

L o u i s e L a b é

D E D I C A T O R Y L E T T E R

T O M . C . D . B . L . 2 8

Since the time has now come, Mademoiselle, when men's harsh laws no longer prevent women from applying themselves to study and learning, it seems to me that those who have the means should take advantage of this well-deserved freedom — so fervently desired by our sex in the past — to pursue them, and to show men how wrong they were to deprive us of the benefit and recognition these things might have given us.²⁹ And if any of us succeeds to the point where she can put her ideas down in writing, she should do it seriously and not disdain fame, but adorn herself with it, rather than with chains, rings, and lavish clothing, all of which we cannot truly consider our own except by social custom.³⁰ But the honor that education brings us will be entirely our own, and cannot be taken away from us — neither by a thief's trickery, nor by an enemy's force, nor by the passage of time.

If the heavens had blessed me with a mind intelligent enough to understand whatever it wanted to, I would hold myself up here as an example, instead of simply giving advice. But because I spent part of my youth being trained in music, and found the time left over to be too brief to apply my limited understanding, I cannot carry out on my own the sincere wish I have for our sex, to see it surpass or equal men not only in physical beauty, but in knowledge and virtue. ³¹ I can do no more than urge virtuous ladies to raise their minds a bit above their distaffs and spindles, and to dedicate themselves to making the world understand that if we are not made to be in command, we nevertheless should not be scorned as partners, in domestic as in public affairs, by those who rule and demand obedience. Beyond the acclaim our sex will receive, we will benefit the public good, since men will put more effort and study into valuable domains of knowledge in order to avoid the shame of seeing themselves surpassed by women, over whom they have always claimed to be superior in almost everything. For this reason, we have to spur one another on to such a worthy undertaking. You must not abandon or be deterred from this goal, and you should thus devote your mind, already endowed with so many qualities, your youth, and whatever other gifts fortune has given you to obtaining the honor that letters and learning generally bring to people who pursue them.

Yet if there is something else beyond fame and honor to recommend in the study of letters, the pleasure it typically provides ought to be an incentive to every one of us. This pleasure is different from other diversions, for when people have gotten as much enjoyment from them as they want, they can boast of nothing except having passed the time. Study, on the contrary, brings with it a unique inner satisfaction that stays with us far longer.³³ We take joy in the past, and it serves us better than the present, but the pleasures of the senses immediately slip away and never return, and the memory of them is sometimes as painful as the acts were sweet. Besides this, other sensual pleasures are such that whatever memory we have of them cannot put us back in our previous state of mind; and no matter how powerful the image imprinted in our minds, we still know perfectly well it is merely a shadow of the past that misleads and deceives us.

But when we happen to put our thoughts down in writing — even though afterward our mind races through endless distractions and never stops moving — by going back much later to what we wrote, we can still recapture the moment and state of mind we were in before. Then we experience twice the enjoyment, for we rediscover the pleasure we had in the past, either in the subject we were writing about, or in our understanding of the fields of knowledge we were studying at the time. And beyond this, the judgment that our second impressions allow us to make of our earlier ones repays us with an unparalleled satisfaction. These two benefits attainable through writing should inspire you, for you can rest assured that the first one will not fail to go hand in hand with what you write, just as it does with all your other actions and your entire way of life. As for the second one, it will be up to you whether to take or leave it, depending on how happy you are with what you write.

As for me, both when I first wrote these youthful works, and when I had occasion to look over them again more recently, I was seeking nothing more than a worthwhile pastime and a way to keep from being idle. I never meant for anyone else to see them. But since some of my friends managed to read them without my knowledge and since (how easily we believe those who praise us!) they persuaded me that I ought to make them public, I didn't dare say no to them — although I did threaten to make them drink down half the shame that might come out of it.

And because women are reluctant to appear in public alone, I have cho-

sen you as my guide and dedicate this little book to you. I send it with no other goal than to assure you of the good will that I have long had toward you, and to instill in you, after seeing this crude and badly constructed work of mine, the desire to produce another that may be more polished and more elegant. May God keep you in good health.

From Lyon, on this 24th day of July, 1555.

Your humble friend,

Louise Labé