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Article abstract

This article will focus on the ways in which Gabrielle de Coignard's Sonnets spirituels, cultivated in purposefully sought domestic isolation, reveals conflictual aspirations nourished by the pursuit of an untainted devotional path that nevertheless cannot escape the assimilation of the earthly passion-fraught discourse of the Petrarchan tradition. Beginning with an analysis of the two opening sonnets, I will examine how despite her apparent disavowal of the worldly obsessions of practitioners of this dominant tradition in order to define herself as a singularly and purely Christian poet, her writing places many of their conventions, allusions, and rhetoric at the centre of her own poetic itinerary. I will then move on to study how these opening signals of Coignard's inscription of her devotional trajectory both against and within the male and female Petrarchan tradition are affirmed at multiple moments in the progression of her collection.

Gabrielle de Coignard's *Sonnets spirituels*: Writing Passion within and against the Petrarchan Tradition

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*This article will focus on the ways in which Gabrielle de Coignard's *Sonnets spirituels*, cultivated in purposefully sought domestic isolation, reveals conflictual aspirations nourished by the pursuit of an untainted devotional path that nevertheless cannot escape the assimilation of the earthly passion-fraught discourse of the Petrarchan tradition. Beginning with an analysis of the two opening sonnets, I will examine how despite her apparent disavowal of the worldly obsessions of practitioners of this dominant tradition in order to define herself as a singularly and purely Christian poet, her writing places many of their conventions, allusions, and rhetoric at the centre of her own poetic itinerary. I will then move on to study how these opening signals of Coignard's inscription of her devotional trajectory both against and within the male and female Petrarchan tradition are affirmed at multiple moments in the progression of her collection.*

*Cet article approfondira les façons dont les *Sonnets spirituels* de Gabrielle de Coignard, composés dans le cadre d'une solitude domestique voulue, font preuve de fortes aspirations conflictuelles nourries par la poursuite d'un chemin dévotionnel qui n'arrive néanmoins pas à s'échapper de l'assimilation du discours des passions terrestres dans la tradition pétrarquiste. À partir d'une analyse des deux premiers sonnets, j'examinerai comment — malgré son refus apparent de ces obsessions chez Pétrarque et ses imitateurs/imitatrices français, un refus visé à se définir en tant que poétesse purement chrétienne — l'écriture de Coignard incorpore maints éléments de la rhétorique pétrarquiste au centre de son propre itinéraire poétique. J'étudierai, par la suite, comment ces signes inauguraux de l'inscription de sa trajectoire spirituelle à l'intérieur et à l'encontre du discours pétrarquiste sont affirmés à de multiples moments dans la progression de son recueil.*

Frequently referred to as the passionately grieving widowed poet of Toulouse, Gabrielle de Coignard is now considered one of the most striking representatives of the rich body of women's devotional verse in early modern France, a body of verse that has come to light largely through the textual recovery and critical rediscovery by scholars beginning in the second half of the twentieth century—most notably via the first annotated modern critical edition of Coignard's complete works by Colette Winn in 1995, and the first

bilingual edition of the *Spiritual Sonnets* by Melanie Gregg in 2004.¹ In this essay—following a brief but crucial contextualization of Coignard’s positioning in the development of early modern women’s religious writing, and a short review of her life and publication history—my focus will be to extend and explore in more depth an issue addressed by Winn in her recent article on pedagogical approaches to studying the sonnets of Louise Labé and Coignard: how Coignard’s sonnets embody conflictual aspirations, nourished by the pursuit of an untainted devotional path that nevertheless assimilates both the existential and artistic registers of Petrarchan lyric discourse.²

1. Gabrielle de Coignard, *Œuvres chétiennes*, ed. Colette H. Winn (Geneva: Droz, 1995) and Gabrielle de Coignard, *Spiritual Sonnets*, ed. and trans. Melanie E. Gregg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). All French quotations from the *Sonnets spirituels* are cited from Winn’s edition and all English translations are cited from Gregg’s edition, unless otherwise noted. Both these editors of Coignard have also published articles dealing in part with the *Sonnets spirituels*: see Winn’s close juxtaposition of sonnets by Louise Labé and Coignard in “Variations on the Same Tune: The Love Lyrics of Louise Labé and Gabrielle de Coignard,” in her edited volume *Teaching French Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2011), 285–301, and her study of Ronsard’s influence on Coignard in “Gabrielle de Coignard, ‘Sur la mort de Ronsard,’” in her edited volume *Ronsard figure de la variété. En mémoire d’Isidore Silver* (Geneva: Droz, THR 368, 2002), 251–63; see also Gregg’s discussion of Coignard’s Sonnet 24 in “Women’s Poetry of Grief and Mourning: The Languages of Lament in Sixteenth-Century French Lyric,” *Revue canadienne de littérature comparée* 30. 1 (2003): 55–74.

In the context of the other, still relatively modest amount of scholarly attention that Coignard has received it is Terence Cave, who, as Winn has remarked, first drew widespread attention to the scope of the poetess’s importance in the spiritual resurgence toward the end of the sixteenth century in his classic study, *Devotional Poetry in France c. 1570–1613* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). Among additional recent important published studies of the *Sonnets spirituels* are those by Gary Ferguson, “The Feminisation of Devotion: Gabrielle de Coignard, Anne de Marquets, and François de Sales,” in *Women’s Writing in the French Renaissance*, ed. Philip Ford and Gillian Jondorf (Cambridge: Cambridge French Colloquia, 1999); Évelyne Berriot-Salvadore, *Les femmes dans la société de la Renaissance* (Geneva: Droz, 1990), 434–43, and “Les héritières de Louise Labé,” in *Les voix du lyrisme*, ed. Guy Demerson (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Étienne, Éditions du CNRS, 1990), 93–106; and three articles by Paula Sommers: “Female Subjectivity and the Distaff: Louise Labé, Catherine Des Roches, and Gabrielle de Coignard,” *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 25 (1999): 139–50, “Gendered Distaffs: Gabrielle de Coignard’s Revision of Classical Tradition,” *Classical and Modern Literature* 18. 13 (1998): 203–10, and “Spatial Dynamics and the Female Poet: Gabrielle de Coignard and Catherine des Roches,” *Romance Notes* 41.3 (2001): 363–73.

2. In her parallel presentations of selected sonnets by Labé and Coignard, Winn focuses on how Coignard “uses Petrarchan lyrics to articulate the contradictory emotions that accompany her spiritual

Writing in the last third of the 1500s, Coignard participates in a female tradition that reaches back to the late twelfth century, specifically to the corpus of the first known woman poet writing in French, Marie de France, whose manuscripts came to establish what Roberta Krueger has called three “often intersecting registers in which medieval and Renaissance poets composed their verse”: the didactic register (in Marie’s *Fables*), the courtly or lyric register (in her *Lais*), and the religious register (in her *Espurgatoire Saint Patriz*, a long verse narrative translated from a Latin monastic text recounting an Irish knight’s voyage to purgatory).³ My reading of Coignard’s sonnets will centre on the interpenetration of these latter two registers—the lyric and the religious.

It is worth emphasizing, in a study of Coignard’s itinerary, the risks entailed in a woman’s pursuit of religious writing—dramatized already in the Middle Ages, when the French mystic, Marguerite Porete, was burned at the stake in 1310 for refusing to repudiate her mystical poetry and prose manuscript entitled *The Mirror of Simple Souls*.⁴ As we move into the flowering of French female verse—both religious and secular—in the sixteenth century, especially in the increasingly controversial religious climate of the period and with the advent of printing, issues of censure and attendant strategies of discretion abound. As Krueger⁵ and others have underlined, for a woman, in particular, to attempt to enter into dialogue with God or to offer explanations of the Bible could be seen as perilous, if not openly heretical. Even Marguerite de Navarre, the sister of King Francis I, incurred the condemnation of the Sorbonne for her early long devotional poem, the 1531 *Miroir de l’âme pécheresse* (*Mirror of the Sinful Soul*), which espoused Evangelical ideas and combined them with a mysticism that portrayed Marguerite’s relationship with God in familial as

quest” (301). I have also explored this problem at length in respect to Petrarch and Labé in *The Subject of Desire: Petrarchan Poetics and the Female Voice in Louise Labé* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996).

3. Roberta L. Krueger, Introduction, *French Women Poets of Nine Centuries*, trans. Norman R. Shapiro (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 11. Krueger’s essay presents an excellent synthesis of the rise of all forms of female-authored poetry in the French Middle Ages and Renaissance and was extremely helpful to me in the introductory cultural context portion of this article.

4. See Marguerite Porete, *Le miroir des simples âmes*, ed. Romana Guarniere (Turnholt: Brepols, 1986), translated into *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, ed. and trans. Ellen Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

5. Krueger, 9.

well as spiritual terms.⁶ The manuscripts of devotional plays and poetry written in solitude at the end of her life, including her monumental spiritual odyssey, *Les Prisons*, were locked in an iron box after her death by her daughter Jeanne d'Albret, a devotional poet in her own right, presumably to protect them from injudicious eyes, and did not come to scholarly discovery until the 1890s. The Dominican nun Anne de Marquets, writing for her sisters in Christ at the convent of Poissy, apparently at the encouragement of Catholic officials, defended her championship of the Catholic cause in print against the accusation by a Protestant critic that she attempted to articulate God's words through human diction. Yet her *Spiritual Sonnets*, organized around the liturgical year and feast days of saints and the Virgin Mary, went unpublished until seventeen years after her death, reflecting perhaps the discomfort of the poet herself and her religious sisters and students with sharing her most intimate spiritual materials beyond the convent walls.⁷ Similarly, Coignard, the other major devotional French sonneteer of this period, cultivated her intimate spiritual writings in purposeful domestic isolation, and her daughters sought its publication only well after their mother's death.

We know relatively little of Coignard's life.⁸ She was born sometime around 1550 into a wealthy Catholic family in the major French cultural centre of Toulouse. Her father, Jean de Coignard, not only was a prominent counselor at the city parliament but also served for twenty years as the so-called "master" of the *Jeux Floraux*, a well-known annual poetry competition in Toulouse. Thanks in part to her father's stature and position, Gabrielle frequented the more cultivated circles of the city and was not only well-schooled in Catholicism but also very well acquainted with the poetry of her contemporaries, which she would come both to admire and to disdain in her own writerly endeavours. In 1570, her social position was further enhanced when she married Pierre de Mansencal, son of the president of the Toulouse parliament

6. For an important study of Marguerite's risky devotional poem, see Paula Sommers, "The *Mirror* and Its Reflections: Marguerite de Navarre's Biblical Feminism," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5.1 (1986): 29–39.

7. See Gary Ferguson's introduction to his edition of Anne de Marquets, *Sonets spirituels* (Geneva: Droz, 1997) and his article "Le chapelet et la plume, ou, quand la religieuse se fait écrivain: Le cas du Prieuré de Poissy (1562–1621)," *Nouvelle revue du seizième siècle* 19.2 (2001): 83–99.

8. For my brief biographical and publication summary, I have relied mostly on the critical introductions presented in the editions of Coignard's poetry by Winn and Gregg.

and a budding parliamentary statesman in his own right. After bearing two daughters in the three years of what her verse would suggest was an especially devoted marriage, Coignard was widowed at the age of twenty-three; she dedicated the rest of her short life to raising her children in the domestic space of her family household and to recording her private confessions and her quest for spiritual consolation in her *Oeuvres chrétiennes* (*Christian Works*), which were composed of her 129 *Sonnets spirituels* (*Spiritual Sonnets*), and her twenty-one longer poetic meditations on a variety of biblical themes, the *Vers chrétiens* (*Christian Verses*). Coignard died in her mid-thirties around 1586; her then adult daughters published the first edition of their mother's complete works in 1594 in Toulouse. Following the publication a year later of a second edition by a bookseller in Avignon (reprinted in Lyon in 1613), three centuries passed before the sonnets were republished in an anthology in 1900.⁹ As already mentioned, Winn's first annotated modern critical edition of the entire *Oeuvres chrétiennes* and Gregg's bilingual edition of the *Spiritual Sonnets* did not appear until 1995 and 2004, respectively. A number of Coignard's sonnets also appear in the magisterial 2008 bilingual anthology by acclaimed translator Norman Shapiro, who is the first to maintain Coignard's original metre and rhyme schemes.¹⁰

As Winn and Gregg have both stressed, the text of the *Sonnets spirituels* reads like an intensely intimate autobiographical journal that records at once the emotional vicissitudes Coignard endured in her life and the longings and struggles she experienced in pursuing her relationship with God. With her dominating use of the lyric first person pronoun, she reveals herself as an introspective voyager often torn between her roles as a spiritual initiate, as a faithful but anguished widow and mother, and as a writer inspired by multiple sources and traditions.

Let us first consider in some detail the opening sonnet, which in establishing the lyric speaker's passionate embrace of the devotional path, nevertheless introduces competing threads of spiritual and artistic expression that will inform her trajectory:

9. Gabrielle de Coignard, *Sonnets spirituels*, in *Le thresor du sonet, XVIe–XVIIe siècles. III.*, ed. Hugues Vaganay (Macon: Protat Frères, 1900).

10. See Shapiro, trans., *French Women Poets of Nine Centuries*, 232–41.

Je n'ay jamais gousté de l'eau de la fontaine,
 Que le cheval aeslé fit sortir du rocher.
 A ses payennes eaux je ne veux point toucher,
 Je cherche autre liqueur pour soulager ma peine.

Du celeste ruisseau de grace souveraine,
 qui peut des alterez la grand soif estancher:
 Je desire ardemment me pouvoir approcher,
 Pour y laver mon coeur de sa tasche mondaine.

Je ne veux point porter le glorieux laurier,
 La couronne de myrte ou celle d'olivier,
 Honneurs que l'on reserve aux testes plus insines.

Ayant l'angoisse en l'ame, ayant la larme à l'oeil,
 M'irois-je couronnant de ces marques d'orgueil,
 Puis que mon Sauveur mesme est couronné d'espines?

(Never have I drunk from that spring profane
 That the winged horse caused from the rock to flow.
 I would not touch its pagan waters; no,
 I seek a different draught to ease my pain.

Rather would I that heavenly stream attain,
 Whose grace the greatest thirst quells here below.
 How fervently I yearn thither to go,
 To cleanse therein my heart of worldly stain.

I wish no glorious laurel crown to wear,
 Nor myrtle wreath, nor olive, in my hair:
 Honors that naught but worthier brow gird round.

With anguish in my soul, tear in my eye,
 Ought I such marks of pride bear, crowned thereby,
 Whilst my dear Savior's head with thorns is crowned?¹¹

11. For the complete citation of Sonnet 1, I have used the translation of Norman Shapiro for its elegant retention of Coignard's original metre and rhyme scheme.

Beginning with the powerful rhetorical device of denegation, Coignard would appear to eschew the classical proclivities and worldly concerns of dominant Petrarchan practitioners in order to define herself as a singularly Christian poet who sacrifices her entire being to writing in what she calls, in line 13 of Sonnet 2, the “shadow” (“ombre”) of the crucified Saviour’s cross. By rejecting in Sonnet 1’s very first line the Hippocrene fountain sacred to the muses in Greek mythology in favour of a “heavenly stream” (“celeste ruisseau,” line 5) that would purify her heart of “worldly stain” (“tasche mondaine,” line 8), and in humbly venerating Christ’s crown of thorns rather than seeking the laurel or myrtle crowns of poetic glory, she ostensibly establishes her work within the penitential practice promoted by King Henry III in the 1570s and championed by the Jesuits to revive the development of more individualized, emotive spirituality. While we are unsure of the level of Coignard’s knowledge in respect to Ignatius of Loyola’s 1548 Latin *Spiritual Exercises* or Louis of Granada’s 1566 *Book of Prayer and Meditation*, translated into French in 1575 by François de Belleforest under the title *Le vrai chemin* (*The True Path*), she follows their urging that the penitent turn inward to attain the highest possible level of self-awareness; to focus on remorse for sins and the shedding of earthly concerns in pursuit of divine consolation and a deep affective and spiritual union with God. Critics such as Terence Cave, in his foundational 1969 work *Devotional Poetry in France 1570–1630*, and Gary Ferguson, who has written widely on Coignard, Anne de Marquets, and Marguerite de Navarre, have remarked in this movement a tendency toward the “feminization” of devotional literature during the course of the sixteenth century, owing in part to this intimately emotive aspect of the spiritual journey.¹²

That being said, if Coignard starts her collection by denying any aspiration to the celebrated status of her Petrarchan contemporaries and predecessors, what is striking is the extent to which she places certain of their conventions and rhetoric at the service of her own psychic itinerary. Her very opening refusal to imbibe in the Hippocrene fountain—followed by an explicit rejection of the classical muses in Sonnet 2, line 9 (“Je ne veux point la Muse des payens” [“I do not desire the Muse of the pagans”])—is a vivid reminder and counterpoint to Pierre de Ronsard’s own prefatory poem, “Voeu,” to the 1552 *Amours*, in which he extols himself as both the student and leader of the “Divine

12. See Cave, 85–87 and Ferguson’s entire article, “The Feminisation of Devotion” (see note 1, above).

Muses,” with whom he dances around their inspirational fountain as a prelude to dedicating his “immortal book” to his Beloved Cassandre.¹³ Further on, in Sonnet 1, line 10, Coignard’s disinclination to wear the myrtle crown recalls the association of myrtle with Venus, goddess of earthly love, and by extension, the allusion Ronsard makes in his famous sonnet, “Quand vous serez bien vieille,” following his Beloved’s purported rejection, to seeking his eternal rest in the myrtle forest, the sacred after-death abode reserved for great lovers in classical mythology.¹⁴ Even more pointedly, Coignard’s refusal to wear the glorious laurel crown inevitably evokes the long quest of Ronsard’s antecedent Petrarch two centuries earlier to celebrate his unattainable love, Laura. And at the end of Sonnet 2, the vehemence with which the speaker’s burning with the flame of Christ moves her to sacrifice what she calls “my all, my body, my writings, and my soul” (“Mon tout, mon corps, mes escrits, et mon ame”; line 14) reminds

13. Divines Soeurs, qui sur les rives molles
De Castalie, et sur le mont natal,
Et sur le bord du chevalin crystal
M’avez d’enfance instruit en voz escolles;
- Si tout ravy des saults de vos carolles,
D’un pied nombreux j’ay conduit vostre bal,
Plus dur qu’en fer, qu’en cuyvre et qu’en metal,
Dans vostre temple engravez ces paroles: [...] (lines 1–8)

Ronsard quotations are cited from Pierre de Ronsard, *Les Amours*, ed. H. and C. Weber (Paris: Garnier 1963).

- (Divine Sisters, who on the smooth shores
Of Castalie, and on the mountain birthplace,
And on the edge of the Hippocrene fountain
Instructed me from childhood in your school;
- If in all delight from the leaps of your dances
With rhythmic feet I led your ball,
Harder than in iron, in copper, and in metal,
In your temple, engrave these words: [...]) (My translation)
14. Je seray sous la terre, & fantaume sans os:
Par les ombres Myrtheux je prendray mon repos. (lines 9–10)
(I shall be beneath the earth and, a bodiless phantom,
I shall be taking my rest in the myrtle groves of the Underworld.)

The translation is by Malcolm Quainton, *Pierre de Ronsard: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

us of the achingly erotic female voice of Lyonnais love poet Louise Labé, who subverted various forms of sublimation in her male Petrarchan counterparts by expressing both her passion and her anguish “en toutes pars,” as she says in her Sonnet 3 (line 12)—that is, “with every part of her being.”¹⁵ Thus, in a sense, as Du Bellay does with his famous denegations in the opening sonnets of the *Regrets*, Coignard declines to imitate—all the while inscribing herself in various modalities of poetic imitation.¹⁶

These opening signals of Coignard's inscription of her devotional writing both against and within the male and female Petrarchan tradition are affirmed in the progression of her collection. Indeed, her penchant alternately to refuse and implicitly to embrace her lyric models emerges at various points of the sonnet sequence in the form of similarly paradoxical denegations or otherwise contradictory assertions. On the one hand, her ostensible rejection of the pagan muse as shown above in Sonnet 2 is seconded by the insistence that *her* muse will write of nothing but the Cross: “Je ne sçaurois écrire d'autre chose / Que de la croix [...] Autre chanson ma muse ne compose” (“I would not know how to write about anything else / But the Cross [...] My muse does not compose

15. The quotation is cited from Louise Labé, *Complete Poetry and Prose*, ed. Deborah Lesko Baker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). The translation is my own. If both Coignard and Labé speak of expressing their love with “all” the parts of their beings, Coignard later culminates an extended enumeration of the multiple roles the Saviour plays in her life by transferring this totalizing diction onto Christ himself: “Puis que tu es mon *tout*” (“Since You are my *all*,” Sonnet 52, line 8, my emphasis)—not unlike how Labé ends an extended inquiry on the multiple attractions of the male lover by synthesizing them as “*tout* le beau que lon pourroit choisir” (“*all* the beauty that one might choose,” Sonnet 21, line 12, my translation and emphasis).

16. See for example, Du Bellay's surface denial of the process of classical or Petrarchan imitation in the first stanza of Sonnet 4 of his *Regrets*:

Je ne veulx feuilleter les exemplaires Grecs,
 Je ne veulx retracer les beaux traits d'un Horace,
 Et moins veulx-je imiter d'un Petrarque la grace,
 Ou la voix d'un Ronsard, pour chanter mes regrets.
 (I do not want to turn the pages of Greek models;
 I do not want to retrace the beautiful lines of a Horace;
 And still less do I want to imitate the grace of a Petrarch
 Or the voice of a Ronsard to sing my regrets.)

The translation is by Richard Helgerson in his bilingual edition of *The Regrets, with The Antiquities of Rome, Three Latin Elegies, and The Defense and Enrichment of the French Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

any other song”; Sonnet 69, lines 1–2, 4). Or more radically, in an occasional self-flagellating condemnation of her artistic endeavours, she would purportedly expunge the muse altogether: “Je veux quitter les vers, je veux laisser la muse, / J’abandonne le lut, je ne veux plus chanter” (“I want to quit these verses; I want to leave the muse; / I am abandoning the lute; I shall not sing any longer”; Sonnet 86, lines 1–2). On the other hand, although denying the temptations of writerly glory—“N’y l’hameçon des superbes honneurs” (“Nor the snare of distinguished honors”; Sonnet 6, line 3)—she can set about to discipline her muse by holding it to the same standards of classical learning as her poetic contemporaries and predecessors:

Mes vers, demeurez coys dedans mon cabinet,
 Et ne sortez jamais, pour chose qu’on vous die, [...]
 Il faut estre sçavant pour bien faire un sonnet,
 Qu’on lise nuit et jour, qu’Homere on estudie,
 Et le riche pinceau des muses l’on mandie [...] (Sonnet 14, lines 1–2, 5–7)

(My verse, stay quiet in my room,
 And never leave, no matter what anyone says to you. [...]
 One must be learned to compose a sonnet well,
 Read night and day and study Homer,
 And beg for the rich brush of the muses [...])

Despite the almost ascetic tone of the opening imperatives to her verses, the speaker initially eschews any anticipated devotional intention here by validating instead the necessity of Homeric erudition for the composition of a worthy sonnet. As Melanie Gregg¹⁷ points out in a note to this poem in her edition, Coignard’s reference here recalls Du Bellay’s emphasis in his *Deffence et Illustration de la langue francoyse* on the intimate knowledge of antique (and Italian) languages and texts for their imitation in sixteenth-century French poetry. What I find even more striking in Coignard’s sonnet is the extent to which it adapts—admittedly to much different ends—Ronsard’s opening command to his servant in the famous Sonnet 65 from the 1555 *Continuation des Amours*: “Je veux lire en trois jours l’Iliade d’Homere, / Et pour-ce, Corydon, ferme

17. Gregg, ed., *Spiritual Sonnets*, 164n42.

bien l'huis sur moi" (I want to read Homer's *Iliade* in three days, / And for this, Corydon, shut the door tightly behind me; lines 1–2, my translation). Whereas the only caveat to the cloistered Ronsardian speaker's imperative is to open the door to any messenger from his beloved Cassandra, Coignard's speaker finally seeks here to perfect her verse as a worthy offering to Christ through the very classical mastery she has elsewhere refuted.

If we view Coignard's Sonnet 14 as an implicit imitation of Ronsard's more light-hearted nod to humanistic dedication—just as we saw her simultaneous denial and incorporation of traditional discourse in her opening sonnet through the lens of his own prefatory sonnet to the muses—these parallels support the widely-known view that it is Ronsard, among the Petrarchan poets, whom Coignard evokes most explicitly in her volume. Contradictory rhetorical impulses once again show themselves to be in play in the juxtaposition of the early Sonnet 8 and the concluding Sonnet 129. In Sonnet 8, all her previous disavowals are first elided in a desire to please the Lord by assuming the very lyre of Ronsard (evoked periphrastically as “le grand Vandomois”) in admiration of his “Hercule chretien” and by declaring the hypothetical capacity to accept his laurel crown: “Je ferois de mes chants les rochers mi-partir, / Si j'avois le laurier, marque de sa victoire” (“I would sunder rocks with my songs, / If I had the laurel, the mark of his victory”; lines 7–8). But a visceral denegation quickly follows, as in shock and revulsion she exclaims “Ah! Non divin Ronsard, je ne puis advouer / Telle comparaison: leur payenne insolence / Offence le Seigneur” (“Ah! *Not* divine Ronsard, I cannot admit / Such a comparison: his pagan insolence / Offends the Lord [...]”; lines 12–14). Yet another stunning reversal greets the reader as Coignard ends her sequence with a panegyric on the event of Ronsard's death in which she directly addresses the formerly spurned classical muses and joins them in praise of their “Apollo” (line 4). Drawing a vertical move heavenward, she imagines his transcendence of Mount Parnassus and his soul's discovery of celestial harmonies (“les celestes accords,” line 10) when coming face to face with God.

Although it is Ronsard whom Coignard references most explicitly by name, and with whom she dialogues implicitly on the classical underpinnings of the Petrarchan heritage, we have already seen in Sonnet 2 how her verse can resonate with the existential register of Petrarchan poetics in the love lyrics of Labé. Here again, Coignard's discourse is divided between the renunciation and the embrace of emotional highs and lows experienced by her speaker. Sonnet

83, for example, begins with another series of searing denegations in respect to her emotional expression:

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. (lines 1–6)

(No, I do not want to complain at all,
 No, I do not want to recount my troubles;
 No, I do not want to content my spirit
 In order to lessen my pain in speaking.

I would rather dissemble and feign,
 And surmount my tongue by silencing myself.)

Nevertheless, this stated desire to dissimulate and even block verbal complaint more often than not is superseded by the force of her psychic struggles. A powerful demonstration of this phenomenon appears in Winn's aforementioned article on the teaching of early modern women writers, in which she draws multiple, compelling, side-by-side textual examples of how Coignard assimilates the thematics and rhetoric of Petrarchan contradiction and the scenarios of passionate suffering as rehearsed specifically in Labé's sonnets. These include parallel illustrations of the use of oxymoronic vocabulary to paint affective instability;¹⁸ of apostrophes to the planet Venus and to the night to offer empathy and understanding;¹⁹ and of explorations of the limits and failure of poetic expression.²⁰

Even given all these potent resonances, I myself would argue that more than with the varied dimensions of Petrarchan convention followed by sixteenth-century lyric practitioners such as either Labé or Ronsard, it is

18. Winn, "Variations on the Same Tune," 289–92.

19. Winn, "Variations on the Same Tune," 293–96.

20. Winn, "Variations on the Same Tune," 296–300.

particularly with the deeply Christian poet Petrarch himself that Coignard seems temperamentally and rhetorically most aligned—from *Rime sparse* 1's opening figuration of all worldly pleasure as "breve sogno" ("a brief dream"; line 14) to *Canzone* 366's final celestial plea to send forth his last breath in peace ("ch' accolga 'l mio spirto ultimo in pace"; line 137). In explicitly invoking her life on earth in Sonnet 52 as a "pilgrimage" of loss ("Parmy le cours de mon pelerinage, / Durant l'Avril verdoyant de mon aage, / J'ay tout perdu ce que j'avois çà bas" ["During the course of my pilgrimage, / During the verdant April of my age, / I lost everything I had down here"; lines 9–11]), Coignard engages multiple times with the notion of forging a *path* (the male lyric speaker's *camino*) away from the profound mistrust of earthly desire that constitutes the core of Petrarchan error.²¹ Affectionately bidding farewell to her desires, personified as "mignons," or "darlings," as early as Sonnet 3, she urges them on to a journey toward what she calls the "beautiful" and "blessed" desires ("desirs bienheureux"; line 9), "beaux desirs" (line 12), for heavenly connection. Such a journey recalls Petrarch's portrayal in *Rime sparse* 16 of the travelling pilgrim who seeks the higher "desire" of coming face to face with the image of Christ as an analogy for his quest after the purified form of the Lady—"la disiata vostra forma vera" ("your longed-for true form").²² But as in the case of her Italian antecedent's auto-referential pilgrim, for whom the journey is one of weariness and rupture ("rotto dagli anni, et dal camino stanco" ["broken by the years and tired by the road"; line 8]), Coignard's speaker can deplore her own radical divagation from her penitential path: "Ha! Que je suis extreme en ma condition, / Je ne garde jamais le milieu de la voye" ("I am extreme in my condition; I never keep to the middle of the road"; Sonnet 41, lines 1–2).

At times in the course of her journey through the classic Petrarchan terrain of vacillating emotions, Coignard reaches for the paradoxical St. Theresa-like moment of ecstasy and pain, as in Sonnet 15 when she beseeches the Lord to "Pierce my stomach with an amorous arrow" ("Perce moy l'estomach d'une

21. In her edition, Winn notes line 10's echo of the opening of Dizain 6 of Maurice Scève's *Délie*, the earliest full-volume French imitation of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*: "Libre vivois en l'Avril de mon aage" ("Free I lived in the April of my life"). The French quotation is cited from the classic edition of I. D. McFarlane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); the translation is mine.

22. The Italian quotations and their English translations are from *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The "Rime sparse" and Other Lyrics*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

amoureuse fleche”; line 1). This image recalls one of Petrarch’s most powerful paradoxical metaphors in *Rime sparse* 164, the hand that simultaneously “pierces” and “heals” the lover (“una man sola mi risana et punge”; line 11), bathing him in the “sweet pain” (“dolce pena,” line 6) destined to become one of the fundamental oxymora of his amatory rhetoric. At other times, Coignard eschews such visceral imperatives, engaging with the Petrarchan speaker’s desired flight from the world and human witnessing captured so fervently in *Rime sparse* 35:

Solo et pensoso i più deserti campi
vo mesurando a passi tardi et lenti,
et gli occhi porto per fuggire intenti
ove vestigio uman la rena stampi. (lines 1–4)

(Alone and filled with care, I go measuring the most deserted
Fields with steps delaying and slow, and I keep my eyes alert so
As to flee from where any human footprint marks the sand.)

Thus does Coignard frequently embrace a hauntingly similar need to seek ontological solitude, as illustrated in Sonnets 11 and 79:

Hors des soucis mondains, je m’en irois bien loin
Choisir pour mon logis une forest obscure.
Las! Je ne verrois plus aucune creature,
Ayant abandonné de ce monde le soing [...] (Sonnet 11, lines 3–6)

(I would go far away from worldly worries
And choose a dark forest for my lodging.
Alas! I would not see a single creature.
Having abandoned the cares of this world [...])

Las je veux arroser de larmes mon visage,
Pour allenter le mal que je veux oublier.
Aux villes je ne veux ma douleur publier,
Je la veux enterrer en ce desert sauvage. (Sonnet 79, lines 5–8)

(Weary, I want to set my face with tears
 To alleviate the pain that I long to forget.
 I do not want to disclose my pain in the cities;
 I want to bury it in this wild desert.)

And yet, in another compelling resonance with Petrarch's speaker who "cannot seek paths so harsh and savage that Love does not always come along discoursing with me and I with him" ("ma pur si aspre vie né si selvage / cercar non so ch' Amor non venga sempre / ragionando con meco, et io con lui"; lines 12–14), Coignard's sorrowful flight finds her likewise accompanied, in both poems, not by "Amor" but by the Lord as her witness and her interlocutor:

Mais qui sera tesmoin de l'ennuy que je sens?
 Ce sera toy, Seigneur [...] (Sonnet 79, lines 9–10)

(But who will be the witness to the grief I feel?
 It will be you, Lord [...])

Et en pleurs et soupirs requerant son secours,
 Je passerois ainsi le reste de mes jours,
 Recevant de mon Dieu les graces secourables. (Sonnet 11, lines 12–13)

(And in tears and sighs, invoking His succor,
 I would thus spend the rest of my days,
 Receiving the merciful grace from my God.)

It is crucial to note that in the two sonnets above, Coignard's speaker emphasizes the "tears" and "sighs" that characterize both her own psychic state and the hopeful but still anxiety-ridden communicative mode of her supplications to the Lord. Although the direct evocation of the male speaker's distress in *Rime sparse* 35 is limited to the adjective "pensoso" (line 1) and in the following stanza to his "bearing, in which all happiness is extinguished" ("negli atti d'allegrezza spenti"; line 7), the topos of weeping in an overarching sense has a fundamental relationship to the ontology of the lyric subject throughout Petrarch's volume. As I have argued in respect to Petrarchan poetics in *The Subject of Desire*, "from the *Canzoniere's* opening revelation of a discourse

divided between tears and reason ('del vario stile in ch'io *piango et ragiono*' ('for the varied style in which I weep and speak' [line 4]), the reader is led to anticipate a relationship between weeping and affective instability within the poetic speaker.²³ Although Coignard does not invoke her tears and sighs as globally as does Petrarch, her frequent recourse to this trope points to a similar notion of disorder or rupture of the self.

Indeed, even when evoked in such a widespread mystical trope as a spiritual marriage to quell her conjugal longings and losses, Coignard's connection with the Saviour often seems, because of her self-perceived human failings, as severed and inaccessible as the Petrarchan speaker's both real-life and oneric connection with Laura. Thus Coignard at times falls, like her male counterpart, into the self-turned agony of psychic instability, conveyed in images not only of weeping but of storm and shipwreck, which even while they become staples, as Winn notes, of late sixteenth-century poets trying to navigate their way back to God, go back fundamentally to Petrarch himself.²⁴ A particularly striking linkage of both weeping and storm images occurs in his moving elegiac response to Laura's death in *Rime sparse* 292:

Et io pur vivo, onde mi doglio et sdegno,
 rimaso senza 'l lume ch' amai tanto
 in gran fortuna e 'n disarmato legno,
 Or sia qui fine al mio amoroso canto;
 Secca e la vena de l'usato ingegno,
 Et la cetera mia rivolta in pianto. (lines 9–14)

(And I still live, at which I am sorrowful and angry, left without
 the light I loved so, in a great tempest and a dismasted ship.
 Now let there be an end to my song of love; dry is the vein
 of my accustomed wit, and my lyre is turned to weeping.)

Similarly, in Sonnet 24, Coignard's speaker seems viscerally torn from all sense of internal mooring:

23. Lesko Baker, *The Subject of Desire*, 146; see note 2, above.

24. See Winn's footnote to Sonnet 24 in her critical edition of Coignard.

Mon coeur estoit de douleur oppressé,
 Je n'avois plus parole ny langage,
 Mon stomach ressembloit a l'orage,
 Qu'eleve en mer Aquilon courroucé
 Mille sanglots vers le ciel j'ay poussé [...] (lines 1–5)

(My heart was oppressed with pain;
 I no longer had words or language;
 My stomach resembled the storm
 That rises up in the angry Aquilon sea.
 I have pushed a thousand sobs toward the sky [...])

What is all the more noteworthy in the juxtaposition of these two sonnets is that the shared topoi of literal weeping and metaphoric storms are accompanied by a sense of artistic paralysis. In Coignard's line 2, this paralysis is evoked pleonastically by a loss of words and language, whereas in Petrarch's concluding line (a biblical echo of Job 30:31) the verse figured by his lyre has been literally subsumed by tears. For the female poetess, too, the loss of poetic inspiration is later conveyed through the lyre image in part of a series of denegations directly associated with an immobilized state where vision is blurred by tears, where voice is choked by sighs: "Je ne puis remonster les cordes de ma lire / J'ay les yeux esblouys, je lamente et souspire" ("I cannot raise the strings of my lyre / My eyes are blurry; I lament and sigh"; Sonnet 73, lines 4–5).

Given all the similar psychic, artistic, and even physiological fluctuations of her own *camino*—the flights and falls that she once likens to those of Icarus (Sonnet 111) and that her Italian predecessor likens to those of the mythological phoenix (Sonnet 135)—what Coignard perhaps shares most acutely with Petrarch throughout her sequence is the rhetoric of spiritual dynamism. At once authentically perceived and compensatory, this rhetoric predominates in the final section of the *Rime sparse*, fashioning a transpositional movement in both time and space toward celestial transcendence, accompanied by direct invocations of both Christ and the Virgin Mary as the poet's longed-for interlocutors. These invocations reach their climax in Petrarch's two final poems, both of which are movingly recalled in Coignard's verse. Let us examine first the elements of Petrarch's penultimate poem addressed to Christ that resonate in the *Spiritual Sonnets*. First, the male speaker hyperbolizes his regret at having

spent his past in fixation upon worldly love: “I’ vo piangendo I miei passati tempi / i quai posi in amar cosa mortale / senza levarmi a volo [...]” (“I go weeping for my past time, which I spent in loving a mortal thing without lifting myself in flight [...]”; Sonnet 365, lines 1–3). A similar sense of earthly remorse and impulse toward heavenward movement emerges in Coignard’s Sonnet 127: “Combien ay je perdu de travail et de temps / A te suivre par tout, o monde miserable [...] Ores je veux chercher ce qui est perdurable” (“How much work and time have I lost / Following you everywhere, O miserable world [...] Now I want to see what is eternal”; lines 1–2, 6). Later in this same sonnet, the female speaker addresses the Lord directly, imploring that He remain *visible* as she follows his path (“Ne cache, s’il te plaist, la douceur de ta face” [“Please do not hide the sweetness of Your face”; line 13]), while the Petrarchan lover likewise begs for Christ’s very *presence* as he continues his own path toward death: “A quel poco di viver che m’avanza / et al morir degni esser tua man presta” (“To what little life remains to me and to my dying deign to be present”; lines 12–13). Indeed, he follows that plea in the last line of his sonnet with the affirmation that all hope rests solely in Him: “tu sai ben che’n altrui non o speranza” (“You know well that I have no hope in anyone else”). This transfer of all hope to Christ also forms the conclusion of Coignard’s Sonnet 41: “Car tu es mon espoir, ma nef, et mon nocher” (“For You are my hope, my ship, and my captain”; line 14). But it is not only this line of Sonnet 41 that echoes Petrarch’s Sonnet 365, for both poets see that hope as the preservation and port from the metaphoric storms they have evoked throughout their sequences. Strikingly, Coignard’s imperative at the beginning of the final tercet, accompanied by the pleonastic insistence on the storm figure (“Delivre moy, Seigneur de l’orage et tempeste, / Qui pour me submerger s’eslance sur ma teste” [“Deliver me, Lord, from the storm and tempest / That thrust themselves onto my head to submerge me”; lines 12–13]), harkens back to Petrarch’s own culminating imperative and evocation of the storm image in the *Rime sparse*: “soccorri a l’alma disviata et frale [...] sic che, s’io vissi in guerra et in tempesta, / mora in pace et in porto” (“help my strayed frail soul [...] so that, though I have lived in war and in storm, I may die in peace and in port”; lines 6, 8–9).

Finally, and by way of conclusion, Petrarch’s side-by-side placement (above) of the storm and war images can lead us to the remarkable parallel between Coignard’s invocation to the Virgin in Sonnet 39, and Petrarch’s prayer to the Virgin that concludes his volume, *Rime sparse* 366. Continuing their

search for spiritual interlocutors, both poets call upon the Queen of Heaven to hear their anguished voices and to intercede before Christ on their behalf. Reinvoking her psychic fragility via the topos of weeping, Coignard's speaker implores: "Sainte mere de Dieu, entens à mes clameurs [...] Presente, s'il te plaist, ô ma seule maistresse, / a ton fils Jesus Christ, mes larmes et mes pleurs" ("Holy Mother of God, hear my cries [...] If it please you, my sole mistress, present / my tears and cries to your son Jesus Christ"; lines 3–4). Although the Petrarchan speaker does not begin with Coignard's imperatives, he accomplishes this same plea for mediation not only by confessing the futility of his solitary struggle, but by reverently acknowledging the Virgin's responsiveness to human pain—an antidote to the off-regretted silence of the beloved Laura: "Vergine bella [...] non so 'ncominciar senza tu aita / et di colui ch' amando in te si pose. / Invoco lei che ben sempre rispose / chi la chiamo con fede" ("Beautiful Virgin [...] I do not know how to begin without your help and His who loving placed Himself in you. I invoke her who has always replied to whoever called on her with faith"; lines 5–8).

As Coignard and Petrarch move to the climax of their supplications for guidance, they both return to the fundamental metaphor of war to dramatize their ongoing struggles. The female speaker laments how her own imperfections constantly pursue her, "Me livrant à tous coups une mortelle guerre" ("Delivering me incessantly to a mortal war"; line 13). In a final chiasmic return to the imperative mode noted rather at the start of Coignard's sonnet, the Petrarchan speaker pleads in line 13 of his own poem, "Soccorri a la mia guerra" ("give succor to my war"). Crucially, in Coignard, as in Petrarch, the plea is not to put an *end* to the existential battle but to receive spiritual help in order to *withstand* it. What we see, then, at last, is that in the profoundest sense, the very ontological underpinnings of the devotional itinerary and the amatory path, or *camino*, as Petrarch calls it, are congruent: they are based on acute self-absorption, affective and artistic turmoil, and struggles with desire, loss, and unattainability. As can be observed in much mystical discourse, of which Gabrielle de Coignard's is such a powerful example, there is thus a complex metaphorical displacement between the tortured quest for union with a human beloved, and an equally arduous struggle for union with a transcendent God.