

Program note for *je me délace*
by Jenece Gerber

In 1555 Louise Labé, the poet-courtesan of Lyon, published a collection of poetry. She closed this publication with a letter nominally addressed to a socialite acquaintance, Mademoiselle Clemence de Bourges of Lyon. A substantial excerpt of this letter in its original early modern French version forms the backbone of *je me délace* (“I come undone”). The letter serves as justification and exhortation for women’s study and practice of arts and sciences (see the text translation). I was so completely struck by this text precisely because it remains quite contemporary. The second text is a “nonsense poem” that I wrote simply for its sound in the original French—it is replete with alliteration and double-entendres. There are also subtle references to and comments upon the Labé text. A soprano-alto duet drawn from the choir is entirely devoted to delivering Labé’s letter. The choir only rarely joins in with the text of the letter; rather, they are devoted to “playing with” the nonsense poem. While the duet performs a clear reading of Labé with brief self-commentary, the choir freely “experiments” with phonemes and word-plays suggested by the nonsense poem. At times the choir manages to join in with the Labé text or even perform it backwards in the context of their own word-play—all of which results in an overlap of logical argument with play. This sense of play, even in rendering something very important, is a tribute to the French masters who have influenced much of my own artistic expression—namely Poulenc and Satie. At times harmonies allude to these composers as well, but rarely do they follow traditional harmonic trajectories. There is no precise meaning that I wish any listener to take from the experience of this piece: I have no other agenda than perhaps to poke fun at the fact that despite the years and distance between Louise Labé’s world and ours today, we can (and perhaps *have to*) just comically keep repeating the same arguments and encouragements in support of women artists, scientists and intellectuals. In this way the piece attempts to satirically bring a bit of 1555 into 2007.

TEXTS for Jenece Gerber’s *je me délace*

1) text by Louise Labé, from an excerpt of a letter to Mlle. Clemence de Bourges:

To Mademoiselle Clemence de Bourges of Lyon—

The time having come, Mademoiselle, when the stern laws of men no longer bar women from devoting themselves to the sciences and disciplines, it seems to me that those who are able ought to employ this honorable liberty, which our sex formerly desired so much, in studying these things and show men the wrong they have done us in depriving us of the benefit and the honor which might have come to us. And if anyone reaches the stage at which she is able to put her ideas into writing, she should do it with much thought and should not scorn the glory, but adorn herself with this rather than with chains, rings, and sumptuous clothes, which we are not really able to regard as ours except by custom. But the honor which knowledge will bring us cannot be taken from us - not by the cunning of a thief, not by the violence of enemies, not by the duration of time. Goodwill I bear for our sex - to see it not only in beauty but in knowledge and eminence surpass or equal men - I cannot do otherwise than beg excellent Ladies to raise their minds a little...and to exert themselves to make it clear to the world that...we ought not to be disdained as companions in domestic and public affairs... And in addition to the recognition that our sex will gain by

this, we will have furnished the public with a reason for men to devote more study and labor to the humanities lest they might be ashamed to see us surpass them when they have always pretended to be superior in nearly everything.

For this reason, we must inspire one another in so worthy an undertaking from which you should not spare your intellect, to acquire the honor which literature and the sciences are accustomed to bring those persons who follow them. When one has indulged in them for as long as one wants, one cannot boast of anything except having passed the time. But study rewards us with pleasure all its own which remains with us longer. For the past delights us and serves us better than the present, but the pleasures of the senses are immediately lost and never return, and sometimes the memory of them is as disagreeable as the acts were delectable.

Moreover, the other sensual pleasures are such that whatever memory of them comes to us cannot put us back in the frame of mind we were in. But when we put our thoughts into writing, even if afterwards our minds race through no end of distractions and are constantly agitated, nevertheless, returning much later to what we have written, we find ourselves at the same point and in the same state of mind we were in before. Furthermore, the judgment which our second impression makes of the first gives us a singular satisfaction.

And because women do not willingly appear alone in public, I have chosen you to serve as my guide, dedicating this little work to you. I do not send it to you for any purpose other than to assure you of the goodwill I have borne you for a long time and to make you, seeing this roughly and badly written work of mine, long to create another which might be more polished and more elegant.

God keep you in good health.

From Lyon, July 24, 1555

Your humble friend,

Louise Labé

translation from early modern French by Jeanne Prinne and Jenece Gerber

2) original text by Jenece Gerber:

So that...I myself...provided that...unless the fearsome parasite
with whatever hare-brained plans...

I impose upon myself with clarity a dab of lemon sole with dirty laundry,
snails and slugs!

I am bloodhound or even the shrouded linguist who does the lion's share
to dismiss this silty lemonade!

The dual-purpose tool is doubly the measuring glass and the measurement.

The still waters are gilded by the condemned sun.

The mind is stuck in the rut of confessing, conferring, confederating,

Conducting itself conductively without confrontation!

But the sun hides in the fear

We rejoice because the past is the past—

The footprints of emotion are lost and shall never return.

If a little reminder...

I am bloodhound or even the shrouded linguist who does Red Lyon's share—

Ah that men should no longer pain and study the virtuous science.

I conduct myself conductively without confrontation!

translated from modern French by Jenece Gerber