
H-France Review Vol. 6 (December 2006), No. 155

Madeleine Des Roches and Catherine Des Roches, *From Mother and Daughter: Poems, Dialogues, and Letters of Les Dames Des Roches*. Edited and Translated by Anne R. Larsen. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xxx + 319 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-72337-2; \$24.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-226-72338-0.

Review by Sara Beam, University of Victoria.

2006 marks an important year for the study of French Renaissance women writers with the publication of bilingual editions of the writings of both Louise Labé and the Dames Des Roches.[1] The volume under review here, Anne Larsen's impeccable critical edition and translation of excerpts from the collected works of the mother and daughter team Madeleine Des Roches and Catherine Des Roches celebrates an important contribution to our understanding of the constraints faced by non-noble provincial women writing for a wider public. Given the recent controversy surrounding Louise Labé's authorship of the works until now attributed to her, the accessibility of the writings of the Dames Des Roches has never been more urgent.[2] The Dames Des Roches' explicit linking of their authorial independence with their chastity highlights the degree to which claiming physical isolation from men could be a crucial component of female literary authority in sixteenth-century France.

Anne Larsen has based this bilingual volume on her well-received critical editions of their writings. The Dames Des Roches had four volumes published: three entirely of their own writings—*Les Oeuvres* (1578-79), *Les Secondes Oeuvres* (1583), and *Les Missives* (1586)—in addition to one collaborative volume entitled *La Puce* (1582-83).[3] Larsen selects judiciously from the three mother-daughter volumes, providing the reader with evocative examples of both their poetry and prose. She reveals how working together as a team, dedicating their works to each other and emphasizing their mutual devotion to learning above all other pursuits served to justify publication in an era when the act of writing remained morally suspect for women. Larsen's translation and redaction are impeccable: she provides informative introductions to each of the chapters, which are divided by genre and in some cases by author as well. Her notes are generous and informative, though it is puzzling why the editors decided to alternate between footnotes and endnotes, a choice that makes reading the poetry sections more difficult. Although the prose work is offered solely in English, the poetry is presented in a bilingual format, with the original French on the left. This is particularly helpful since Larsen elected not to use rhyme in her very readable translations of the poetry.

The mother partner of the Des Roches team, born Madeleine Neveu, was raised in a Poitevin family of notaries, and seems to have been educated at home. Praised by a member of her literary circle as "the most learned person in Europe, among those who only know one language" (p. 4), Madeleine remained committed to learning even as she married, bore three children and married again, the second time to a prominent lawyer. Madeleine devoted herself to the education of her only surviving child, Catherine, born in 1542, encouraging her daughter to seek fame through her writings. Madeleine's poetry is steeped in a rich humanist tradition of classical references and allusions, and provides a unique window on the realities of growing old as a bourgeois widow during the Wars of Religion. She addresses matters of public concern, decrying the violence of the Huguenot armies and warning the young duke d'Alençon against marriage with Elizabeth of England. On a more personal note, Madeleine writes of her illnesses, of the death of her friends, of her legal troubles and of simultaneously fearing and longing for the freedom of death. In letters to members of her literary circle, she emphatically affirms the autonomy of her authorial voice, rejecting tactful suggestions to change particular words in her poems.

Some of her most passionate contributions speak of a condition she knows well, the condition of marriage. She laments the bondage of marriage, and the conviction held by so many men that a woman cannot be both a good wife and an educated individual. Yet she also celebrates her second husband, referring to their bond as one of mutual respect and “chaste love” (p. 77).

Catherine Des Roches’ education and social experience was broader than that of her mother’s: Catherine read Latin and was exposed in her youth to the intellectual sociability of her mother’s literary coterie. The Dames Des Roches were well thought of by contemporaries in Poitiers, and as early as 1575 a poem written by Catherine Des Roches addressed to the king Henry III was presented at court and translated into Latin and Greek. Catherine found herself in the limelight twice more when the king’s court visited Poitiers in 1577 and when in 1579 the Grands Jours brought prominent Parisian men of the law to Poitiers for several months. In her diverse and ambitious writings, Catherine articulates a proto-feminist sensibility that celebrates homoerotic bonds between women and yet also reveals the pleasure she took in flirting and engaging intellectually with the most prominent bourgeois men of her generation.

Catherine’s writing celebrates bonds between women. She writes appreciatively to female members of the Poitiers literary coterie, and with love to cousins and friends when faced with death and disease. She offers sage advice to a friend whose husband is unfaithful: do not love him too much, and know your worth is not defined by his affection. Catherine’s rendition of the story of Agnodice, a mythic Greek woman who hid her female identity in order to study obstetrics and work as a doctor, is sensual: in order to prove that she is actually a woman to her female clients, the otherwise chaste Agnodice exposes her breasts to their admiration, caresses and kisses (p. 129). A lively dialogue explores the relationship between two young women, Pasithée, a paragon of learning and virtue, and Iris, a flighty, undereducated flirt. When Iris visits her wise friend, Pasithée seeks to persuade her of the virtues of learning, singing to Iris in an effort to lure her fickle friend to the side of reason. In the end, Iris is unconvinced: she runs off to join her lover whom she sees passing in the street. Although the reader is intended to admire the serene Pasithée, Des Roches’ evocative prose captures the seduction of the chase, the impatient youthful need to be on the move and the challenges of doing the right thing: remaining virginal and learned in the home.

Catherine Des Roches positions herself as a chaste virgin, but her literary activities suggest that Iris also had a place in her psyche. In poems and letters, she turns away from her suitors, delicately sidestepping compliments and emphatically choosing the life of the mind over marriage. Yet her poetic exploration of the perfect courtship between two fictional characters, Sincero and Charité, shows her appreciation of romantic love. Sincero is depicted as an anti-Petrarchan suitor, more concerned with the excellence of his mistress than the sufferings of his soul. He represents Charité as a teacher who helps him evade life’s troubles and claims that her writing will bring them both renown.

The tension between Catherine’s insistent claims to chastity and the coterie context in which she wrote is revealed most obviously in *La Puce*, the collaborative volume Catherine wrote in conjunction with several men, including the Parisian lawyer Étienne Pasquier. Larsen includes poems addressed to Pasquier and Catherine’s sexually modest contribution to the exchange, but does not emphasize the collaborative nature of the venture. *La Puce*, published in 1583 by the same publisher who published the Roches’ *Oeuvres* four years earlier—perhaps at the behest of Catherine and her mother—is a collection of verse based on the experiences and consequences of a flea alighting on Catherine’s breast. Pasquier claimed to have witnessed the flea at one of Des Roches’ literary evenings (Poitiers in 1579) and jokingly proposed a literary game. Des Roches and Pasquier contributed the first poems, but the final volume includes contributions from a dozen authors, some of which are explicitly sexual in nature, exploring just exactly where else the flea might be found on Catherine’s body.[4] Catherine’s possible

agency in the publication of a volume of semi-erotic poetry complicates our understanding of her claims to chastity, re-situating them in the heterosexual context of literary exchange and sociability in which they were constructed.

Since many of the readers of this volume will likely be undergraduates unfamiliar with the world of the literary coterie and the politics of sixteenth-century publishing, it would have been helpful to have explored more fully the ways that social class and the dynamic cross-fertilization of the coterie shaped the Dames Des Roches' publication strategies. Larsen notes that the Dames Des Roches were the first women to publish a collection of their personal letters in France (p. 243). Why they chose to do so could have been explored more fully. Aristocrats for the most part circulated their writings in manuscript rather than in print, and it is clear that by the mid-1570s the Dames Des Roches had already achieved an *entrée* into that world (p. 7, n. 24). Larsen suggests that they hoped to profit financially from their writings. This is possible, though of course problematic: Catherine asserts with pride in one of her poems "For I protest before God that neither Princes nor Princesses/Have ever paid me a sou" (p. 117); to admit otherwise would demean her literary efforts as crass commerce even though Larsen demonstrates that the Dames Des Roches did sometimes receive payment for their writings (p. 248). Instead, it seems more likely, given that so many of the missives were letters of compliment addressed to noblewomen with whom they corresponded and for whom they wrote poetry, that publication was a means to transcend the barriers of class that made it impossible for the Dames Des Roches to enter the inner circles of court society directly. In this regard, it would be interesting to explore more fully the relationship between Pasquier and the Des Roches as authors. Was it merely accidental that the Dames Des Roches and Pasquier published their ground-breaking volumes of collected personal letters in the same year and with the same publisher? Both Pasquier and the Dames Des Roches may have hoped to benefit from their continued association to enhance each other's reputations in a society in which non-noble writers' claims to authority--both men's and women's--needed to be emphasized again and again in a society in which virtue was usually associated with nobility.

Whatever the motivation behind their decision to publish, we can be thankful that Madeleine Des Roches and Catherine Des Roches did so. They are a fascinating pair and Anne Larsen has done real service in bringing their writings together in a single erudite volume--one that will be appreciated by undergraduates and researchers alike.

NOTES [1] Louise Labé, *Complete Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and tr. Deborah Lesko Baker, tr. Annie Finch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Both the Labé and Des Roches volumes were published in The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe series.

[2] Mireille Huchon, *Louise Labé: une créature de papier* (Geneva: Droz, 2006).

[3] Madeleine Des Roches and Catherine Des Roches, *Les oeuvres*, ed. Anne R. Larsen (Geneva: Droz, 1993); *Les missives*, ed. Anne R. Larsen (Geneva: Droz, 1999); *Les secondes oeuvres*, ed. Anne R. Larsen (Geneva: Droz, 1998); Catherine Des Roches, *La puce de Mme. Desroches*, ed. Damase Jouaust (Paris: D. Jouaust, 1868).

[4] Recent analyses of *La puce* include C. Yandell, "Of Lice and Women: Rhetoric and Gender in 'La puce de Madame des Roches'" *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 20 (1990): 123-35; A. R. Jones, "Contentious Readings: Urban Humanism and Gender Difference in 'La Puce de Madame Des-Roches' (1582)" *Renaissance Quarterly* 48 (1995): 109-28.

Sara Beam
University of Victoria
sbeam@uvic.ca

Copyright © 2006 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172