

Classic Poetry Series

Louise Labe
- poems -

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Louise Labe(1524 - 1566)

Louise Labe was born in the early 1520s to a prosperous rope-maker, a member of the Lyon bourgeoisie. Her mother died when she was a child; her father had her educated in languages and music, and a brother may have taught her to ride and fence. She was married in her mid-teens to another rope-maker, some 30 years older than she. It was apparently after her marriage that she began to participate in the literary circles of Lyon.

In 1555 *Euvres de Louize Labe Lionnoize* was published in Lyon: it contained a prose dedicatory epistle to a local noblewoman, a prose *Debat de Folie et d'Amour*, 24 sonnets (the first in Italian), and three elegies; the work concluded with 24 poems by other writers, praising Labe's ability. The book was popular enough that three other editions came out within a year (the first *Reuves et corrigees par la dite Dame*), and it was widely-read enough to bring both praise from beyond Lyon and criticism for being immodest and "unwomanly."

Sometime after 1556, Labe apparently left Lyon to live in the countryside. Her husband died in the early 1560s and she died, perhaps of the plague, in 1566.

I Flee The City, Temples, And Each Place

I flee the city, temples, and each place
where you took pleasure in your own lament,
where you used every forceful argument
to make me yield what I could not replace.
Games, masques, tournaments bore me and I sigh
and I dream no beauty that is not of you.
And so I try to kill my passion too,
forcing another image to my eye,
hoping to break away from tender thought.
Deep in the woods I found a lonely trail,
and after wandering in a maze I sought
to put you wholly out of mind. I fail.
Only outside my body can I live
or else in exile like a fugitive.

Louise Labe

Long-Felt Desires

Long-felt desires, hopes as long as vain--
sad sighs--slow tears accustomed to run sad
into as many rivers as two eyes could add,
pouring like fountains, endless as the rain--
cruelty beyond humanity, a pain
so hard it makes compassionate stars go mad
with pity: these are the first passions I've had.
Do you think love could root in my soul again?
If it arched the great bow back again at me,
licked me again with fire, and stabbed me deep
with the violent worst, as awful as before,
the wounds that cut me everywhere would keep
me shielded, so there would be no place free
for love. It covers me. It can pierce no more.

Louise Labe

Sonnet I

What if the hero of the Odyssey
Had been like you, a man that's fair of face ?
Would he have had that easy-mannered grace,
Yet be the cause of so much agony ?

At any rate, your roving ways are sure
To make me count the weeks we've been apart,
And open gaping wounds within my heart,
This ailing heart which you alone can cure.

O ill-starred fate! A scorpion sting
Eats at my heart. I need a remedy
From the malicious beast that poisoned me.

I beg you, dear, just stop my suffering.
Come back to your true love, and let me lie
Clasped in your arms again, or let me die.

Louise Labe

Sonnet Iii

O languid longing, o languorous sighs.
Rise up once more whenever you are here,
Because I can't stop these rivers of tears,
And these fountains flowing from my eyes.

O cruelties, o inhuman hardness,
Piteable regards of celestial lights.
O benumbed heart, o passionate heights,
Do you con me with false lovelinnes ?

Amor is disguised with a friendly face,
But I won't welcome him, nor embrace
His cunning features, mysterious and dark.

As he draws and aims on me his arrow,
I'm not afraid because it is too narrow,
Even for him, to hurt me and hit a free mark.

Louise Labe

Sonnet VII

All love is seen to fade and pass away.
When soul blends body by most subtle art,
I am the body, you the better part.
But O my well-loved soul, why did you stray ?

Why can't I always swoon with pleasure in
Your arms? My love, my better part, my soul,
O rescue me from drowning, even though
I know so well how badly I have sinned.

Dear friend, I sense there's something in the air
Of hunger lost. And if at last we meet
Again, please don't be cold, remote, discreet.

I am afraid our long concealed affair
Is willed to play out with a formal grace,
Both kind and cruel, never commonplace.

Louise Labe

Sonnet Viii

I live, I burn, I drown and I die
I endure at once chill and cold;
Life is too hard and too soft to hold;
I am joyful and sad, don't ask me why.

Suddenly I laugh and at the same time cry
And as I'm happy I must endure grief,
It lasts forever and goes like a thief,
Suddenly I bloom and vanish into sigh.

Thus I suffer Amors' inconstancy
And when I think I am in great pain,
Without thinking, it is gone again.

Then when my joy is a certainty
And my longing for love is not in vain,
I am in pain all over once again.

Louise Labe

Sonnet Xi

O gentle gaze, o eyes where beauty grows,
Like little gardens full of amorous flowers,
Where the bow of Love shoots his sharp arrows
And where my eyes have gazed for many hours.

O savage cruelty, o felon heart
Binding me in so many rigorous chains,
So many are my lovesick tears and pains,
Burning is the ache of my tortured heart.

Thus you, my eyes, so much delight have had,
From looking in his eyes, so much enjoyment;
But you, my heart, the more you see them glad,

The more you languish, the worse your torment.
Then guess if there is any joy for me,
Knowing my heart and eyes thus disagree.

Louise Labe

Sonnet Xiv

While I have tears that start into my eyes,
At memories of joys that we have known
And while my voice, still master of its own,
Is not yet choked with sobbing and with sighs.

While still my hand has cunning to devise,
A lover's cadence to the lute's soft tone
And while in understanding you alone,
I no more wisdom need to make me wise.

How could I want, as yet, that I were dead ?
And when these eyes have no more tears to shed,
My voice is hoarse and my hands lost their art.

When no longer can my tormented heart
Declare itself in love, then I will pray
For Death to blacken out my brightest day.

Louise Labe

Sonnet XVIII

Kiss me, kiss me again and kiss me more;
Give me one of your most tastiest,
Give me one of your most sexiest
And I'll give hot kisses, more than four.

Ah, are you sad? Let me ease the pain,
With more sweet kisses, five or six;
So that our desiring lips can mix
And we'll enjoy each other again.

Then double life will us both ensue:
You will live in me, as I live in you.
Love, let me dream about foolish things:

I'm always unsatisfied with my life
And I'm sad that I can't be your wife,
Because I can't fly away on wings.

Louise Labe

Sonnet Xxiii

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

And shot the cruel 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 loyalty ?

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

When grief and anger fiercely combine;
I know, wherever you may have gone,
Your martyrdom is as harsh as mine.

Louise Labe

Sonnet Xxiv

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

Thus, Ladies, do not denigrate my name.
If I did wrong, the pain and punishment
Are now. Don't file their daggers to a point.
You must know, Love is master of the game:

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

As the whim takes her, idly she can curse
You with a stronger and stranger passion.
But take care your suffering is not worse !

Louise Labe

While Yet These Tears

While yet these tears have power to flow
For hours for ever past away;
While yet these swelling sighs allow
My faltering 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 shadows o'er my fate!

Louise Labe