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A Voice Restored:
Louise Labé’s Impersonation of Sappho

PHYLLIS R. BROWN

Ever since the publication of herŒuvres in 1555, Louise Labé’s name and poetic voice have been closely linked with the name, voice, and identity of the ancient Greek poet Sappho. Labé’s contemporaries called her the “Sappho Lyonnaise,” and Labé names and alludes to Sappho at several points in her writings. For example, in Labé’s first elegy the persona specifies that Apollo has given her the lyre which was accustomed to sing about lesbian love and which would at the same time cry about hers:

Il m’a donné la lyre, qui les vers
Soulait chanter de l’Amour Lesbienne:
Et à ce coup pleurera de la mienne.

(Œuvres complètes, 107)

He gave me the lyre which was accustomed to sing about the woman from Lesbos’s love: and with that touch it will weep about my love.

Far less conspicuous than the association between Labé and Sappho is the idea of Sappho that Labé responds to and evokes in her writings, for Sappho has had and continues to have many different meanings and identities for different people. Not only poets and novelists, but also literary historians and biographers, have created fictitious “Sapphos.” The poetic persona Labé creates derives in part from knowledge of the historical woman and poet Sappho and in part from the fictions of Sappho to which classical writers like Ovid contributed.

In her Fictions of Sappho, Joan DeJean traces developments in the French literary and historical construct called “Sappho” from 1546 to 1937. She reveals that since about 1660, Sappho has more often been associated with unrequited heterosexual love than with homoeroticism. Although DeJean gives the French credit for having “made the fictionalization of Sappho into a national obsession,”
she adds that "nearly every element used through the centuries of Sapphic fiction-making can be found in embryonic form in commentaries in antiquity." She concludes her introduction saying,

For centuries, Sappho commentary has been torn between two radically opposed visions: on the one hand, Sappho as the abandoned woman, the essence of unmediated female suffering and pain; and, on the other, Sappho as detached and wry commentator on "the vanity and impermanence" of human—not essentially female—passion.

(Fictions of Sappho, 28)

These visions, for simplicity's sake, can be credited to Ovid in the fifteenth letter of the *Heroides*, and Catullus in "Ille mi par esse" ("To me he seems godlike"). Although Ovid certainly did not invent the story of Sappho's suicide after her falling in love with the boatman Phaon, his version of the story, available in French translation throughout the sixteenth century, "succeeded in capturing the collective literary imagination of the age that prepared the way for French neoclassicism" (Fictions of Sappho, 42). Similarly, Catullus's "Ille mi par esse" transforms Sappho's poem, "To me he seems to match the gods," which expresses female sexual desire kindled by seeing another woman talking with a man, into a poem in which a male speaker's desire for a woman is intensified by the competition implicit in her conversation with another man. DeJean argues that "Catullus then reclaims for male poet-lovers the control over the gaze that positions the scene of desire" (Fictions of Sappho, 35). Catullus's poem, by naming Lesbia as the object of his desire, simultaneously adds to the fame and legends associated with the historical woman-poet Sappho.

François Rigolot suggests that most readers have read Louise Labé's "Amour Lesbienne" as more closely related to Catullus's poetic expressions of love for Lesbia, or Ovid's poetic re-creation of Sappho in *Heroides*, than to the historical poet Sappho herself. Nevertheless, as Rigolot and DeJean point out, Labé's publication of her work occurred during the very decade when two of Sappho's poems were published and translated into Latin and French, and when Marc-Antoine de Muret, in his edition of Catullus, articulated the relationship between Catullus's "To me he seems godlike" and Sappho's "To me he seems to match the gods." Rigolot goes further to suggest that a Greek ode praising Labé and linking her to Sappho may have been written by Henri Estienne, the scholar who had included two of Sappho's poems in his edition of Anacreon published in 1554. The Greek ode is as follows:
The songs of sweet-voiced Sappho which the power
Of all-consuming time destroyed,
Louise Labé, having been reared in the gentle lap
Of the Paphian [Aphrodite] and Loves, restored.
If anyone wonders at how strange it is and says,
"Whence comes this new poetess?"
Let him know that the unfortunate [poetess] has a beloved
Phaon, vigorous and inflexible;
Struck by his flight, she being wretched began to adopt
A shrill song to the chords of her lyre,
Through these poems, a vehement passion penetrates
The love of arrogant young boys.

If, indeed, Estienne admired Labé’s poetry and credited her with
the restoration of Sappho’s odes, then it seems likely that Labé’s knowledge of the historical poet Sappho was enriched by her association with Estienne, who later was to publish more of Sappho’s poetry and fragments in an edition of Greek lyrics (1566). An examination of Labé’s elegies in the two very different contexts—the Renaissance image of Sappho rediscovered in the sixteenth century and the legendary Sappho appropriated by poets like Ovid and Catullus—reveals Labé impersonating and imitating the historical Sappho in ways which serve to reverse, at least briefly, the sixteenth-century trend of making women silent and powerless, and the trend that runs from the ancient world to the modern, in which male writers “displace the female subject from the position of control.”

The difficulties of reconstructing Sappho as Labé might have envisaged her result not only from Sappho’s near erasure from literary history but also from our ignorance of Labé’s own biography, especially her education. Most critics express their confidence that Labé read Latin but not Greek. If that is so, she must have read Sappho in translation, in Latin or French, although the Latin source is the more likely, since the first published French translation was not to appear until 1556, a year after Labé published her own works. In addition to knowing the two recently recovered Sapphic odes, Labé is likely to have been aware that Greek and Latin meters were named after Sappho. In Débat de folie et d’amour, Apollo’s inclusion of Sappho in a list of the best ancient poets and philosophers suggests that Labé must have been aware of the high esteem Sappho’s poetry had earned in ancient Greece. It is no less likely, however, that Labé’s knowledge of Sappho to a large extent derived from the Catullan and Ovidian appropriations of Sappho, especially since Labé’s poetry includes
numerous other signs of borrowings from Catullus and Ovid. Furthermore, the Greek ode praising Labé and naming her as the restorer of Sappho’s song also names Phaon, the fictional boatman whose power over Sappho was perpetuated by Ovid’s *Heroides*. Labé’s second elegy in particular, epistolary in form, is powerfully evocative of Ovid’s *Heroides*. Although Labé never names Sappho in the second elegy, she seems to be adopting first a character and voice like those of Ovid’s grieving, abandoned women brought to life in the *Heroides*, and then, more specifically, the voice of the simultaneously fictional and historical “author”-character Sappho. Yet, whereas Ovid silenced Sappho in the fifteenth verse letter of the *Heroides*, Labé was to restore her voice and her poetic powers in her second elegy.

A closer look at Labé’s second elegy reveals several parallels to Ovid’s *Heroides*. As in each of the first fifteen *Heroides*, the situation is that of a woman writing to a man who has abandoned her. Consistently the man is mobile, traveling by water, and the abandoned woman stationary, on land. Ovid’s women, however, vary from the chastely married Penelope, who we know ultimately will be reunited with Odysseus, to the naively innocent Phyllis, who relinquished both her kingdom and her virginity to Demophon only to have her trust betrayed. Ovid’s situations vary from that of Laodamia—newly married to Protesilaus, who will die the moment he sets foot on Trojan soil—to that of Medea, cast aside by Jason when the opportunity of marriage to Creon’s daughter presents itself. Some of the women reveal themselves to be helpless as well as hopeless, while others respond to their circumstances with cunning or rage. Harold Isbell points out that a source of irony in the *Heroides*

is to be found in the fact that every lover is writing out of a desire for union with the beloved, a union which it is hoped will result in stability and permanence. While this is the stated desire of the writer, it is the reader’s universal experience that nothing in this life can be static. The irony arises with the reader’s realization that the only stability free of change is to be found in the death of either one or the other or both parties. While love causes one to desire the unchanging fulfilment of love, it is only in death that anything can be said to be free of change.

A further irony resides in Ovid’s simultaneous empowerment of women by giving them voices and transforming them from minor characters in epic to central characters in lyric, and disempowerment of women through the depiction of their inability to perceive themselves as autonomous individuals. Typically, the al-
ternatives seem to be either reunion with the loved one or death. Even Penelope closes with the reminder:

\[ \text{Certe ego, quae fueram te discedente puella,} \\
\text{protinus ut venias, facta videbor anus.} \]

Just remember, I was a young girl when you left; if you came at once you would find an old woman.\(^{10}\)

Age and time have more control over who she is than she does herself, although Penelope exercises more control over her situation than do most of the women, albeit through patient faith and waiting.

Louise Labé’s “Elegy 2,” while sharing many characteristics with Ovid’s *Heroïdes*, introduces changes that associate her persona more with the broader Renaissance image or conception of Sappho than with legend’s and Ovid’s Sappho, and with the poet of the *Amores*, *Heroïdes*, and *Metamorphoses* more than with the women in Ovid’s poetry. The Sappho of Ovid’s *Heroïdes* differs from Ovid’s other women letter writers, inasmuch as Sappho is historical whereas the other women are fictional. By Ovid’s time, however, the legend of Sappho’s unrequited love for Phaon had attached itself to the historical figure. Ovid embroiders on this legend, having his Sappho specify that nothing—not even the girls of Lesbos—can now give her any joy:

\[ \text{non oculis grata est Atthis, ut ante, meis;} \\
\text{atque aliae centum, quas non sine crimine amavi;} \\
\text{inprobec, multarum quod fuit, anus habes.} \]

\[(\text{Heroïdes, XV.18–20; Loeb, 182)}\]

Atthis no longer brings joy to my eyes as she did once. Nor do I find pleasure in the hundred others I have loved in shame. Yours is now the love these maids once had.

\[(\text{Heroïdes, 134)}\]

Ovid’s Sappho acknowledges, then undercuts, the greatness of her lyric artistry:

\[ \text{iam canitur toto nomen in orbe meum;} \\
\text{nec plus Alcaeus, consors patriaeque lyraeque;} \\
\text{laudis habet, quamvis ille sonet.} \]

\[(\text{Heroïdes, XV.28–30; Loeb, 182)}\]

my name is known all over the earth. Alcaeus himself has no richer fame: he who shares not only my gift for song
but also my homeland, though he sings a song of more dignity than my lyrics.

(Heroides, 134)

Therefore, it is even more significant, when, toward the end of the poem, she describes the death of her art:

\[
\text{nunc vellem facunda forem! dolor artibus obstat,}
\text{ingeniumque meis substitit omne malis.}
\text{non mihi respondent veteres in carmina vires;}
\text{plectra dolore tacent, muta dolore lyra est.}
\]

(Heroides, XV.195-98; Loeb, 194)

I wish that eloquence were mine now, but grief kills my art and woe stops my genius. The gift of song I enjoyed will not answer my call; lyre and plectrum are silent.

(Heroides, 140)

Ovid’s poetry intensifies the poignancy of her destruction, first as a poet and subsequently as a woman, as a result of Phaon’s abandoning her.

Labé’s second elegy plays with many of the same themes and images, while naming neither the speaker nor the male loved one. Like Sappho, the persona of Labé’s elegy has earned wide fame, not only in France but in Spain and Germany as well:

\[
\text{Non seulement en France suis flatee,}
\text{Et beaucoup plus, que ne veus, exalte.}
\text{La terre aussi que Calpe et Pyrenees}
\text{Avec la mer tiennent environnee,}
\text{Du large Rhin les roulantes areines,}
\text{Le beau pais auquel or'te promeines,}
\text{Ont entendu (tu me l'as fait à croire)}
\text{Que gens d'esprit me donnent quelque gloire.}
\]

(61-68)

Not only in France am I flattered, but celebrated much more, which I do not desire. The land which Gibraltar and the Pyrenees hold encircled with the sea, the rolling sands of the broad Rhine, the beautiful country where you formerly rambled, have also heard tell (according to your own account) that intelligent folk confer glory on me.

Labé’s persona also threatens suicide if her lover does not return to her. Both speakers cite inscriptions that will be engraved to
commemorate their deaths. Yet these parallels intensify significant differences. For example, Sappho’s inscription in Ovid’s *Heroides* focuses on the return of her lyre to Phoebus, emphasizing simultaneously her loss of poetic voice and power and Ovid’s skill as a poet:

*Grata lyram posui tibi, Phoebus, poetria Sappho:"
*"
*Convenit illa mihi, convenit illa tibi.*

(*Heroides*, XV.183-84; Loeb, 192)

The grateful poet Sappho gives you, Phoebus, the lyre that is appropriate to us both.

Ovid plays with the idea of Phoebus being honored and grateful when a great poet honors him and a poet being honored and grateful when Phoebus inspires him. The balance of the two *convenit* clauses is introduced not only by the names of Phoebus and Sappho in the first line of the inscription, but also by the double meaning of *gratus*, as “grateful” and “deserving thanks.” In a very real sense, Ovid has appropriated Sappho’s voice and used it for his own purposes: her voice is an extension of his fame and honor as a poet. Meanwhile, he has taken from love poetry the ironic convention of lovers singing about their inability to sing, and literally silenced her.

Knowledge of the inscription described in Ovid’s poem gives new resonance to Labé’s account of her persona’s poetic beginnings in the first elegy. Labé invents a myth in which her persona describes Apollo’s gift to her, Sappho’s lyre, with which she will sing simultaneously of her own love and Sappho’s. In this way, Labé aligns herself and her persona with the early modern image of Sappho, the Sappho who was famous for her poetry, and with Ovid himself, who gained fame for his love poetry, rather than the character of Sappho in the fifteenth letter of the *Heroides*. While Ovid perpetuates a myth that contributes to his poetic glory while silencing Sappho, Labé creates a myth that valorizes her poetry through association with Sappho, Apollo, and, obliquely, even Ovid.

Ovid plays similar games with the opening of Sappho’s letter to Phaon, in which Sappho points out that Phaon may be confused to see her writing in elegiacs, since she is famed for her sapphics. She explains:
Love prevents her from writing in the mode that made her famous. Moreover, as the letter continues, Howard Jacobsen argues, the blatant artistry self-consciously and heavy-handedly draws attention to itself in ways reminding the reader of the historical Sappho's style and Ovid's style in the Amores, convincing the reader that "If Phaon has deprived Sappho of her poetic skills, so too he has rendered her incapable of loving and being loved by others. ... He has destroyed her both as lover and as poet." Love prevents Ovid (he tells us) from writing in the epic mode (though his Metamorphoses is in hexameters); writing his Amores and Heroides in elegiacs brought Ovid fame.

Labé's second elegy is full of weeping and tears, as befits an elegy. However, instead of singing about the inability to sing, Labé's persona continually emphasizes the power of her words as lament, prayer, and poem. In line 8, Labé's speaker explicitly refers to her letter-poem as lament ("en vain mon désir se lamente"—my desire laments in vain). Whereas, in Ovid's poem, the lament quality contributes to Sappho's loss of autonomy and power as a woman and a poet, Labé taps into a source of female power with her lament. In her Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature, Gail Holst-Warhaft explores lament as a woman's art potentially posing such a threat to society that from the sixth century B.C. "the more advanced city-states" developed legislation to control "extravagant" mourning by women. Critics agree that Ovid's Heroides builds on the tradition of women's lament that survives in the ancient Greek epic and tragedy, notably Sophocles' Antigone, as well as in Catullus's Ariadne. When Ovid builds on the lament tradition, however, he participates in the disempowerment of women. Labé, on the other hand, recovers the lament as a woman's art and appropriates its power.

Labé's persona is even more explicit about the power of her prayers: she cannot believe that the man she loves can be held back from returning by sickness, or because he has lost his way: the gods would have to be more cruel than tigers not to heed her prayers:
[...]

*De faire aus Diesus pour ta santé prie,*
*Que plus cruels que tigres ils seroient,*
*Quant maladie ils te prochasseroient.*

(Œuvres complètes, 34–37)

[...]

*because I am in the habit of praying so much to the gods for your well-being that they would be more cruel than tigers if they allowed any harm to draw near you.*

She goes on to say that even though her lover may deserve suffering, God will restrain his wrath on account of her prayers:

*Bien que ta fole et volage inconstance*
*Meriteroit avoir quelque soufrance,*
*Telle est ma foy, qu'elle pourra sufere*
*A te garder d'avoir mal et martire.*

*(Œuvres complètes, 37–44)*

Your crazy and fickle vacillations ought to result in some suffering. However, such is my faith, that it will be able to do enough to shield you from evil and martyrdom. He who holds his empire in the heavens above would not be capable of telling me otherwise, it seems to me: when he heard my weeping and tears, praying for you, he would restrain his wrath.

His inconstancy contrasts sharply with her faith and loyalty, with the result that he deserves to be punished; nevertheless, her power of language through prayer and lament is adequate to protect him.

Labé’s persona next turns to her considerable powers as a woman and a poet. No new lover could possibly be as widely respected as she is for her beauty, virtue, grace, and fluency in speech:

[...]

*(Œuvres complètes, 55–57)*

[...]

*I know very well that your new friend will scarcely have the fame of being such [as I am], be it in beauty, virtue, charm, or eloquence.*
In lines reminiscent of the first of the letter in *Heroides*, she stresses her attractiveness to other men. Like Penelope, she has many suitors:

_Maints grans Signeurs à mon amour pretendent,
Et à me plaire et servir prêts se rendent,
Joutes et jeux, maintes belles devises
En ma faveur sont par eux entreprises._

(Œuvres complètes, 75–78)

Many great lords lay claims to my love, and are ever ready to serve and please me, [and] tournaments and games, and many fine devices have been attempted by them to honor me.

Perhaps most important, however, in setting Labé’s persona apart from Ovid’s Sappho, but in company with the poet Ovid and the historical Sappho, is the inscription with which she closes the elegy. Labé’s inscription appropriates the convention of poetry immortalizing its writers. Labé’s persona will not even be silenced by death. The words of her inscription, like Labé’s, Ovid’s, and Sappho’s poetry, will continue to speak throughout time.  

Labé’s inscription simultaneously reflects the persona’s emotional disturbance resulting from unrequited love and the poet’s rhetorical skills which immortalize the female persona’s passion and power. The elegy closes:

_PAR TOY, AMI, TANT, VESQUI ENFLAMMEE
QU’EN LANGUISSANT PAR FEU SUIS CONSUMEE,
QUI COUVE ENCOR SOUS MA CENDRE EMBRAZEE
SI NE LE RENS DE TES PLEURS APAIZEE._

By you, friend, so much, I lived enflamed
That languishing I am consumed by fire,
Which still smolders beneath my burning cinders
[To be] quenched by nothing but your tears.

The careful, rhetorical quality of these lines—especially the syllepsis of *le* in the final line, agreeing grammatically with *feu*, while *apaizee* agrees with the feminine *cendre*—combines with the traditional imagery of burning love to emphasize the phoenix-like grandeur and immortality of her love and her poetry. Only the lover’s tears could extinguish the flame of her passion. Whereas Ovid’s Sappho will take the proverbial Leucadian leap, presumably extinguishing flame and pain in the waves far from her homeland,
Labé’s persona may die of love (indeed, she says she is dying of love a thousand times a day as she writes), but the finite verb of the inscription is the past historic of vivre, meaning “to live.” Furthermore the intransitive verb couve, or “smolder,” may bring with it some of its transitive sense, of “to hatch,” or “to brood.” This female poet is not so easily silenced and put to death as is Ovid’s Sappho. Like a phoenix, Labé’s persona bursts back to life after she has been consumed by the fire of love.

While Sappho frequently appears as a character in poetry, Louise Labé creates a poetic persona that not only draws on the Renaissance conception of Sappho as a woman and poet, but also on the fictions passed to her by poets like Catullus and Ovid. In contrast to these male poetic appropriations of Sappho, which tend to obscure the power of her female voice, Labé restores Sappho’s voice, its gender and its sexual inclination, speaking with her as another woman experiencing passionate desire. Besides, through her impersonation of Sappho, Labé’s persona demonstrates more generally that grief need not silence and destroy women. As the Greek ode says of Labé:

Struck by his flight, she being wretched began to adopt
a shrill song to the chords of her lyre,
Through these poems, a vehement passion penetrates
the love of arrogant young boys.

(trans. George Hardin Brown)

Thus, Labé’s persona in the second elegy converts her wretchedness to poetic artistry, as Sappho had done in her lyrics. Since nothing but the tears of her beloved could possibly extinguish the fires of her love, her passion will smolder and burst into new life, as Sappho’s does through the sixteenth-century recovery of her poems and fragments. Although both Labé and Sappho have tended to be marginalized by literary history, their interlinked voices have survived. Perhaps their passion still has the power to penetrate “the love of arrogant young boys.”

Notes to “A Voice Restored: Louise Labé’s Impersonation of Sappho”

1. As François Rigolot points out, the combination of the mid-sixteenth-century discovery and publication of Sappho’s fragment 31 (“To me he seems to match the gods”), and Labé’s evocation of lesbian love in her first elegy, contributed to her association with Sappho during her own time and since. “Préface” to
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2. Unless stated otherwise, the English translations are my own.

3. Catullus’s famous poem 51 (“Ille mi par esse”), a free translation of Sappho’s poem with the genders reversed, would have been well known to sixteenth-century poets, as would the fifteenth verse letter in Ovid’s Heroides, purporting to be from Sappho to Phaon.


5. “Louise Labé et la redécouverte de Sappho,” 21–23. Rigolot includes the Greek text of this ode as well as a French translation in his edition Œuvres complètes. The English translation quoted below was made specially for this article by George Hardin Brown.

6. DeJean remarks in her introduction, “I no longer see [Sappho’s] history as a progression toward greater knowledge. It now seems to me that the first erudites who worked to recover Sappho—notably Henri Estienne...—knew more about Sappho than any other pre-nineteenth-century scholars” (22).

7. See Fictions of Sappho, 44. In her chapter “Loss and Legitimation: Labé’s Elegiac Voice,” Deborah Lesko Baker discusses ways in which “the Sapphic allusion” in this elegy “does not erase the Petrarchan presence, but works subtly to challenge its exclusivity” through a “rhetorically ambivalent strategy of modesty and boldness, or independence and traditionalism, in their curious juxtaposition of authorial voices.” See The Subject of Desire: Petrarchan Poetics and the Female Voice in Louise Labé (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996), 94.

8. Another important source for Labé’s grieving, abandoned woman is Boccaccio’s The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta, available in a translation by Mariangela Causa-Steindler and Thomas Mauch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Boccaccio’s elegy is in prose, is much longer than either Ovid’s or Labé’s elegies, and depicts Fiammetta as a tiresome, selfish, foolish woman.


13. Jacobson points out that “it is Euripides who must be considered the distant ancestor of the Heroides, not merely because he so effectively and influentially utilized women’s speeches, but also because in the Heroides Ovid—whether consciously or not—inherited many of the intellectual and moral attitudes that were Euripides’” (Ovid’s “Heroides,” 7).

14. The survival of such a minuscule portion of Sappho’s writings is made all the more poignant by Antipater of Thessaloniki’s poem:

These women Mt. Helicon and the Macedonian rock of Pieria raised—with godlike tongues for songs:
Praxilla, Moero, the voice of Anyte (the female Homer),
Sappho, the ornament of the fair-tressed Lesbians,
Erinna, Telesilla of wide fame, and you, Korinna,
singing of the impetuous Child of Athena,
Nossis of womanly tongue, and sweet-sounding Myrtis—
all of them composers of pages that will last for all time.
Great Heaven created nine Muses, but Earth
bore these nine, as everlasting delight for mortals.

Antipater’s poem suggests a very different tradition from that of Catullus and Ovid, a tradition more in line with Labé’s impersonation of Sappho. The translation is by Jane McIntosh Snyder, who uses this poem as the epigraph to The Woman and the Lyre: Women Writers in Classical Greece and Rome (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1989).

15. See Rigolot’s note in Œuvres complètes, 114.