and of these latter twelve had the illustrations coloured in camaïeu. The engravings were by Daullé after Nonotte, and consisted of a frontispiece and head and tail pieces. At the present day this edition is exceedingly difficult to obtain, though it was apparently the largest in number ever printed of the works of Louise Labé.

After 1762, the next edition was one of 140 copies printed at Brest in 1815. It was an octavo. In 1824 a number of cultivated inhabitants of Lyons defrayed the cost of what up to the time was the best edition of the works of Louise Labé. The book was a well printed medium octavo, and in the introduction it is announced that its publication is not a commercial venture. The number of copies was very small. This edition contains
 20* Dumas' dialogue between Louise Labé and Sappho,

and is enriched with voluminous biographical, historical, and bibliographical notes by Cochard and Breghot. A glossary is appended. There were editions in 1845 (printed on tinted paper), in 1853, in 1862, and in 1875, that of 1853 having its pages decorated with woodcut borders and being limited to 120 copies. In 1887 Charles Boy's scholarly edition in two volumes appeared, of which twenty copies were on *papier de Chine*. This has voluminous historical and critical notes, with a careful bibliography, and it is on the whole the best edition. It is furthermore a charming example of bookmaking. In 1910, the poetical portions of the early editions were published with a notice by Tancrede de Visan, and a reproduction of Woëriot's engraved portrait as a frontispiece. Of this edition six copies were issued on *Japan Imperiale*, and twelve on *Hollande*. This engraved portrait of Louise Labé, executed in 1555 at Lyons by Pierre Woëriot, who settled there in that year, is of great interest. The engraver was a prolific producer of copper-plate portraits and historical subjects, and in 1562 he assumed the name of De Bouzey. Many of his plates are signed P. D. B., and some of them carried a representation of the cross of Lorraine. The engraving of the poetess is a half length, and in some degree suggests Mary Stuart. Its artistic value is not great, but its subject gives it great interest. The only known impression was discovered in the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1871 by M. Brouchoud, and in 1886 Devenet the sculptor made a bust from it which displaced that product of the

imagination of Foyatier in the Museum at Lyons.

Apparently beyond those which have been mentioned, there are no other editions of the works of this charming lady of the French renaissance, and it is curious to note that in spite of her importance in French literature, it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that she attracted enough attention to justify the publication of several editions, though in practically every case these were very limited in number, so that the aggregate of all copies of all nineteenth century editions is probably under one thousand. This is assuredly not a large number, when we consider the subject. After the publication of her book Louise Labé lived quietly and apparently uneventfully for about eleven years, part of the time in Lyons and part elsewhere. She published nothing more so far as is recorded. In 1565 she made her will, and in March or April, 1566, she died. It is recorded that one Claude de Bourg, a stonecutter, made the inscription on her tombstone, erected in or near the church of Parcieu. No trace of this now exists. *Sic transit gloria mundi*. Much more might be written in the way of speculation about Louise Labé, but it would be of doubtful utility. Perhaps some day she will appear in an adequate English dress, but she should really be studied in her own smooth original.

E. M. Cox.