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Louise Labé. *Complete Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition.* Edited with introductions and prose translation by Deborah Lesko Baker; poetry translation by Annie Finch. *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006. xxxi + 274 pp. Bibliographies, notes, indexes. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-46714-7; \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-226-46715-5.

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In their bilingual edition of Louise Labé's prose and poetry, Deborah Lesko Baker and Annie Finch offer scholars, students, and teachers an elegant, much-awaited, and long overdue critical translation of one of the most important women writers of the French sixteenth century. In the last twenty years, Labé has become increasingly central not only to scholarship but also to undergraduate and graduate teaching of the French early modern period. And yet, in anglophone countries her work remains accessible to a relatively narrow audience: scholars who read sixteenth-century French easily, and students whose linguistic capabilities allow them to read some of her writings--most often limited to her poetry.

As the first major translation of Labé's entire corpus to appear in twenty years (and only the second translation of the complete works ever published), Lesko Baker and Finch's edition breathes new life into Labé's work for both specialists and non-specialists, and enables instructors to include her in more broadly-conceived undergraduate and graduate courses offered in English, such as those featuring women's writing or European early modern literature. As a bilingual edition, it will also help students of French literature grapple with the difficulties of sixteenth-century language, style, and spelling, and (in a different vein) engage with the theoretical questions surrounding translation and its praxis. The scholarly and pedagogic contribution of the book lies, however, not only in its elegant and well-wrought translations, or its thorough--yet accessible--introductory analyses of both Labé's texts and the methodologies that informed the translators' renderings into English. In its very objective--to bring Labé to a twenty-first-century audience--and in its conceit as a collaborative project, the book also underscores an inherent modernity to Labé's writings, one that has always been at the heart of Labé's appeal.

The volume is divided principally into two parts: the first dedicated to Labé's prose, the second to her poetry. In addition to the French and English versions of Labé's works, the book also contains extensive historical and analytical material, including two general introductions (one by the editors of "The Other Voice" series, and one by the volume editor), two bibliographies of important primary and secondary sources, a separate introduction to each of the prose and poetry sections, and "Translator's Notes" by both Lesko Baker and Finch. While at first glance the sheer amount of analytical material may seem to overwhelm the primary texts and translations, the introductions and notes situate Labé's work both broadly--in terms of the female social and literary condition in Europe predating the early modern period--and more specifically with regard to Labé's life, reception, and literary interventions. The organization of the book easily allows for selective reading of the secondary material according to specific needs.

The "Introduction to the Series" (by Margaret King and Albert Rabil Jr.) defines the "Other Voice" as "a voice of protest" (p. xxxix), female but sometimes male, against a largely misogynist and patriarchal historical and cultural backdrop. This brief but conscientious introduction is by design a review and covers topics ranging from women in Greek philosophy and Roman Law to women's roles in the

church, humanist attitudes toward women, theoretical questions of gender and power, and the vexed problem of women and chastity. The “Volume Editor’s Introduction” (Lesko Baker) nuances this framework by briefly covering basic information on Labé’s life, 1555 publication, and reception. It is here that Lesko Baker raises the fundamental problem of male subjectivity—a chief preoccupation of early modern male-authored poetry—against which Labé’s feminism defines itself. If early to mid-sixteenth-century male writers explore the fragmentation of the male subject in order to (paradoxically) celebrate and glorify it, Lesko Baker asks, what happens “when the woman is no longer an abstract object of male desire but rather becomes the subject of desire in her own right, one who narrates her own journey through the vicissitudes of love?” (pp. 9-10). [1]

Lesko Baker’s introductions to Labé’s prose and poetry begin to explore this question. Neither introduction pretends to be a comprehensive analysis (Lesko Baker is explicit on this point), but through nuanced close readings of selected passages, these introductions help untangle the thematic and rhetorical complexities of Labé’s writing and offer a model for discerning its feminist sensibilities. The introduction to the prose discusses Labé’s “Dedicatory Letter” and “Debate of Folly and Love.” Lesko Baker’s discussion of the dedicatory letter underscores the richness of a comparatively short text (the French and English together comprise only four pages in this edition). This complexity is based in part on a cyclical, narrative structure, which begins with the first person, develops to a broader discussion of women in general (*nous* or “us”), and finishes by returning to the first person and a direct invocation of Labé’s addressee. The preface also employs a number of thematic juxtapositions, including among others the intellectual and sensual pleasures for women of reading and writing, prohibitions placed on women’s education in the past and their emancipation in the present, and an acknowledgment of women’s modesty juxtaposed with a call for their assertiveness, effectively captured in the double-entendre of the word *vertu*. Lesko Baker also highlights Labé’s insistence on her own modernity through an implicit rejection of female exempla; her letter thus becomes a tract on current social practice as much as a literary defense.

One of the strengths of Lesko Baker’s introductions is the way she reveals Labé’s writings to be thoroughly interconnected with one another, rather than separate and self-contained texts. Thus, she shows how the “Debate of Folly and Love” takes up once again some of the decidedly feminist themes of the dedicatory letter, including a caution against divisiveness among women (which she will address again in her poetry), in preference for their solidarity against the patriarchal order (personified in the figure of Jupiter). Most importantly, Lesko Baker shows how Labé’s text is thoroughly in dialogue with a male poetic—particularly Petrarchan—tradition that she subtly attempts to overturn. Thus, for instance, the social change advocated in the dedicatory preface is once again evident in her “Debate,” where Love (Cupid) first asserts then moves away from a traditional Petrarchan and neo-Platonic “sublimation of sensuality” (p. 33) to embrace a mutual physical expression of love and desire. This is a posture that inherently acknowledges and promotes a notion of reciprocal love and—more importantly—women’s desire not conventionally expressed in the early modern literary tradition.

Lesko Baker’s introduction to the poetry walks readers through intricate points, especially in the elegies, whose length and difficulty make them less popular among readers than the sonnet sequence. As in her discussion of the prose, Lesko Baker masterfully shows the thematic and stylistic connections between the elegies and sonnets, tying both back to important themes developed in the dedicatory letter and the “Debate.” Again, Labé’s subversion of the Petrarchan tradition is central. However, this subversion is not without nuance and depth. Lesko Baker is careful to develop the multiple traditions on which Labé draws and from which she departs—Sapphic, Catullian, and Ovidian, in addition to Petrarchan—and to foreground the interplay among these traditions in the poetry. What emerges from her analysis is a female and feminist poetic voice that is at once engaged with its poetic predecessors and contemporaries and sensitive to the gendered differences and perspectives entailed in those disparate traditions.

Both Lesko Baker and Finch include translator's notes that clearly outline their methodology. Lesko Baker helpfully compares her own approach to that of other translators who have preceded her, most notably Anne-Marie Bourbon, Edith Farrell, and Jeanne Prine.^[2] Lesko Baker's principal objective in tackling the prose is readability: as she puts it, Labé's dense and difficult prose often presents significant "obstacles to readability" for the specialist and general reader alike (p. 39). Her goal is thus to "make the English version of these texts not only more accurate and idiomatic but simply more fun to read" (p. 41). In this she has entirely succeeded. Readers familiar with the difficult "Débat" in French will be pleasantly surprised at how well Lesko Baker's English "Debate" moves. Her translation is in many ways true to both the letter and the spirit of the text. Its style is clear and elegantly simple yet not simplistic; although the translation employs a modern idiom, it is by no mean overburdened with colloquialisms that would date it. A comparison between the French and English shows very few grammatical interpolations in the translation, except in a few deserving instances, for example, where the subject of the French sentence needs clarification. The greatest changes to the original text occur on the level of syntax, punctuation, and organization. Lesko Baker frequently breaks up Labé's longer sentences, for example, or exchanges confusing colons in the original for the more definitive full-stop. She also divides Labé's prose into separate paragraphs in the English; in the French, she demarcates where those breaks occur, using paragraph symbols in brackets so as to alert the reader without compromising the organizational integrity of the original version. Carefully prepared notes address both historical and mythological references in the text and more difficult points of translation.

As Lesko Baker herself puts it, Finch's translations of the poetry are innovative, although some of her choices may be more controversial than others. In her introduction to the poetry, Lesko Baker discusses Finch's work and specifies how her versions differ from previous translations. The distinctions she draws are significant for modern scholarship: Finch's, for instance, are the first to preserve in English the Petrarchan rhyme scheme for every one of the twenty-six sonnets (whereas others used either English forms or loose variations of Petrarchan ones). Lesko Baker takes the discussion one step further to show how Finch reads Labé through her translations, avoiding technical issues of sonority and rhyme scheme that might overburden the poems for modern readers, yet capturing the fundamental sensuality and emotional immediacy of the verse.

Finch's translations are indeed beautifully crafted and dynamic. If, at times, some of her vocabulary choices determine meanings that the original French leaves more ambiguous, she nonetheless captures thoroughly the sensual passion and the startling modernity of the poems. Perhaps the most controversial element in the translations is Finch's addition of titles to the English elegies and sonnets. Although some critics might see these as determining the meaning of the poems in ways that the original French did not (especially for non-French readers), Finch and Lesko Baker are both careful to emphasize that these are Finch's creative additions. The titles, moreover, are clearly demarcated by brackets, which helpfully allow the reader or instructor to consider them only if desired. For instructors, the titles can serve another pedagogic purpose by showing the extent to which these translations (like any translation) are subjective and personal readings: in the titles, Finch gives us her sense of the heart of each poem.

Readers interested in Labé's work as a historical artifact should take note that this is not a translation of the entire 1555 or 1556 Lyonnais editions. Noticeably absent are translations of the twenty-six male-authored laudatory poems that accompanied Labé's writings in the original sixteenth-century French publications. Including these poems, one might argue, could have added yet another historical dimension to the book and shed additional light on the ways in which Labé's constitutes an "other voice." Nevertheless, the difference and originality of Labé's prose and poetry stand on their own. Scholars of Labé will want to consult this edition for their pleasure and edification as well as for their own research; the translations may very well become standard. For teachers of French or European literature and early modern women's writings, the book is indispensable. Lesko Baker and Finch have

produced a critically rich, analytically subtle, and elegantly crafted bilingual edition that is also refreshingly honest about its objectives and methodologies. As specialists of Labé are by now well aware, recent critical work has questioned the historical reality of Labé as a writer.[3] Although this line of inquiry is perhaps overdetermined, it captures the scholarly imagination and does put into question approaches to teaching Labé. This new bilingual edition, however, demonstrates that Labé resonates most powerfully not as a historical figure, but first and foremost as a “voice” that traces a specifically feminine, feminist, and decidedly unified subjectivity, whether or not the work was produced by a single female writer, was a sixteenth-century collaboration, or was reproduced 500 years later by the collaboration between Lesko Baker and Finch. And, by communicating it so effectively and passionately to a twenty-first-century audience, Lesko Baker and Finch prove the originality, the modernity, and—most importantly—the vitality of this voice.

NOTES

[1] Lesko Baker’s introductions adapt for a more general audience many of the points and analyses of her *Subject of Desire*, requisite reading for Labé scholars and an important full-length study of Labé’s corpus in English: *The Subject of Desire: Petrarchan Petics and the Female Voice in Louise Labé* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1996).

[2] *Debate of Folly and Love*, trans. Anne-Marie Bourbon (New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 2000); *Louise Labé’s Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Edith R. Farrel (Troy, N.Y.: Whitson, 1986). Jeanne Prine translates the dedicatory letter in “Louise Labé, Poet of Lyon,” in *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

[3] Mireille Huchon, *Louise Labé: Une créature du papier* (Geneva: Droz, 2006).

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