

Women's Poetry of Grief and Mourning

The Languages of Lament in Sixteenth-Century French Lyric

How to transmit to my beloved manuscript the eloquent
mimicry of the body and the face that accompanies speech, the
silences, the tone and music of the voice, the look filled with
unexpressed words which are nevertheless comprehensible, the
hands, like trays of fruit, full of mute phrases.

(Marie Cardinal, *In other words* 71)

FRENCH FEMINIST THEORISTS, most notably Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig, have devoted significant attention to the question of women's language. I have often resisted the application of contemporary theory to Renaissance texts in favour of a more historical, contextualized approach. Nonetheless, my research on sixteenth-century French women poets and of the body language that permeates their writings has led me to consider early-modern constructions of *écriture féminine* in light of contemporary feminist theories.¹ My intention in this essay is to demonstrate how women poets of the Renaissance construct a language that exceeds the conventions of masculine poetic discourse. In their creation of a distinctly feminine language, they anticipated the discourse called for by theorists only within the last few decades. Dissatisfied with the limits of rational language to capture their experiences, sixteenth-century women poets turn to the forces of their bodies to express the ineffable. Poetry of grief and mourning, including works by Philiberte de Fleurs, Madeleine des Roches, Catherine de Bourbon, Gabrielle de Coignard, and Marguerite de Navarre, provides the most compelling examples of this feminine language

of the body, although an analysis of women's love lyric, secular *complaintes*, or devotional compositions would also substantiate many of the ideas I propose here.

Feminist theory has probed and challenged the prospect of women producing a language that would free them from imitating the phallogocentric discourse of their masculine counterparts. Many theorists question how women can inscribe themselves into a language that they have not created—one that, in fact, excludes them—and fails to communicate fully their experiences. Kristeva asserts that within masculine language "woman" refers to "that which cannot be represented, what is not said, what remains above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies" ("La femme, ce n'est jamais ça" 135). While women function within this language that is not theirs, they sometimes fail to make themselves understood—a consequence greatly lamented by French women poets of the sixteenth century.

In "Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un," Luce Irigaray compiles the masculine complaints about the incomprehensibility of women's language, "in which [women go] off in all directions and in which [men are] unable to discern the coherence of any meaning" (353). Such criticism of women's expression implies that a gendered use of language exists, calling to mind the age-old and demeaning dichotomy between masculine Logic and feminine Irrationality. Interestingly, the source of women's language in the examples I will examine here could nonetheless be characterized as irrational: throughout history, the body has often been placed in binary opposition to the mind. Yet it is precisely the body and its irrational forces that modern feminists argue are central to women developing a language of their own. Although the idea of unmediated poetic expression implicit in this notion is troubling, the body is the dominant communicator within women's compositions of grief. In the Renaissance, non-verbal language anchored in the corporeal self—the *sanglots*, *criz*, *souspirs*, *gémissements*, and *larmes* that are so prevalent in women's sixteenth-century verse—effectuates the "writing of the body" called for by feminist theorist Hélène Cixous in "Le Rire de la Meduse"(342).²

In her examination of *l'écriture féminine*, Ann Rosalind Jones ("Writing the Body") has questioned whether the body can in fact be the source of a new discourse. In literature of the latter half of the twentieth century, many women authors have given a voice to their bodies, and in so doing have invoked

a veritable linguistic revolution, shattering rules of grammar, syntax, and punctuation. The difference between modern women authors and women poets of the sixteenth century is that today, it is generally the sexual body that is inscribed into verse. Women authors of the Renaissance sought instead to give voice to their *grieving* bodies, a revolution in itself, considering the religious condemnation and cultural rejection of such release.

Cultural beliefs concerning the notion of grief are reflected within masculine poetry of the mid-sixteenth century. A distinct movement of anti-mourning arises within masculine devotional lyric in particular.³ Authors reject grief in a variety of ways: either by pointing to the futility, or to the selfishness, or above all to the sinfulness of such sentiment.⁴ For male poets, grief is wasted emotion.

A brief look at some examples of masculine verse will furnish the contextual background for an analysis of women's poetry of grief and mourning. Eustorg de Beaulieu's "Rondeau Ixj de resconforter ceulx qui se plaignent de la mort d'aultruy" provides a good point of departure. His poem is intended to deliver a comforting message to those in mourning, but serves instead as a harsh reminder of the impermanence of life and of the utter vanity of all efforts to deny death:

C' est fait il faut passer par la
Tout homme est né affin qu'il meure
Et face eternelle demeure
En joye, ou pleur de par dela,
D' alleguer cecy, ou cela,
Vous n'amendriez point d'une meure
C' est fait.
Cessez de plourer, sus hola?
Priez Dieu en temps & en heure
Qu'au residu ayde & sequeure,
Car que y feriez vous plus? Veez la
C'est fait. (Ciiij-b)

Beaulieu's expression of supposed consolation reflects the stoic resolve encouraged by many religious thinkers of this period. The fundamental

message, "C'est fait," repeated at crucial points within the poem, conveys the poet's own mastery of emotional indifference to loss. There is no point in wasting tears over the inevitable.

Bergedé echoes this view wholeheartedly. His "Pleurer les mors" is even more obdurate than Beaulieu's *rondeau*. The imagery of his composition moves beyond the abstractions of Beaulieu's preaching to form a ridiculing portrait of the mourner:

Tu rompz ta barbe & tes cheveux,
Tu remplis de larmes tes yeux:
De plaintifz tu rompz ton visage,
Douloureux par le dur outrage,
De tes ongles ensanglantez,
Pour y avoir este plantez.
Crois-tu pourtant faire revivre
Celuy que Dieu ne veult plus vivre,
En dueil pour les deffunctz se mettre,
ISP est sinon mal sur mal transmettre. (Ma-b)

With disdain, the poet details the physical manifestations of grief in a manner that recalls medieval and biblical depictions. He mocks the self-abuse and bitter outrage that result from the confrontation with death and its unavoidable finality. The pain the mourner experiences, Bergedé suggests, is not the result of absence, but stems from having been "planted" here unwillingly, forced to remain while a loved one has been released. All displays of grief are therefore in vain; there can be no beneficial purpose to such behaviour. Mourning serves only to divulge a sinful defiance of spirit. Bergede's message echoes that of Beaulieu: submission to God's will is the only reasonable way to confront loss.

The most remarkable example of this belief is found in Marot's *Deploration sur le trespas dufeu messire Florimond Robertet* (1534). Even Marot, who makes every effort to elicit tears in the beginning of the poem, completely rejects the notion of grief by the time he reaches the end.⁵ The turning point takes place as Marot considers the foolishness and hypocrisy of mourning. He affirms that such behaviour is not befitting to believers in Christ, and that

the torments of grief should be left as punishment to the pagans who fail to believe in the eternal life begotten by His sacrifice:

Parquoy bien folle est la coustume humaine
Quant aulcun meurt porter et faire dueil
Si tu crois bien que Dieu vers luy le meyne
A quelle fin en gettes larmes doeil:
Veulx tu le vif tirer hors du cercueil
Pour a son bien mettre empesche et deffence:
Qui pource pleure est marry dont le dueil
De Dieu est fait jugez si cest offence.
Laisse gemir et brayze les payens
Qui nont espoir deternelle demeure
Folte de foy te donne leurs moyens
Dainsi plourer quant fault que aulcun meure
Folie cest de mener dueil a lheure
Hypocrisie en a taille lhabit
Dessoubz lequel tel sa mere pleure
Qui bien voudroit de son pere lobit. (Lb)

A more personal effort to avoid indulgence in grief can be found in Jacques de Billy's *Sonnet spirituel XLVII "De la misere de cette vie."* In this example, Billy tries to comfort himself over the loss of his brother.⁶ He confesses his grief through a vehement rejection of it:

Pourquoy t'affiges tu de dueil & de tristesse
Pour ton frere Prunay? Son sort n'est il heureux,
Quand, ayant combatu d'un bras fort valeureux,
Meurt, la foy soustenant, qui a salut s'adresse?
Quicte done tels regrets, telles pleurs & detresse.
Ne regrette celuy, qui d'un coeur genereux,
Par un illustre mort ayant fendu les cieus,
Jouist ores des biens, dont avons la promesse.
Mais bien deplore toy, les maux considerant
Ausquels resté tu es, & quau monde adherant

Quelque jour te sera de sentir necessaire.
Chetif & miserable, & plein d'aveuglement,
Quel profit te revient de vivre longument,
Sinon voir plus de maux, plus en souffir, ou faire? (189)

There should be no sadness for the one who has died, for he has gained a new and better life of bliss and eternal repose. Billy attempts to stifle the voice of mourning by turning his thoughts away from the one he has lost to contemplate instead his own miserable condition.

It is especially by contrast to such fervent suppression of grief and mourning in poetry by male authors that the difference women authors brought to the poetic tradition of grief in the sixteenth century becomes apparent. This feminine poetic and transgressive response to grief is all the more remarkable given the religious and cultural restraints, as well as the prominence and recognition afforded masculine poetry. The status of mourning itself put sixteenth-century women poets in an exceptional category that entitled them to commit their literary acts of grief.

As many scholars, such as Margaret King, Constance Jordan, and Ruth Kelso have argued, widows, in particular, found themselves in an unusual situation during the Renaissance, as they gained a social and financial autonomy uncommon to most women of the period.⁷ The pleasure some widows took in their independence resulted in occasional bouts of societal suspicion concerning the authenticity of feminine grief.⁸ At the same time, a tension developed between cultural expectations of how women should display their grief and the simultaneous ideal of silence imposed upon widows, and on women in general for that matter.⁹

In his "Ornament! della gentil donna vedova," for example, Guilio Cesare Cabei proposes a list of widows' virtues, the third and fourth of which seek specifically to silence the widow's voice: "She will speak sparingly and without raising her voice.... She will observe silence, except on being questioned" (qtd. in Kelso 130). Despite the deprecation of the widow's voice, widows throughout literary history have refused to be silenced.

Christine de Pisan, for example, represents the paragon of feminine literary grief in her *Cent ballades*, which are fundamental to the tradition. Pisan is almost defiant in her literary lament and writes her grief with an exemplary authority of voice, generating self-portrait after self-portrait to

capture the intensity and singularity of her grief.¹⁰ In the following excerpt from *Ballad VI*, Pisan enumerates her woes through a rapid succession of substantives and descriptives that register the limitlessness and ineffability of her pain:

Dueil engoiseux, rage desmesuree,
Grief desespoir plein de forsennement,
Langour sanz fin, vie malheurée
Pleine de plour, d'engoisse et de tourment,
Cueur doloieux qui vit obscurement,
Tenebreux corps sus le point de perir,
Ay, sanz cesser, continuellement;
Et si ne puis ne garir ne morir. (7)¹¹

The physicality of Pisan's grief, the fundamentally corporeal expression of her despair, foreshadows feminine depictions of grief during the sixteenth century. At the same time, it announces a double transgression that will take place within women's poetry: the turn to the body as a means of expression and the act of grieving that is accomplished through the refusal of silence.

The tradition of poetic mourning is not only developed by major women poets such as Marguerite de Navarre, but it also resonates uncannily in the works of more obscure authors of the sixteenth century. Philiberte de Fleurs, the virtually unknown author of the *Soupirs de induité* (1585), collected in *Oeuures*, is representative of the minor poets who were influenced by the grief tradition. The few extant passages of her five hundred verses (devoted to her dead husband Le sieur de Marteray) reproduce the body language devised in the poetry of Christine de Pisan. For both authors, writing becomes a translation of the body's indomitable force of grief. Unbridled tears play the central role in the interpretation of grief: "je ne saurai restreindre / l'oeil fontaineux, ruisselant cette humeur, / Qui ne permet recéler ma douleur," de Fleurs confesses, hoping God will grant her the restraint of which she knows her body to be incapable (117).

The grammar of grief consists of apostrophic and exclamatory cries, moans, sighs, screams, and sobs. But tears—gushing and all-consuming—like those in the previous passage, provide the foundation for women's body language. The following stanza taken from Madeleine Des Roches's first

sonnet in the second collection devoted to her husband François Eboissard, is also exemplary of the type of lachrymal lament one finds in women's poetry.¹²

O douloureux regrets! O triste pensement
Qui avez mes deux yeux convertis en fontaine!
O trop soudain depart! O cause de la peine
Qui me fait lamenter inconsolablement! (174)

In sonnet II, Des Roches reiterates the ceaselessness of her suffering, turning a second time to the Jeremiac fountain of tears. The whole body is overcome and overwhelmed by its own ungovernable language:

O miserable estat ou je me voy posée,
Dont j'ay tousjours au cueur un amer souvenir
Qui me fait le cerveau fontaine devenir,
Dont l'humeur paries yeux n'est jamais espuisée. (175)

The notion of the uncontrollable body of grief, as portrayed in the works De Fleurs and Des Roches, is universal in sixteenth-century women's laments. There is a constant battle to dominate the flesh and its inconstancies. At the same time, in moments of some subversive indulgence, women almost seem to take a private pleasure in their grief, or at least in the writing of it.

Michel de Montaigne addresses the relation of grief to the process of writing in the *Essais*. In the opening lines of "De l'affection des peres aux enfans," Montaigne explains to Madame d'Estissac:

C'est une humeur melancolique, et une humeur par consequent très ennemie de ma complexion naturelle, produit par le chagrin de la solitude en laquelle il ya quelques années que je m'estoy jetté, qui m'a mis premierement en teste cette resverie de me mesler d'escrire. (Vol. II, 56)

Although he insists that melancholia counters his natural disposition, Montaigne raises the fundamental point that suffering, "le chagrin de la solitude," brought about by loss, is what drew him to writing in the first

place.¹³ Montaigne is an exception among male authors. His words, in fact, are more representative of the feminine experience of the call to writing. In her article on the significance of grief in the work of Montaigne, Françoise Charpentier argues that writing "est déjà un premier geste de désendeuillement, manifestant 'le travail du deuil'" (829).¹⁴ The expression of grief through the written word can play a crucial and highly effective role in the mourning process.¹⁵

The notion of writing as "travail du deuil" is compelling in light of sixteenth-century women's poetry of grief and mourning. While women share Montaigne's shame and resistance to mourning as literary motivation, their works, at the same time, thrive on grief: it is the heart of their literary creativity.¹⁶ Women, nonetheless, make every effort to suppress their grief as is expected of them, but their bodies refuse to be silenced.¹⁷ Marguerite de Navarre writes in *La Navire* about her grief over the death of her brother François I: "Le corps me vient contraindre / A regretter, à pleurer, àcrier; / Et le dehors ne peut le dedans faindre" (407).

In Chanson II "Autres pensées faites un mois apres la mort du roy," Marguerite de Navarre transforms her whole Self into lamentation. Rational language is abandoned; the poet, empty of any mindfulness of God or social expectation, gives herself over entirely to her tears and her cries:

Esprit et corps de dueil sont pleins,
Tant qu'ilz sont convertiz en plainctz:
Seul pleurer est ma contenance.
Je crie par bois et par plains,
Au ciel et terre me complains;¹⁸
A rien fors à mon dueil ne pense. (9-10)

The onomatopoeic quality and echo-effect of "pleins," "plainctz," "plains," "complains" deftly accentuates the image of the poet physically overcome with grief, unable to think or speak of anything else. In *La Navire*, Marguerite de Navarre turns again to wailing and screaming in an attempt to push out the grief that binds her: "Criez, mavoix, jusqu'à sa demourance; / Pleurez mes yeux, jusqu'a saillir dehors..." (423).

The scream imparts tremendous linguistic power to women's poetic laments. Catherine de Bourbon, for example, viewing language as an obstacle

to the conveyance of her suffering, instinctively turns to her body as an alternative, and perhaps more reliable, means of expression: "Quelque fois, mais en vain, de parler je m'essaye, / Pour te dire mon mal, mais ma langue begaye, / Et ne peut prononcer un mot de ma douleur, / D'esprit done et de coeur a toy, Pere, je crie" (208).

Like Catherine de Bourbon, Marguerite de Navarre is deeply troubled by the limitations of language to translate her experience. She is resistant to verbal codes into which she cannot, or perhaps does not wish to, transcribe her grief, for the resulting depiction could never be an accurate one. As she explains in Chanson XLII: "Mon parler n'a couleur / Pour monstrier ma douleur" (119). The body, therefore, becomes the source of women's language and rhetoric.¹⁹ In the very first of the Chansons Spirituelles, the "Pensees de la royne de Navarre, estant dans sa litiere durant la maladie du roy," Marguerite de Navarre claims she will be unable to write her grief, unable to render visible her pain "par escrit," "par parole." She asserts that language or, more precisely, "[s]on parler" is defeated before she even begins.²⁰ Unable to find sufficient words to give voice to her grief, her body provides her with the necessary means:

Mes larmes, mes souspirs,²¹ mes criz,
Dont tant bien je sgay la pratique, Sont
mon parler et mes escritz, Car je n'ay
autre rhetorique. (4)

There is nothing that can more directly express the inarticulate "douleur de [son] esprit" than her body (3).²²

One final example will illustrate the significance of women's body language. Gabrielle de Coignard's Sonnet XXIV in *Oeuures chrciennes* provides a particularly cogent example of verbal language submitting to the expressive forces of the body. Unlike Marguerite de Navarre, Gabrielle de Coignard does not explain her use of body language as the result of a distrust of verbal language; rather, in her grief, she simply experiences a loss of contact with language.²³

Mon Coeur estoit de douleur oppresse,
Je n'avois plus parole ny langage;

Mon estomach ressembloit à l'orage,²⁴
Qu'eleve en mer Aquilon courroucé.
Mille sanglots vers le ciel j'ay poussé,
Vrais tourbillons eschelans ce nuage. (169)

Coignard relays the intensity of her grief through a description of its physical manifestations. Using hyperbolic, metaphorical water imagery to convey the internal experience of grief, Coignard successfully renders what she considers to be indescribable. The storm in her stomach compels her to cry out toward the heavens, driving out her pain in the only language she has: "mille sanglots."

The so-called irrational forces of the body, the emotions of the grieving "hysteric," are omnipresent in women's poetry, I have discussed only a few among the many examples that deserve further analysis and consideration in what should be a discussion of the history of women's language. As the poems examined here undeniably suggest, the development of a feminine language has a long and nuanced history.

As Madeleine Lazard, in *Image Littéraires de la femme à la Renaissance*, has already observed, women poets rarely focus their compositions of mourning on the one who has died; they choose instead to expound upon their own suffering that is the result of their loss.²⁵ Their inspiration is purely selfish, in the most positive sense of the word. Their writing provided the private space to grieve denied them by social custom. As a result of their awareness of the failures of language, women turn to their bodies of grief and indeed refuse, through the rejection of rational discourse and the construction of their own language, the patriarchal control over the feminine body that feminist theorists today continue to discuss.

Although there is substantial evidence that women hesitated as they shed their grief in writing, the plethora of examples in their works reveals the transgressive act they committed through their poetic mourning. Self-criticism pervades their literary expressions of grief because they are required to deal with the contradictions between their private needs and the expectations of society. Women advance, within their poetic sanctuaries, from emotional restraint and self-denial to moderation in their grief and, then, still unsatisfied, to justifications of their grief and confrontations with the cultural codes that seek to silence them. As sixteenth-century Italian poet

Vittoria Colonna reveals, women's grief poetry can transcend its own literary purpose to fulfill the more intimate, emotional needs of the author where the process of poetic composition replaces the outward act of mourning:

A bitter weeping, not a sweet song,
and melancholy sighs, not a clear voice,
make me vaunt not my style but my grief. (Love Poem 1,129)

NOTES

1. In my research on French women's literature of the Renaissance, I have been repeatedly surprised to discover how women writers of the sixteenth century struggled with some of the same linguistic and literary problems that many modern women authors and critics contend with today. Considering the work of Renaissance women authors with an awareness of the perspectives of modern feminist critics can better illuminate their linguistic challenges and literary goals. While I would not go so far as to suggest that there is a universalist quality to women's writing, the ideas of contemporary feminist critics can serve as an enlightening gloss on women's writing of the past.
2. Cixous writes: "Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse."
3. There was a formal tradition of poetic weeping, which actually stands as a paradox to religious opposition to grief, that was established during the middle ages and was greatly popularized during the sixteenth century. The genre, known as the *déploration finèbre*, refers to literary tributes to individuals who have died. The *déploration* most often follows a conventional schema (e.g. lamentation, eulogy, prayer), is written by request, and is rarely inspired by personal loss. In many cases they chronicle controlled meditations on Death itself and turn to realistic descriptions of the decomposition of the body, drawing on the vanitas tradition or the *ars moriendi*, etc.—all notions that have received extensive critical attention. For a solid history of the *déploration*, see Christine Martineau-Ceney's *Le thème de la mort dans la poésie française: (1450-1550)* (Paris: H. Champion, 1978).
4. For Catholic believers, grief was a sin; mourning suggested, without exception, in submission to God's will. Nothing and no one outside the relationship with God deserved to hold any significance. Penitential grief alone was permitted. All other feelings of despair were deemed corrupt and disobedient. Consider Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 7:10: "For Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation

and brings no regret but worldly grief produces death." Although this statement is taken out of context (Paul is writing to comfort the Corinthians who have at last been moved to repent after a temporary lapse in faith), it nonetheless parallels the problem of grief associated with mourning, since this latter emotion is so clearly grounded in the terrestrial experience.

5. The opening lines of the poem describe the difference between affectation and authentic grief as the poet attempts to feel the pain of loss:

Mais quant la mort a fait son malefice
Amour adonc use de son office
Faisant porter aux vray amys le dueil
Non point ung dueil de fainctes larmes doeil
Non point ung dueil de drap noir annuel
Mais ung dueil tainct dennuy perpetuel
Non point ung dueil qui dehors apparoist
Mais qui au coeur sans apparence croist
Voyla le dueil qui a vaincu ma joye
Cest ce qui fait que tout rien que je oye
Me donne ennuy; c'est ce que me procure
Que couleur blanches a loeil me soit obscure
Et que jour cler me semble noir nuyc
De tel facon que ce qui tant me nuyst
Corromp du tout le naif de ma muse
Lequel de soy ne veult que je mamuse
A composer en triste tragedye
Mais maintenant force mest que je dye
Chanson mortelle en stille plain desmoy. (Aija-b)

This excerpt of the initial movement of the *déploration* is presented as a lesson in the proper expressions of grief. At the same time, the passage reveals the efforts on the part of the author to convince his reader that he is indeed sad over the death of Robertet. As modern readers, it is difficult to perceive any sincerity in his expression. The poet uses conventional rhetoric and imagery to capture a grief that is not his own. The end result, as is often the case with official poetry of circumstance, is a failure to convey an authentic sense of despair.

6. The meditation is inspired by Saint Gregory of Nazianus's *oraison funebre* on the death of his brother Cesarius. Billy notes after his own sonnet how he was moved by the words Saint Gregory said to his mother and father. He translates:

De combien Cesarius no us a-t-il desavance: Combien encores
pleurons nous son deces? N'allons nous pas en diligence en une
mesme demeure? N'entrons nous pas en bref soubz la mesme
pierre? Ne serons nous pas incontinent mesme pouldre? Tout le

proffit que ferons en ce peu de jours, qu'aurons encores a vivre, ne sera-ce pas, partie de voir plus de maux, partie d'en souffrir, partie aussi, paraventure, d'en faire, & puis apres payer le commun tribut, a la loy de nature? (191)

7. See Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1978), and Margaret King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991).
8. Widows were often suspected of feigning their grief and fabricating illusions of melancholy for the sake of appearances. Masculine disbelief of feminine grief is reflected in many Medieval and Early Modern texts. Aside from two exceptional pieces by Benoît Alizet ("Consolation des Vefves") and Nicolas Le Digne ("Sonnet pour les vefves"), the predominant literary image of the widow from the 12th through the 16th centuries, in works spanning from Chretien de Troyes to Michel de Montaigne, is one that portrays her as full of deceitful tears and false regret. In "De trois bonnes femmes," Montaigne, refusing to be duped by the trickery of the widow, maintains that the women of his century:

réservent plus communement a estaller leurs bons offices a la vehemence de leur affection envers leurs maris perdus, cherchent au moins lors a donner tesmoignage de leur bonne volonte. Tardif tesmoignage et hors de saison! Elles preuvent plustot par la qu'elles ne les aiment que morts.... S'il y a quelque honneur a pleurer les maris, il n'appartient qu'a celles qui leur ont ry; celles qui ont pleure en la vie, qu'elles rient en la mort, au dehors comme au dedans. Aussi ne regardez pas ces yeux moites et a cette piteuse voix; regardez ce port, ce telnet et l'embonpoint de ces joues sous ces grandes voiles: c'est par-la qu'elle parle franc;ais. Il en est peu de qui la sante n'aille en amendant, qualité qui ne scait pas mentir. Cette ceremonieuse contenance ne regarde pas tant derriere soy, que devant; c'est acquest plus que pavement. (II, 35, 406-07)

See also Heather Arden's "Grief, Widowhood, and Woman's Sexuality in Medieval French Literature," in *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe*, ed. Louise Mirrer (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992), 305-19.

9. Juan Luis Vivés's council concerning the appropriate manner of the widow's grief promotes this paradoxical code of conduct, one which suggests that the widow reveal some evidence of her grief so that others can be assured of her femininity, but that she limit herself to avoid over-indulgence in her expression, which would attract unseemly attention. "Floods of tears and bitter laments," he writes "are allowable to her, even to be recommended; not to weep at all is a sign of a hard heart and unchaste mind. ...Let a widow therefore bewail her husband, if not for

one reason then for another, but with due measure, not crying out or beating herself to display her grief to others" (qtd. in Kelso 127-28).

Moderation was the key to appropriate grieving or to any emotivity for that matter, which was so often associated with feminine weakness. From a medical point of view, the physical difference of the woman—her physiology and humours—was thought to contribute to her supposed emotional "instabilities." According to Ian Maclean, the physician Mercado believed that melancholia, listlessness, and irrational behaviour, among other hysterical illnesses, were caused specifically by the female reproductive system (41). Maclean explains that women's assumed physical frailty, for sixteenth-century thinkers, "is accompanied by mental emotional weakness" (43). "For all this, woman is considered to be inferior to man in that the psychological effects of her cold and moist humours throw doubt on her control of her emotions and her rationality" (46). Grief, therefore, with its associations to irrationality and lack of emotional control, became linked in the minds of men with a feminine madness to be avoided at all costs. Marguerite de Navarre herself contributes to this kind of thinking, referring to her *fol pleurer in La navire* (386). The association of grief with madness would explain the issue of anti-mourning raised earlier. In "Accoustumance," Bergecé distinguishes the appropriate masculine response, or rather lack thereof in the face of adversity: "Cueur *viril* ne doit lamenter / Lorsque luy survient infortune" (published under the name Nicolle Bargedé de Vezelay, Kiiij-a, emphasis added).

10. See in particular Ballads I, V, and VI.
11. A comparison of Pisan's poem with Madeleine des Roches's Sonnet VIII written over a century-and-a-half later, reveals the fundamental role of the body in the experience and rather morbid expression of grief.

Pleurant amerement mon douloureux servage
 Qui tient mon corps mal sain, mon esprit en souci,
 Le coeur comble d'amer, le visage transi,
 Cachant l'ombre de vie en une morte image,
 Je cherche vainement qui l'esprit me soulage; (127)

The series of "plaintes" in Ode IV further illustrates the physical extreme to which Madeleine Des Roches experiences her grief:

Du chef jusques a la plante
 Une humeur froid se plante
 Par le millieu de mes os
 Dont la douleur trop pressante
 M'oste repas etrepos. (102)

12. For Des Roches's primary grief poems, see Sonnet XXXVI in the first collection, her *Ephitaphe de Feu Maistre François Eboissard, Seigneur de la Villée, son Mary*, and the first

and second sonnets of the second collection. At the same time, Madeleine des Roches experiences a certain guilt over allowing herself this kind of release—much like Gabrielle de Coignard. Compare Des Roches's sonnet VII and Coignard's sonnet LXXXIII. See also Catherine de Bourbon's "Stances de Madame, Seur du Roy."

13. In Françoise Charpentier's words: "Les *Essais* sont enfants du deuil et de la melancolie" ("Ecriture et travail du deuil" 828).
14. Despite the opposition to grief expressed in "De la tristesse," Montaigne undeniably experiences and writes about the pain he suffers over the loss of his friend, Etienne de la Boetie. His doleful remembrances of the union they once shared inevitably suggest that he is overcome by the grief he so despises. In "De Pamitie," writing provides the ideal opportunity for Montaigne to honour the beauty of his friendship with La Boetie and to mourn their separation.
15. Charpentier elaborates:

Ecriture du deuil, c'est aussi dire, célébrer l'objet perdu, et décrire ce qu'il en est de cette perte. C'est une démarche qui oblige celui qui écrit aller chercher en lui l'objet de sa célébration, dont il a intériorisé l'image puisque la réalité lui en refuse désormais la rencontre; cette image est devenue un modèle, auquel il s'identifie, puis que l'objet du deuil est un objet d'amour.... [L] 'écriture du deuil, c'est aussi élaborer et dépasser le deuil, c'est une thérapie; elle permet de mettre à distance cet objet perdu et dangereusement introjecté. (829)

16. The shame women associate with their grief is the result of societal pressures to silence it. In *La nauire*, François I attempts to goad Marguerite out of her misery, prompting: "Laisse ton pleur, laisse ton soupiner, / Laisse le deuil qui tant d'ennuy te donne, / Qui ne te sert sinon que d'empirer" (411). Briçonnet's missive to Marguerite in September of 1524 is intended both to comfort Marguerite after the loss of her niece and to criticize her excessive indulgence in her grief:

Si mes dernières lettres concluent et vous persuadent n'estre à plaindre feu nostre bonne dame et royne, qu'il a pleu à Dieu appeller a luy, plus doivent pour sa bonne fille, qui chantera, suivant l'aigneau, quelque part qu'il voyse, le cantique qui n'est permis à sa bonne dame et mere, la royne. Innocence l'a conduit au domicile de l'innocent aigneau sans macule. En la plorant l'on desplaist non seulement à Dieu, comme contrevenant ou desirant (sinon obvier) ne se contenter de son vouloir, mais aussi a elle, luy substrayant, par nostre inconsideré a desir, la felicité incommuable, et ce pour une folle amour, que cuydons avoir en elle. (264)

17. Gabrielle de Coignard, endeavouring to overcome her personal struggles with grief, epitomizes the predicament of women authors in Sonnet LXXXIII.

Non je ne veux aucunement me plaindre,
 Non je ne veux mes ennuis racompter,
 Non je ne veux mon esprit contenter,
 Pour en parlant faire ma douleur moindre.
 Je veux plustost dissimuler et feindre,
 En me taisant ma langue surmonter,
 Il faut ce corps severement dompter
 Par la raison qui se doit faire craindre. (240)

The series of anaphorae that opens the composition reflects the persistent efforts of the author to avoid surrendering herself to lamentation. The repetition of "Non je ne veux" resounds as a mantra that she chants in order to mould her will to the behaviour she considers appropriate. Coignard aspires to bear her burdens with austere resolve. To complain, to "racompter [s]es ennuis," would allow for a release of her pain, which would, as she suggests, diminish it. "Taire [s]a langue" would symbolize her ultimate triumph over the body, to deny the natural forces of grief would be the utmost proof of her devotion. Coignard moves from expressing what she does not want in the first stanza, to a forceful statement of what she does want, trying to comply wholeheartedly with Christian acceptance and endurance of pain as punishment. She is resolute that reason will conquer her instinctive need to express her pain in order to avoid losing herself to it entirely.

The irony in the passage is that by the expression of her desire not to complain, Coignard carries out her complaint indirectly. By mere mention of it, she makes her suffering known, thereby permitting at least a partial release. Despite this, Coignard reveals her profound determination to overcome the body, to mortify the concrete with abstract reason (in this case, faith). Colette Winn clarifies the thought process at the root of Gabrielle de Coignard's refusal: "L'auteur refuse de s'épandre sur ses maux, de décharger son coeur afin de trouver réconfort dans l'acte d'écriture. Point ne suffit de diminuer la peine. Il faut apprendre à la dominer pour se rendre maître de son corps et de soi" (*Oeuvres Chrétiennes*, Introduction 41).

18. As this example illustrates, women poets often turn to nature to create and secure private space in their compositions for the release of emotions. Gabrielle de Coignard also employs this tactic. See for example, sonnet LXXIX.
 Poetic composition becomes the sanctuary where grief is savoured in a few stolen moments: "Quand nul ne voy, l'oeil j'abandonne / A pleurer," admits de Navarre, "puis sur le papier / Un peu de ma douleur j'ordonne; / Voilà mon douloureux mestier" (Chanson I, 6).
19. Chanson II also describes the physical toil that grief has taken on her, bringing her to the point of death, leaving her with nothing but her voice. Despite her feeble state, Marguerite succeeds in developing a rare strength of voice:

Tristess, par ses grans efforts,
 A rendu si foible mon corps
 Qu'il n'ha ny vertu ny puissance:
 Il est semblable à l'un des morts,
 Tant que, la voyant par dehors,
 L'on perd de luy la cognoissance.

Je n'ay plus que la triste voix,
 De la quelle crier m'en vois
 En lamentant la dure absence.
 Las, de celuy pour qui je vivois,
 Que de si bon Coeur je voyois,
 J'ay perdu l'heureuse presence. (8-9)

20. Si la douleur de mois esprit
 Je pouvois monstrier par parole
 Ou la declarer par escrit.
 Oncques ne fut sy triste rolle;
 Car le mal qui plus fort;
 Par-quoy n'ay rien qui me concole,
 Fors l'espoir de la douce mort.

Je se.ay que je ne dois celer Mon
 ennui, plus que raisonnable;
 Mais si ne scauroit mon parler
 Atteindre à mon dueil importable:
 A l'escriture veritable
 Defaudroit la force à ma main; Le
 taire me seroit louable,
 S'il ne m'esoit tant inhumain. (3)

Within the first two strophes of the poem, despite her lack of confidence in her ability to write and function within language, there is a marked refusal to silence herself. She describes her grief as "raisonnable," which is not necessarily in opposition with the "mal...qui [l]'affole." Marguerite admits that this inordinate pain she bears brings about an irrational response within her, but claims simultaneously that her reaction is not irrational, that it is perfectly normal, in fact, considering the tremendous loss she endures. The poem serves as a defence, a discreet riposte against anyone who might reproach her voice of grief. For although language is inadequate, and despite the fact that it would be praiseworthy for her to silence herself, Marguerite de Navarre boldly claims her right to mourn.

21. In the *Complainte pour un detenu prisonnier*, de Navarre argues for the superiority of the sigh over verbal language in expressions of pain: "Et les souspirs sont plus certain

message / De tes douleurs, que ne fait ton langage" (*Marguerite de la Marguerite des Princesses* [Ed. Ruth Thomas. Paris: Mouton, 1970] 452).

22. In the Chapter entitled "The Rhetoric of Tears" in his study of Marguerite de Navarre's religious poetry, Robert Cottrell describes the dilemma the poet faces, clarifying exactly what the turn to lachrymal language representation means:

In the opening three stanzas, Marguerite returns to a double-edged theme that runs through her poetry: although she recognizes the utter inadequacy of fallen language, she cannot remain silent; she is compelled by inner necessity to go on writing. Whereas for Humanists copiousness was a sign of man's fertile mind and inexhaustible creative energy, for Marguerite it signals an ontological flaw. Since the Fall, man has been condemned to language. Marguerite continues to speak, although (or at least claims to know) that words are useless.... Declaring that she finds no solace in language, Marguerite asserts that her chansons are not linguistic structures at all. They rely not on the artificial code of language and textuality, but on the natural code of tears, sighs, and sobs. Weeping is the non-linguistic discourse of the heart. (*In The Grammar of Silence: A Reading of Marguerite de Navarre's Poetry* [Washington DC: Catholic U of American P, 1986], 195-97).

23. Madelein des Roches describes this experience in similar terms. In her physical grief, she discovers that she is stripped of language: "Par le repos perdu j'ay la raison blessée, / J'ay le discours rompu" (Sonnet VIII, 128).
24. Cf. Job 30:27: "My stomach seethes, is never still, / for every day brings further suffering."
25. "La poésie du veuvage ne s'attache guère à rappeler le bonheur enfui, se complait rarement à évoquer la figure de disparu ou sa tendresse protectrice. Elle se détourne du passé pour s'appesantir sur la tristesse présente" (*Images littéraires de la Femme à la Renaissance* 58).