

The Erotic in Women's Poetry

The aim of this issue was to be a host(ess) to papers that would explore the erotic in the body of poetry written by women – rethinking eroticism in predominantly female terms. It had specified that subjects for discussion could be chosen from a broad historical and cultural perspective, alerting its prospective contributors to the fact that in the past (i.e. before the recent feminist movement which broke woman's silence) women had not always been able to speak directly about sex or desire but had often done so under cover and through displacement, thus creating erotic “sub-texts” neither “revealing” nor “concealing” but “signifying” (to remember, with Heraclitus, the god whose temple is in Delphi).

Some suggestions for issues to be addressed, and questions to be problematised about, had been given as follows: Does the female erotic redraw the sexual landscape? Can it subvert the male-dominated discourse of love? Does it affect style, canon and genre? How do women poets accommodate a male-constructed rhetoric of the erotic? Is there a female tradition in erotic writing? What codes of expression did women seek, to represent their body or sensuality? What is the impact of erotic memory on fantasy and romance? How does woman perform as (desiring) subject? Does female sexuality speak a different language? How does the female erotic gaze function? Is the erotic “power”? Is it a creative life-force? How is the erotic experienced in forms other than (heterosexual) physical attraction – autoeroticism, infantile sexuality, motherhood, lesbian erotica? How does the erotic interact with the spiritual? With the political? What is the relation between the erotic and the sacred? Finally – given that both “eroticism” and “poetry” mark an anarchic eruption of (existential and linguistic) barriers, the question was raised whether the female erotic/poetic utterance could be seen as the (dangerous) topos of ultimate transgression.

With the harvest now in hand, eleven papers and one poem, one should probably begin by posing the (Platonic) question of essential semantics: What is the (female) erotic? – keeping in mind of course that female sexuality has always been theorised within masculine parameters.

The triptych around which most papers are constructed is that of eros/logos/thanatos, in different variations of interaction among the constituent parts. Here is an attempt to encode the multiplicity of the participants' recurrent problematisation into a few basic questions: Is (poetic) logos the ex-

pression or re-pression of eros? Is poetry inevitably erected on the tombstone of the buried body? Does logos stream (like blood) from a wound, from a tortured body, from mortified flesh? What is the flow, bodily fluid that turns into ink—ritualistic blood or blood spilt, wasted? Is there an “excess” that can (never no way) be represented in language? Is “jouissance” inevitably related to mourning—is poetic logos necessarily an elegy to eros? Is sublimation the death of eros? Does eros yearn for an (absent) other or celebrate a (present) self? Is eroticism the rupture of a closed being? Is eroticism necessarily linguistically mediated? Does language “kill” or “give birth” to the erotic? Is eroticism sexuality sublimated to the realm of imagination, going beyond the merely physical? Is eroticism “culture” or “nature”? Does eroticism inhabit the region of language and fantasy only? In short, is desire (always already) mediated by the “phantom” or ghost of image and language?

One of the most interesting answers, and pertinent to the special topic of the issue because it relates the erotic to the poetic, is given by Octavio Paz as quoted by Herrera: “The relationship between eroticism and poetry is such that it could be said, without affectation, that the former is a bodily poetics while the latter is verbal eroticism”. Surely somehow tautological, and certainly circular in structure, the definition points towards a reciprocal referentiality in a closed circuit that places both eroticism and poetic language in the region of the imaginary, divorced from the external world of sex and linguistic representation. The agonising search for tracing the originary connection of “flesh” to “word” is of course lost in the misty primal scenes of religion and psychoanalysis. The papers that make up the present volume seem to take a variety of positions: that flesh (eroticism) is annihilated in linguistic sublimation; that only the tortured body can speak (poetry coming from the condition of being possessed and wounded); that only the sexually aroused body can speak poetically; finally, that not only the flesh is made word but the word is also made flesh.

Such an all-encompassing, mutually enhancing and nourishing relationship of eros/logos, in its full self-sufficiency and absolute enclosure, is unfolded in Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke’s poem, written especially for this volume and entitled “I Fed You Well”. It is built on an extended metaphor of mother/baby nourishment, or, I would say mother/daughter, because, although the baby’s sex remains purposefully hidden and unspecified, the feminine of the Greek gender points not just to the obvious noun, “ποίηση”, but also to the epithet of the title, “καλοανατεθραμμένη”, which carries strong cultural connotations not only of the well-fed female child, but of the well-brought-up one (“properly” in every sense of the word including the negative restrictive/constrictive that accompanies the socialisation of young girls). This sinister hue is totally submerged, however, as the transformation of flesh into word is given in a dazzling exuberance that eroticises the whole landscape of the body. From the soft pleasurable “satin skin” to the neutral “shoulders”, to the pulsating surges of excitement—the angelic entrainment—every lack is filled with plenitude. The mother feeds the (poem) daughter not murderous “ice” (as in Irigaray’s “And the One Doesn’t

Stir Without the Other") but the whole exhilarating cuisine of physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual experience, an overflow of erotic frenzy.

In the second stanza, the flow of plenty is reversed, thanks to a perfect balance of energy: it is the daughter-word now that ful-fills the maternal "emptiness" through its nourishing potential, giving back to flesh its due. To the old question, "Is language a creature of lack or plenitude?", Anghelaki-Rooke opts for the second, not only returning poetic writing to its source in the rhythmic pulsion of the maternal "chora" (to remember Kristeva's Platonic adoption), but giving us a chance to listen to the very m/other speak. Patterns of excitation embodied in language are sent back, re-eroticising the body that is now fed the flesh of language. We witness here an idyllic correspondence of eros/logos, a reciprocal empowering, an ebb-and-flow, a reciprocal transubstantiation that fleshes out the poem which in turn becomes the "food for flesh" (rather than thought) and allows an easy, almost automatic, reversal of the mother-daughter role.

Now, to move from an erotic poem to the critical discussion of eroticism in poetry:

David Punter, Towards a Homeopathic Erotics: Sylvia Plath's "Nick and the Candlestick"

This essay is centred on an analysis of Sylvia Plath's poem "Nick and the Candlestick". In the course of the analysis, it sets out to tackle some of the difficulties surrounding our dealings with Plath's work, principally the "myth of Plath" which colours our reading and our response. "Nick and the Candlestick" is seen primarily as an erotic poem, but in a difficult area of erotics, which has to do primarily with mother and baby. In the service of exploring this erotics, it deploys ideas which are – eventually, although perhaps not always evidently – derived from the philosophical and psychological work of Deleuze and Guattari among others. The notion of the "homeopathic" is advanced as a way of conceiving of the significance of Plath's poetry; or, more particularly, of its significance within the field of reading and of cultural myth. But at all points, it remains essentially a "close" reading (whatever that may now mean), in the hope that staying on this terrain will provide some contribution towards the dialectic of familiarity and defamiliarisation which bears on all our own acts of reading; on the uncanny nature of Plath's poetry; on her life, as received, redeployed and disseminated within the cultural field; and on our engagement with her work. What the meaning might be of the term "our" which I have been using above, and thus how this analysis might relate to wider issues of feminism, especially when the presumed author of the piece is

male, will be for the reader to judge.

Punter's homeopathic (ὅμοιο πάθος/same passion) erotics is employed in a double sense: as the "old" (ancient, familiar) discourse of eros/thanatos, and as a treatment of homeopathy for the reader who, through exposure to the poetic text (Plath's in this case) is healed (Aristotelian fashion?) from a similar passion/suffering, experiencing this deadly love affair by proxy, as it were. Homeopathy can also be said to turn into hom(e)opathy, that is a self-inflicted passion, a wounding of the body which is not an object of love but of hatred and repulsion: the rejected, martyred body of Christian tradition (painfully reminding us that we inhabit a culture fundamentally inimical to the flesh). The mother-child/foetus love affair holds the centre of Punter's attention. Relating the paper to wider issues of feminism, as Punter invites us to do, we read that when the female author comes to writing she is "masculinised", her psyche negatively transformed, becoming other than itself; also, the use (twice) of the Jungian term "anima" raises the question: whose "anima" are we talking about, the (female) poet's or the (male) critic's? Punter explores psychoanalytically the (dangerous) birth of the other within the self, set in a triangulation of desire encompassing man/woman/baby. Carefully balanced between a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion, aware of the "tricks" and irony involved, Punter's (gendered) reading places "suicide" (female/sacrificial) as the unavoidable topos of transition/transgression to the other within.

Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, Denying Eros: Reading Women's Poetry of the Mid-twentieth Century

In the light of the fact that the epithet erotic is not commonly associated with women's poetry, this essay sets out to contextualise the work of major mid-twentieth-century British women poets with regard to Freudian, Jungian, and Platonic concepts of *eros*. Given women's traditional role as object or inspiring muse rather than that of creator, the women's poetry written before the rise of gender discussions when poetry began to tackle questions of female authorship and sexuality, is particularly intriguing. Exploring poems by Stevie Smith, E.J. Scovell, Sylvia Lynd, Phoebe Hesketh, Ruth Pitter, Kathleen Raine, Mary Stella Edwards, Dorothea Eastwood, and Lilian Bowes Lyon, special emphasis will be given to such diverse antagonistic forces as *caritas* and *sexus*, *thanatos*, *hypnos*, *logos*, and *Narcissus*, which are crucial to their poetic concepts of self and other. The women's poetry at issue pinpoints discordant moods and suggests a wider scale of emotions than the reader is likely to encounter in the tradition of male love poetry. There is a profound concern with death; auto-aggression, self-denial, destruction of the body, and contemplation of a lifeless *imago* are as frequently encountered in the work of Lilian Bowes Lyon, Kathleen Raine, and Phoebe Hesketh as feelings of distrust, frustration, mockery and doubt.

The article purports to show how erotic potentialities are repressed, transcended and sublimated by the poetic imagination, by employing various psychoanalytical models of explanation. The continuous denial of the life of the body, the repudiation of history, as well as the desexualised, silenced, ghostly or dead self at the heart of so many poems reveal a profound disharmony between *eros* and *thanatos*, a rupture of what Norman O. Brown has shown to be an inseparable nexus in the human soul: the affirmation of life and the affirmation of death.

Coelsch-Foisner's reading also employs a psychoanalytic approach, and, as the title implies, her interest is focused again on the *eros/thanatos* interrelation and the rejection of the body detected as a central theme in the work of the British women poets of modernism. So, although her opening statement, that the term "erotic" does not pertain to poetry written by women, would surprise a reader who thinks of the female poetic tradition as extending from Sappho to Rich, yet it appears that in the period and the country she has singled out for study, this was apparently so. To Punter's "fossilised" female body, Foisner juxtaposes the "petrified" body. Centering her argument on Lyon's poem, "Helen Meditates before her Portrait as a Woman", Foisner sees the female tactics of withdrawal from physical existence (into death and spirituality) as the only escape from the authorial scopophilia of the male gaze that immobilises but offers no reflecting reassurance to the "mirrored" female subject. As is the case with Plath, it is the wounded flesh that is made word, not the exhilarating one; the body is held in contempt and is suffering from a self-inflicted aggression that perverts or obliterates it, putting to strange use, indeed, the Platonic equation of "σῶμα/σῆμα" (body/tomb). Eroticism as excitation and exuberance is denied in favour of "homeostasis" (balance and stability). Foisner sees the very act of writing, of sublimation, as a denial of *eros*, a "death", a desolation of the flesh, offering "knowledge" rather than "being".

Nicola Rehling, Taking Patriarchy out of Poetry: Eroticism and Subversion in Gertrude Stein's Lifting Belly

This paper reads Gertrude Stein's lesbian love poem, *Lifting Belly*, both through her own writings on language and through more contemporary feminist theories concerned with the relationships between language, the body, sexuality and desire. It explores how Stein sought to subvert traditional male discourses of the erotic by forging her own poetics that self-consciously departed from what she herself termed "patriarchal poetry". The overall aim of the paper is to reveal how Stein's experimentations with language and her construction of a female rhetoric of desire enabled a thematic and textual expression of female eroticism that was fundamental to her lesbian identity.

With Rehling we are in the familiar ground of French feminist thought

(Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva) that advocates the inscription of the body in the text, acting as a framework for the reading of Stein. Focusing particularly on style (abolition of punctuation, repetition, tautology, use of present participles in place of nouns, ellipsis, reduction of grammar) Rehling argues for an *écriture féminine* that successfully embodies a new discourse of desire, but also constitutes a private code of lesbian eroticism. In total contrast to the previous papers, the image of the female body presented in the poem under discussion, *Lifting Belly* (does one trace an echo of Baubo here?), is celebratory and amatory. Unlike Plath's materialistic "atoms" (strongly emphasized by Punter) and Foisner's observation that in the poems she examines living body is often turned into inorganic matter, Rehling notes that Stein privileges the materiality of language over its referentiality (language being after all a bodily function). Sexual identity, freed from biological or social determinations, is seen as "performance" facilitated by the non-specificity of the genderless first person personal pronoun used in the poem. Stein's poetic language, Rehling maintains, never fully captures or freezes erotic experience, always leaving an excess, a trace of desire in language that allows the text to constantly form and transform itself (mainly through readerly participation).

Harriet Tarlo, "Ah, could they know": The Place of the Erotic in H. D.'s *Hymen*

In this essay I examine and decode the eroticism of the American poet H.D.'s second book of poetry, *Hymen* (1921). *Hymen* is set within the poet's own self-created Greek world, a world which provided her with an imaginary space in which she could experiment with aesthetics, language and genre, as well as essential human emotions and relationships, both familial and sexual. In particular, H.D. perceived this world as one free of taboos and thus made use of ancient Greek pastoral to speak about eroticism, both heterosexual and homosexual. I maintain that the "Greek" rituals and masques she creates in the book serve a simultaneously spiritual and sexual, even voyeuristic, purpose, enabling her to celebrate the erotic body through a Greek veil. Above all, I read *Hymen* as a passionate text concerned with the exploration of sexual desire. In the second half of the essay, I develop the theory that H.D. uses a colour code within her poetry to enable her to cover all kinds of desire, and I suggest some of the significances of the colours she employs for the sexualities she presents. My reading is backed up by reference to H.D.'s prose and relates to studies of other critics on her use of "flowers". My deciphering work enables me to read H.D.'s pastoral poems as highly charged eroticised landscapes in which desire is suffused through the natural features of hills and flowers to which she refers. To those who have in the past regarded this poetry as cold and passionless, this essay simply says (to quote

from the dedicatory poem to the collection): "Ah, could they know...".

"Caressing" is a term used by both Rehling and Tarlo to define the stylistic specificities of two near contemporary American women poets of modernism—Gertrude Stein and Hilda Doolittle. The case of H.D.'s *Hymen* uncovers and holds together the whole range of erotic variations, auto-/homo-/hetero-, to include the worship of the divine in its human form (of the beloved object). This celebration of multiple sexualities, set in a liberating Greek context and removed into the realm of myth and fairytale, is enhanced in Tarlo's approach by a detailed analysis of the sexually specific colour code employed systematically by H.D. to differentiate between lesbian, heterosexual, and godly eros. Reading eroticism where other critics have only seen instances of chastity and coldness, Tarlo opens up new vistas of interpretation by showing us something of the strategies employed by female poets in their attempt to speak *as* women.

M. Pilar Sánchez Calle, The Maternal, the Lesbian, and the Political: Explorations of the Erotic in Audre Lorde's Poetry

This paper analyses Audre Lorde's notion of the erotic and its presence in her poetry. Lorde identifies it as an empowering force within the individual that tempers the individualistic sense of self, opening up an entire realm of human understanding otherwise unavailable. She applies this concept of the erotic not only to the creation of personal connections between and among people, but also to the establishment of contacts in social and political aspects of one's conduct and work. The essay explores the link between the maternal and the erotic in Lorde's poetry, where she acknowledges her mother's legacy in her life and art. Also, poems are analysed where Lorde claims the erotic as a dynamic presence in her definition as lesbian and in her relationships with other women. Finally, the essay focuses on the connections between the erotic and the political in her poems, where the erotic is viewed as a source of energy in the fight against oppressive political and social power structures.

Drawing on Lorde's extensive discussions on the "erotic as power" (psychological, ontological, political), a power that cannot be contained within the limits of the sexual, Calle first explores the (so central in contemporary feminist thinking) mother-daughter relation. Based on biographical material Lorde depicts the difficulties and tensions in her relationship with her biological mother, but she also seems to tap a racial and cultural memory in order to relate to the goddesses of her tradition. Revisionary mythmaking goes into her lesbian poems, too, playing a formative part in the construction of a female identity that is as far removed from white patriarchal norms, but also operating as a weapon—"warrior construct"—that can become instrumental to social and political liberation. Calle's critical eye/I fully merges into that of Lorde, reading

the poems as instances of a female/feminist ideology.

José Rodríguez Herrera, Eros at the Temple Stream: Eroticism in the Poetry of Denise Levertov

Eroticism in the poetry of Denise Levertov pertains to the passion of love for oneself and for others. However, in Levertov's poetry Eros is also *agape*, that is, spiritual worship for the god of love. Eroticism turns into a sacred, religious endeavour as is shown in the poem "Hymn to Eros". Eroticism, nonetheless, implies the acquisition of a certain knowledge and power as Audre Lorde has repeatedly stated. The knowledge of the body leads the lovers to transcend themselves in the erotic encounter and become continuous with nature as in "Eros at the Temple Stream". Finally, "The Poem Unwritten" embodies the conception of poetry as a form of "verbal eroticism".

Herrera's essay is built around two axes: a theoretical discussion of the meaning of eroticism and a close critical reading of certain poems by Levertov. As a male reader of poetry by women, especially centred on female sexuality, and dealing in particular with the work of a poet who acknowledges the "multiple erotogeneity of the female body", Herrera seeks critical precursors and reminds us of Plato who, in the *Symposium*, appropriates Diotima's language to "legitimise" a male erotic discourse. (To Punter's "masculinising" of the female writer, Herrera "feminises" the male reader.) Herrera's investigation towards a definition of the erotic draws upon Bataille and the critical work of Paz: for Bataille, he informs us, the erotic is constituted in "the desire of a discontinuous being for continuity", whereas Paz sees the erotic and the poetic as homologous conditions, both induced by the imagination, meeting half way on the reciprocal journey from/to the body. Levertov's poetry, Herrera argues, is an instance of erotic desire being nurtured not only by the "flesh" but also the "word".

Morag Harris, Representations of the Male in the Female Imagination: The Brontës and Dickinson

This article reviews the role of male-female relationship in the poet's formation of creative linguistic representation. It argues that such relationship, both externally and internally to the individual's mind, is extremely complex and should not be "denied" (in Coleridge's wider sense) in any of its parts, for such denial or reductionism seriously impoverishes the richness of our experience and our capacity for expression of experience. This argument emerges with reference to the lives and work of Emily and Charlotte Brontë and Emily Dickinson—in particular from close observation of interrelated poems by Emily Brontë and Dickinson. The imagery and syntactic form in the language of these writers do seem to suggest that, in one way or another, the ghost of an image/idea of sexual union—the interpenetration of

opposite parts for the creation of a third element, the birth of a symbol-child—is intrinsic to their experience and idea of inspired creativity. It is argued that the authenticity of states of mind expressed in poetry does not necessarily bear direct relation to any stereotype external event, and that images in linguistic representation (male, female etc.) should not automatically and reductively be extrapolated to literal fact. It is the relationship between opposites that is of vital importance, and the *quality* of this engagement that is significant and dynamic. It serves the poet to elaborate a means by which real connection may be made to the world even if, or perhaps especially if, it involves facing murderous, hateful or painful feelings; such that the knowledge acquired as to how to sustain contact may eventually be passed on in its symbolic representation, for further use. This strenuous attempt at continuing a truthful relationship is considered to constitute an act of “love”, though it walks a fine line between more perverse forms of interaction (subjection/domination) and is constantly at risk.

Taking us away from the twentieth century into the past, Harris' article, by describing the poetic praxis in terms of an imaginative engagement of opposites (female-male) in sexual union developing into child-bearing and childbirth, touches again upon a model of creative writing as giving “birth” (though with minimised negativity, compared to Punter's treatment of a similar theme). What Harris attempts to define is the “gender” of the female imagination, thus sexing creativity. Interesting biographical information serves as a foil (though it does not fully explain) the imaginative choices of Emily Brontë and Dickinson, both entering into dangerous (as it appears) relationships with a male “other”. In spite of the title, however, “intercourse” seems to become subsumed into impregnation and parturition—especially in the image of container/contained—tracing the reluctant yet relieving separation of mother-child as a passionate rupture that gives birth to the “poem”: it is the “awful parting” that is also marked by an “appalling trust” in the necessary continuity-in-separation of existence, guaranteed by religious faith.

Tatjana Jukić, Sound of Silence: A Reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnet XXXVIII

The essay focuses on the erotic and its representation in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnet XXXVIII (*Sonnets from the Portuguese*). It aims at showing that here aesthetic cannot be reduced to the Victorian stereotype of the self-abnegating angel-woman, but is a result of a profound reflection on the nature of art, language, femininity, eroticism. The analysis of the Sonnet XXXVIII will illustrate that it is precisely her experience/expression of love and the erotic that casts a new light on her seemingly narrow Victorian demeanour in some other works (the

ending of *Aurora Leigh*, for instance). Thus a reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (the title quite neglected by contemporary literary criticism) might indeed redefine the overall interpretative context of her poetic corpus.

Jukić's argument balances on the sensitive relation between eros and logos, finding their coexistence incompatible and mutually exclusive, possibly because the model she draws upon to describe poetic production is that of mystical experience. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "three kisses sonnet" that has been selected for close reading presents precisely this reversed analogy between love and language, the ascending gradation of erotic passion evaporating the capacity for verbal utterance. Jukić also detects a colour scheme (using almost the same colour code employed by Tarlo—white/gold/purple—though with a different signification) that relates the parts of the (speaker's) body receiving the visitations of (the beloved's) attention to the climaxing of spiritual intensity. The open trafficking between the erotic and the religious seems to be indicative of a rhetorical strategy amply adopted by women poets of the nineteenth century.

Margarete Rubik, "My life, my soul, my all is fixed upon enjoyment": Female Desire in Mrs Manley's *The Royal Mischief*

Even at a time renowned for its bawdy stage Mrs Manley's *The Royal Mischief* (1696) was notorious for its blatant sensuality and its unabashed expression of female desire. Homais, the heroine, is a sympathetically drawn villainess—a very unusual figure in Restoration drama. She usurps the language of the libertine, assuming the role of the sexual predator in a period when women were supposed to be passive, and female virtue was synonymous with chastity. Contrary to precedent, she does not lose her attractiveness on possession, is not discarded or exploited by her lovers, but assumes the power and emotional independence usually afforded only to Restoration rakes. She professes her desires with devastating candour and also invents a female language of desire that is fervent, seductive and active, subverting the love discourse usually put into the mouths of Restoration heroines. Although poetic justice, according to the canon, required that Homais be punished in the end, Manley managed to turn the moralising conclusion into an indictment of male hypocrisy. Even in death Homais remains the most dynamic and irresistibly sensual character in the play.

A further step backward in time takes us to the late seventeenth century and to a genre different from the lyric poetry so far examined—to the erotic extravagance of Mrs Manley's poetic tragedy. The play forms an interesting case of portraying a female character fully appropriating the male rhetoric of desire, "mimicking" the language of men, as Irigaray would put it. Is it for this, perhaps, that (within the scope of this volume) Manley gives us the most

convincing images of men as objects of desire? What should be noted here is that the open licentiousness of an unabashed eroticism is doubly conditioned (limitations that do not normally pertain to the fully exposed lyrical "I"): the distance afforded by the use of a dramatic persona, and the conventional closing scene that ultimately silences woman's desire through physical death. The correlation of eros and thanatos, both limited to the physical level without any metaphysical dimensions, seem to be less macabre and bleak than their representation in the work of contemporary women poets, appropriately so if, as Rubik informs us, "dying was still a metaphor for orgasm". The issue of the relation between erotic and political power (though not at all in the sense of Lorde's usage) is inevitably touched upon—the desiring subject in this case being a queen. Rubik's reading emphasises the prominence of sexual over royal power, and attempts to account for this "feminist utopia" so removed from any real life situations by stressing that it is placed in a "social vacuum".

Sarah M. Dunnigan, Rewriting the Renaissance Language of Love and Desire: The "bodily burdein" in the Poetry of Mary, Queen of Scots

This paper proposes that the mid-sixteenth century love poetry of Mary, Queen of Scots extends our understanding of the rhetorical and expressive scope of conventional erotic discourse in the European Renaissance. Mary's poetry, comprising a sonnet sequence and an elegy, provides further proof of the innately transgressive nature of early women's love lyric. The desiring female "I" at once opposes ideological decorum, religious and philosophical censure, and the entrenched masculinity of the existing amatory mode. Mary's sonnets draw from the dominant poetic philosophy of amatory Neoplatonism. Yet they surpass rhetorical and thematic orthodoxies common to Renaissance love poets of both genders by the disclosure of rape. This single, striking aberration creates a series of paradoxes: for example, the uneasy alliance of exalted spiritual and anguished physical subjugation. The greater irony which informs both the sequence and the elegy consists in the sanctity of the private erotic imagination *versus* the pathos of literal or actual manifestations of love. Mary's critically neglected poetry enfolds sensuous beauty, spiritual purity and sexual desecration. Ultimately, the poetry's extraordinary sense of the violated woman lends irony to Hélène Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine* as the ecstatic lyrical incarnation of the female body.

The royal subject of Mary's desiring "I", fictional and autobiographical, is yet another voice transgressing social and literary institutions. The crucial paradox in her sonnets, as highlighted by Dunnigan's reading, is of course the confession by the female subject/lover of physical seduction (rape) by the object of her desire, the male beloved. Since there is no clear time differentiation that

would establish the rise of desire as post-rape, the rejection of physical consummation seems to fall within the dominant ideology of the time that places eroticism beyond the bounds of sexual gratification. Dunnigan detects a “feminine” diversion in the treatment of contemporary Neoplatonic tenets concerning the bodily aspect of love, in that Mary refuses to openly differentiate between the sacred and the profane, nor does she take a clear moral stand, opting instead for a fluid and indeterminate emotional evasiveness. Unlike Manley’s sexual seducer of a queen, Mary’s queenly speaker is the erotic subject of a female sovereign physically subjugated by her subject (who does not respond to her love). Mary’s motives and deepest intentions, as Dunnigan emphasises, remain hidden. The oxymoron of a beloved who both corrupts and inspires, Dunnigan argues, could possibly be explained if a line were drawn between the real person and the idealised product of the erotic imagination (should we remember at this point that artistic creativity has been experienced by women as violation and rape)—a distinction that remains blurred in Mary’s reluctance to separate sensuality from spirituality as was the (male) poetic practice of the time.

George Freris, “I am the body”: Erotic Passion in the Poetry of Louise Labé

This study examines Louise Labé’s conception of the erotic as depicted in her poetic work; what is mainly emphasised is her contribution to the “freedom and fulfilment” of the human being through love. In the first part, a synoptic account of the role and representation of eroticism in literature is given, while in the second part the work of this female Renaissance poet is discussed more thoroughly. The paper describes the social context within which Labé operated and the influences she received; it also addresses her poetry as the testimony of a certain historical moment and a specific point of view, examines her contribution to the revision of thematics and poetic technique, and assesses her virtuosity and originality. The main conclusion of this brief discussion is that in a period when the liberation of the body was unthinkable, a woman, transgressing the social taboos and restrictions of her time and way before the current feminist declarations, had the courage to celebrate eros and assign to the body a determining role in the construction of female identity.

The Neoplatonic distinction between sexual consummation as the end of love, and infinite perpetuation and postponement of gratification as the end of erotic desire, is at the centre of Freris’ problematisation on Labé’s poetry. He specifies that “eroticism originates when ‘desire’ becomes more desirable than its object, when erotic discourse is preferred to the love affair as such”. What brings together the erotic and the poetic is that both pertain not to physical satisfaction but to fantasy. With this in mind, Freris reads Labé’s poetry as balancing on the axis of “absence” and “expectation”, that is on lack and its imaginative

substitution. In view of the absent object of love—the male beloved—it is the female body, physically present, that becomes the referential point of an (auto)erotic discourse. Thus, it is not accidental that Labé identifies herself as “the body”, in the here and now, while relegating her beloved to the role of “soul” that can abandon the body to death. In what I would call Labé’s “Copernican revolution”, she not only inverts the traditional role of the female from recipient to generator of desire, but also reverses the soul/body ontological hierarchy, making of the spiritual a “section” of a physical organic whole: “I am the body and you its most precious part: / Where are you then soul beloved?”.

As this survey shows, the subject of eroticism is tackled in some of its most familiar variations: heterosexual, homosexual, narcissistic, mystical. Contributors seem to agree that poetry written by women is transgressive of social restrictions and literary norms. They also converge on the point of accepting that there is a specifically female poetic rhetoric (let us not forget that, according to Sappho, Persuasion was the daughter of Aphrodite) which successfully articulates female sexuality, subverting patriarchal models and exploding male conceptions of femininity as passivity, chastity, self-effacement—a discourse which presents woman as a speaking subject, either openly or tacitly articulating her desire. Rather than dutifully adopting the prescribed sexual roles, women poets (of all times) show the possibility of a variety of erotic “dressing” to cater for a multiplicity of sexual preferences. It is worth noting that, at least in the papers included in this collection, the partnership of eros/thanatos is most often detected in poems referring to heterosexual relations rather than homosexual ones. Which gives rise to the question: If the erotic is desire for continuity, wholeness, merging, contact, communication, disruption, opening up, could we say that (male) gaze separates while (female) touch unites?

Plato was probably the first to distinguish between sexuality as an act of procreation and eroticism as an act of imagination—also gendering them, in a way that balances between compulsory heterosexuality and a homosexual existence, yet omitting any question of female sexual difference. Plato has repeatedly told us that human beings are erotic because they are incomplete, giving to erotic striving a tragic dimension. The Platonic definition of *έρως* as a “rushing in” (*εἰσρέω*) gestures towards the etymological kinship of streaming, loving, and speaking—in the *ρέω/έρω* correlation—that produces the triptych: *ρεῦμα/έρως/ρήμα*. If the erotic is essentially experienced (and expressed) as a surging of rhythmicity, pulsation and streaming, then the basic binary opposition (as also emphasised in current feminist debates) seems to be that of fluidity/solidity.

We should remember here that the arche-text where we find a re-transformation of woman’s body from “use” value into a topos where erotic “being” occurs, is in the poetry of Sappho (that should not be absent from the present discussion). She is the one who sets up an originary female poetic discourse, a rhetoric of the erotic that has been subsequently violated and

distorted in models that cast reality into rigid, oppositional and hierarchical categories, in an endless repetition of the essential patriarchal rite: the dismemberment of woman's body, which leaves female sexuality impenetrable (or rather forgotten), after a momentary poetic disclosure in one of Sappho's most cryptic erotic metaphors:

Here again limb-loosening eros shakes me,
the bitter-sweet, irresistible, creeping thing (130)

E. Douka-Kabitoglou