Chapter 10

Du Bellay’s “Source de Meduse”
Margaret Ferguson

Writing is precisely working (in) the in between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death.

Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” [“Le Rire de la Méduse”]

It is here, in this Latin elegy [the “Patriae desiderium,” “Longing for His Fatherland”], that [Du Bellay] first defines his stay in Rome as exile, first takes alienation as his great subject.

Richard Helgerson, “Introduction,” Joachim du Bellay

This chapter aims to illuminate and estrange some of Joachim Du Bellay’s poetic representations of a feminized source of linguistic creativity in relation to his bilingual practices of writing, reading, and disseminating allusions. In the four books of poems that he published in 1558—three in French, one in Latin—Du Bellay explores his great subject of alienation, as Helgerson justly calls it, by reflecting on his four years in Rome (1553–57) under the rubric of exile.¹ He repeatedly depicts his exile as an absence from a source of poetic inspiration. The source, whether located in modern France or in ancient Rome, is typically depicted in terms of a kind of wealth that the poet lacks, whether it is erotic, economic, political, and/or linguistic. The source is also depicted as the home of the Muse, sometimes as a singular entity, sometimes as the group of nine sisters created (according to Pindar) in order to “hymn the praises of Zeus’s newly ordered world, whose beauty was incomplete” without their singing.² Du Bellay represents his absence from the desired source as structural, not accidental: it continues even when he returns to his birthplace, as he figures himself doing in Regrets 130. This sonnet is an ironic
reprise of the more famous poem in which he longs for his French homeland by contrasting himself with Ulysses ("Heureux qui, comme Ulyssse," Regrets 31). In the later sonnet, he presents himself as a disillusioned anti-Ulysses, a voyager who returns home but fails to reclaim his property from the greedy suitors who had threatened his patriarchal security in his absence. Returning "to the bosom of the land that nursed him" ("au sein de sa terre nourrice"), the French poet finds himself dispossessed by "mille soucis mordants" ("a thousand biting cares." Helgerson 180–81).

These "cares," which "gnaw his heart" ("rongent le coeur"). are an intriguingly abstract version of Homer's suitors: imitating but also changing the Homeric story by a detour through an Ovidian poem about Penelope. Du Bellay's sonnet ends with a fantasy of taking vengeance on these unspecified enemies if his friend Dorat will lend him a phallic "bow" ("arc"). That weapon has been passed from the nine Muses to the "hand" of the absent male friend: Du Bellay's typically epistolary sonnet begs for the Muses' gift to be handed over—as a loan, not an outright gift—to the man now writing, the man who threatens portentously to remain "still Roman" if the Muses' bow is denied to him: "Adieu donques [Dorat] je suis encor' Romain/Si l'arc que les neuf Sœurs te misrent en la main/Tu ne me prête icy. pour faire ma vangence" ("So adieu. Dorat. I am a Roman still, unless you lend me here the nine sisters put into your hand, so I can take my revenge; Helgerson 180–81).

Ulysses's wife is not named in this poem; nor is she named in the Latin elegy "Patriae desiderium," in which Du Bellay contrasts himself to the "Ithacan" who returned to his "fatherland" though the land itself was "sterile" ("sterilis," 1. 42: Helgerson 312–13). She is mentioned, however, in a Latin poem addressed to the same friend addressed in Sonnet 130, Jean Dorat. In the Latin version of the French poem, Du Bellay laments his lack of a "virtuous Penelope" and of a good son such as Telemachus. As a weaver and unweaver of textiles, as an ostensibly chaste wife, and as a mother. Penelope is a significant influence on Du Bellay's figuration of his composite and labile Muse. She arguably encompasses both the wife and the mistress figures that Du Bellay in one Latin poem neatly separates by associating the wife with the French language, the mistress with the allure and danger of Latin. The boundaries between these muses, like those between French, Latin, and their shadowy sister Italian, are unstable in Du Bellay's oeuvre. However, as is the distinction between male and female. I suggest, indeed, that Regrets 131 shows us a male poet posing as Ulysses blending his voice with that of Penelope as she is refigured, from her Greek prototype, by Ovid in the first poem of his Heroïdes. This is a series of somewhat accusatory epistolary elegies written as if by women to the lovers who have abandoned them. Critics and editors have not cited the Heroïdes as a subtext for the Regrets, perhaps because they simply do not expect a male poet to echo the voice of a female writer, even a male-authored one. Ovid's Penelope, however, suffers from fearful "cares" ("curas," 1. 73), a Latin version of Du Bellay's "soucis": moreover, like Du Bellay's persona. Penelope describes herself as failing to repel those who are "pillaging" her household goods—or, more precisely, the goods that Ulysses, with his "scepter" should protect. Ovid's Penelope, like Du Bellay, lacks a weapon to protect her home: significantly. Ovid does not mention the weaving stratagem of delay that Penelope deploys in Homer's epic. Ovid transmutes her weaving—with complex ideological effects—into her passive-aggressive writing of a love letter. One could read the transmutation as a masculinist appropriation of a figure who elsewhere more overtly signifies women's artistic powers: but given the striking similarities between the Heroïdes and Ovid's laments for his own exile in the Tristia, it might be interesting to think of his Penelope as a figure for a writer who self-consciously lacks a scepter, that symbol of masculine rule, but who is nonetheless fruitful in strategies of deferral and of difference.

In his printed drama of homelessness, impoverishment, and threatened masculine identity. Du Bellay and his Muse(s) go back and forth between France and Italy, with the latter observed both in its ancient and modern guises. Du Bellay's Muse resembles, at different moments, a Petrarchan mistress, a potentially "pillaged" or possibly unfaithful wife like Penelope, a witch. Ovid's figure of "Echo," a cruel mother who staves her "lamb" (though he is "not the worst of the flock," Regrets 9), and a royal goddess ("diva") named Marguerite of France—the sister of King Henri II. Marguerite is the powerful patron-reader to whom Du Bellay addresses both an early poem enjoining the French poet to write in his native language ("D'Escrire en sa Langue") and a later poem breaking that rule at the threshold of his book of Latin poems produced in Rome: the poem is entitled "Cur intermissis Gallicis Latine scribat" ("Why he [the poet] has abandoned French to write in Latin"). Some of the poems to Marguerite echo or even translate each other, as the queen, who is obliquely but repeatedly reproached for abandoning her poet, becomes a Muse intricately tied to the problem of the poet's loyalty to his country and to his native tongue. That word in French as in English denotes a body part critical for eating, drinking, and speaking: it also signifies a complex psycho-social construction, the phenomenon variously known as the mother or vulvar tongue or the native—or national—language.

Addressed obliquely as "France mere des arts" and, more overtly, as "Gallica"—the Latin name for France that inevitably recalls a time when the territory of France was a colony of Rome—Queen Marguerite is a fulcrum for
Du Bellay's meditations on his experience of being, like Homer's Ulysses, exiled in a "sea" of language: the Latin word for "sea," "mare," provides Du Bellay with rich opportunities for word play on the French word "mère" [mother], a homophone for the French word for sea, "la mer."

Du Bellay's figurations of and addresses to Queen Marguerite as Muse, I argue, exist in a complex network of verbal practices and theories that evoke the Muse—and by implication, the Queen of France and her various surrogates in Du Bellay's poetry—to a famously monstrous mother whom the hero Perseus, aided by Athena, decapitates. The scene of decapitation is often represented in literature and the visual arts: the parts of Medusa's story that seem most to concern Du Bellay, however, have to do with the products of the decapitation: the hybrid creature, the "winged" son Pegasus, who springs into life from Medusa's neck-blood at the moment when Perseus kills her; and the "gushing fountain" that Pegasus later creates, with its hard hoof, as a kind of weird reprise of the moment of his mother's death. That fountain is the Hippocrene, legendary home of the Muses.

Mirroring and doubling greatly interest Du Bellay and are indeed crucial to the ways in which he links the Muse(s) with Medusa. Perseus accomplishes his ostensibly heroic act of murder with the aid of winged shoes given him by Hermes—shoes mirrored in Pegasus's wings—and with a mirroring shield given him by Athena: this is the shield that allows Perseus to "see" Medusa without succumbing to her petrifying powers, and it is itself mirrored in the image of Medusa's head that Athena carries on her dress or shield. Athena, virgin goddess, becomes a mirror of Medusa because Athena too can petrify men (with her shield); and Athena is also yoked to Pegasus by virtue of her own "unnatural" birth from a parent's head—though in Athena's case, the head is a father's and is not cut off from the body. According to Ovid, Perseus recounts to an audience a second-hand story ("tis said") that Neptune raped the beautiful Medusa in Athena's temple. Is Athena then scapegoating Medusa—who according to some classical sources was Medusa's rival in beauty before her lovely hair was changed into snakes—or justly punishing her for an act of sacriligious lust that resulted in the birth of the "swift-winged" Pegasus and his twin brother (I. 986)? Ovid doesn't answer the question, but by having Medusa's killer tell her story—and mention the birth that came from her bloody death—Ovid creates a narratively rich back story, implicating the teller as well as the dead mother and the unpunished father. The latter is a figure whom Freud never mentions in his own famous reading of the Medusa's decapitation as a symbol of (the boy's fears of) castration. Medusa's story is important for Du Bellay because he is concerned, as is Ovid in his exile poetry, with apportioning blame for obscure crimes and with placating reader-patrons both male and female. Among these, as I've suggested, is Queen Marguerite of France; among these also is her husband the king, whom Du Bellay figures as a sea god in Regrets 128 in a phrase—"Neptune Francois"—that reminds us of the king's father (François I) as well as his nationality. The poem begins by emphasizing the writer's lack of choice in steering his ship into "la mer Tyrrhene," the part of the Mediterranean off the west coast of Italy; the poem ends with the poet promising to dedicate his remains (his books of poetry, also his "spoils" from imperial or piratical ventures) to "Neptune Francois" if (and only if) the poet can "one day save myself from the dangers I flee wandering in these foreign seas" ["si je puis un jour me sauver des dangers/Que je fuy vagabond par ces flots étrangers." Helgerson 178-79].

Du Bellay's revisionary reading of the Medusa myth is arguably a key part of his extended and often misogynistic meditation on the male poet's dependence on a feminized "source" which is (to paraphrase Baudelaire) the poet's "semblable" as well as his beloved. Medusa's story—featuring her extended family, as it were—allows Du Bellay to reflect on the art of poetic reflection itself as well as a set of illicit passions including incestuous ones that are tightly tied to desires for food, drink, and unmediated, uncensored speech. Such desires are at once frustrated and analytically re-presented in the medium of writing destined for print as Du Bellay uses it in the service of the ambitious bilingual project he began during his sojourn in Rome and that bore creative fruit, in Paris, in 1558.

In the quartet of books he published that year, as distinct but nonetheless thematically and verbally linked objects, Du Bellay represents himself as banished to a territory between languages as well as between places, times, and Muses. This territory anticipates the "in between" of writing-as-work posited by Hélène Cixous in the passage quoted in my epigraph. In Du Bellay's case, the writing is often explicitly described as "useless" and the words are often borrowed—or echoed or stolen—from others, illustrating the phenomenon that Du Bellay and his contemporaries defined (in multiple and contradictory metaphors) as "imitation." Through writings that blur not only the common distinction between linguistic theory and practice but also that between a native language and a foreign one, Du Bellay inspects poetic writing as a "process of the same and of the other." As Cixous calls it, in ways that invite further analysis from a feminist perspective. "My approach is indebted to studies of the so-called "pre-Oedipal" mother and, more broadly, to new theoretical work on paths taking us, in Greselda Pollock's phrase, "beyond Oedipus" as his "complex" is formulated by Freud and Lacan. Such paths—which do not forget Freud or Lacan—do focus on the differently gendered perspectives from which such a complex may be seen; moreover, critics such as Cixous and Pollock interrogate the linear temporalities often presumed to
obtain for male or female subjects represented in language. Those feminists who seek to think beyond Oedipus take seriously Cixous’s statement that “the mother, too, is a metaphor.”

Du Bellay’s Roman poetry amply supports this proposition: at the same time, it illustrates habits of misogynistic thought that run like an oily river through centuries of male-authored writing about the Muse.\(^{10}\) I provisionally pair Du Bellay with Cixous not to turn him into a (proto) feminist writer of any kind but rather to focus analytic attention on an intellectually provocative notion of bisexuality that emerges intermittently in his Roman poetry. This notion subverts his theory and practice of imitation and inhere, particularly, in his readings of Ovidian metamorphoses of mythical beings across many different category-lines including those between male and female, animal and human, human and plant, immortal and mortal. Du Bellay’s notion of bisexuality anticipates Cixous’s because it does not “conjure away castration” (Cixous 2048) but instead loosens that construction up by insisting on its status as a construction, that is, as a phenomenon that we can know only as it exists in language. That does not of course mean that the construction has no existence or mode of effectivity beyond language: but the argument does open a breach between ontology and epistemology, a breach that invites interrogation. This, I take it, is what Cixous offers when she critiques the Lacanian idea of the Symbolic as a “sanctuary of the phallos” even as she also writes that “their symbolic exists” and “holds power”; she further insists that we are in no way obliged to deposit our lives in their banks of lack” (Cixous 2048). We could read this witty statement as supporting the case against Cixous made by some of her feminist readers who worry about “the potential impotence” of her “utopianism.” “Utopian thinking is ‘potentially’ impotent much of the time, however, as is most non-Utopian thought. Cixous does offer a bracing destabilization of Oedipal paradigms including that of the “castration complex.” Her destabilizing enterprise, which attempts to make “the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language” (2049), can help us layer questions of gender and sexuality into the dynamic identified by George Hugo Tucker in his important studies of Du Bellay’s bilingualism and his self-representations as an “Ovidian exile cut off not just from France but implicitly also, like Ovid himself, from Rome.”

Cut off, yes—but by whom? The answers Du Bellay offers are multiple and shifting, and to trace them, I have suggested, we need to entertain the idea that he is ringing changes on Ovid’s female personae in the Heroïdes as well as his male persona in the autobiographical Tristia. In the Regrets and the Poemata, Du Bellay represents himself both as being abandoned and as choosing separation as part of a strategy of revenge. Sometimes, the two postures occur in a single poem: striking images of weakness often exist in—and through—poetic practices signaling authorial agency and even aristocratic masculine bravado. Du Bellay indeed offers the reader glimpses of a complex mode of authorial agency through minute linguistic deviations from the texts he has chosen as his sources—texts that he both follows and abandons. He thus creates a certain ironic distance from his sources that is analogous to the distance from the ancient poets that he recommends to the ambitious French poet in La Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Française (1549). Although by 1558 he has clearly modified his early somewhat paradoxical view (articulated both in the Deffence and the poem mentioned above, “D’Escrire en sa Langue”) that the French poet should not write in a “strange” language but should rather “convert” to his native tongue—which phrasing of course implies that the tongue is not simply something naturally given—Du Bellay insists throughout his short and intense career that the mother or “vulgar” tongue should be “ennobled” through masculine labor and art.\(^{21}\) As the “defender” of the French language, Du Bellay had indeed urged the ambitious French poet (always rhetorically presumed to be male) to “cut out” the “corrupted flesh” of his native literary tradition and to pursue a literary language “eloigné du vulgaire”; distanced from the vernacular and the vulgar people including women and nurses who speak but don’t write it.\(^{22}\)

Being cut off from a desired source, whether it is symbolized as France or Rome, is arguably what the Du Bellayan poetic persona shows himself needing in order to achieve a certain kind of poetic fecundity. This is one of the stories he dramatizes in the longest poem of Les Regrets. On the threshold of that sequence of sonnets is a poem in quatrains addressed to a paternal figure of authority, the “Conseiller du Roy en son Privé Conseil”: Jean de Saint-Marcel, lord of Avanson, appointed French ambassador to the Pope in 1555, and hence in Rome during the latter part of Du Bellay’s time in that place. Du Bellay also addresses Elegy 3 of the Poemata to this man, under the title “Ad Ianum Avansoniun.” D’Avanson is additionally addressed in several sonnets of the Regrets, including 165, where he is described as the “dearest nurser of the nine sisters” (“des neuf Soeurs le plus cher nourison,” Helgerson 216–17).

The poem to D’Avanson begins with a quatrain by and about a poet who is distinctly nourished by the Muse: “Si je n’ay plus la faveur de la Muse/En si mes vers se trouvent impairs,/Le lieu, le temps, l’aage où je les ay fait;/Et mes enuis leur serviront d’excuse” “[If I no longer am favored by the Muse, and if my lines are found to be imperfect, the place, the time, the age at which I wrote them, and my troubles will serve as their excuse.” Helgerson 40–41. This seems a conventionally self-deprecatory opening: but the poet’s rhetorical tactics invite a second look, for he is at once displacing blame onto the abstract entities of “le lieu, le temps, et l’aage” and also enlisting these
entities as his servants. as, literally, those who will "serve" as an "excuse" in a complex scene of gift giving—or commodity proffering—that includes the poet himself, occupying a servant's role: the man he solicits here as a potential patron; and the Muse. The opening scene with three characters is open-ended, marked by the conditional mood Du Bellay employs in many of his poems ("Si...si") and by the poet's deft shifting of any responsibility for the quality of his verse onto the Muse. its inspirational source: onto its conditions of production, including an "age" that is soon specified as a condition of the poet's being "beyond" his most "active" years; and onto its powerful male reader-patron, who stands as the chief of those who could judge the poetry imperfect. I read this opening scene as the first of many in Les Regrets in which Du Bellay borrows others' words (in this case, Ovid's, from the Tristia) to limn a small but powerful drama in which an aging son—one mysteriously beyond his prime—presents the fruits of his labors to parent figures, a mother and a father, who may already have abandoned him, deeming him unproductive.23 The poet nonetheless continues to court their favor, albeit in a way that reminds them, obliquely, that they are to blame for any insufficiency they may find in the poetic gift or commodity being offered to them. What is arguably at stake here is the quality of a work that stands in for the poet-son's already failing body: "J'estois à Rome au milieu de la guerre," he explains at the beginning of the second stanza ("I was in Rome in the midst of war"), and during that time, he was "already beyond [his] most active [or willing or ready] age, seeking some rest from his labors, not to acquire praise or favor" (Helgerson 41–42).

The second quatrain's concluding line exemplifies what François Rigolot has called Du Bellay's "poetics of refusal" ("poésie de refus"): "Non pour louange ou pour faveur acquérir."24 Syntactically, the fourth line takes us back to the first, which is retroactively revealed as harboring a question that the poet refuses to answer: Why was he in Rome? Not for the reasons you might suppose—not to acquire favor or praise—terms causally linked, in Du Bellay's milieu, to financial gain. The shadowy parent figures from the first quatrain, the Muse and potential patron whose favor and praise the poet seemed to be seeking, are thus obliquely set aside by the poet who declares that he was and is not seeking anyone's favor. In the next quatrain, he metamorphoses from a son-like figure courting favor for his "line-making" work into a denigrated figure of paradoxical, fantasmatique self-sufficiency: he becomes (like) a laborer who works not for money or praise (for the acquisition of which he would be dependent on others' judgment of his work), but rather for himself. He states that he resembles a cowherd or a rampart-builder, humble types of workers in his world; in sixteenth-century Paris, vagrants were often put to work as rampart builders.25 From these comparisons, he creates a simplified version of his own work: he presents himself as someone who produces poetry on the side, as it were: the poetry is without "art" (or artifice), a leisure activity (avocation) undertaken simply for the "worker's" pleasure—or, more accurately, for relief from the pain of his labor: "Ainsi voit-on celuy qui sur la plaine/Pique le boeuf, ou travaille au rampart./Se resjouir, et d'un vers sans art/S'esvertuer au travail de sa peine." ["So the man who on the plain herds cattle or toils on the ramps rejoices with and an artless poem he has made relieves the burden of his labor." II. 9–12. Helgerson 40–41].

The opening of the poem to d'Avanson offers a subtle inquiry into the nature of poetic production: is it a kind of adult work at all, or is it an alternative to or indeed an escape from what others see as valuable work? After the vague comparisons of the poet to the cowherd and the rampart builder—types of rural and city laborers respectively—Du Bellay gives three other analogies for his poetic activity: the first is a quatrains-long comparison of himself to one who rows a galley—an apt image for a laborer who reaps no profit from his work and who has to adjust his every stroke to the rhythms set by the galley master: "Celuy aussi qui dessus la galere/Fait escumr les flots à l'environ/Ses tristes chantes accorde à l'aviron/Pour esprouver la rame plus legere." ["Likewise he, who on the galley makes the sea around him foam, accords his sad songs to his rowing, so that his oar will seem lighter." II. 13–16]. These lines acquire ironic depth from the fact that Du Bellay compares himself to a Roman slave who produces "tristes chantes" ["sad songs"] while at the same time closely imitating a single poem (IV.1) from Ovid's own book of sad songs, the Tristia. Ovid's comparison of his exiled self to a galley slave occurs in elegant lines that mimic the repetitive motion of oar strokes that he is describing; he compares the poet to one who pulls to his breast in unison the pliant oars, timing his arms with measured strokes upon the water: ["quiue refert pariter lentos ad pectora remos, in numerum pulsas brachia pulsat aqua"]).26 Du Bellay's indefinite "celuy," so often invoked in these poems contrasting the exile to someone happier than he is, applies here quite specifically to Ovid, Du Bellay's precursor. There is a mise en abyme quality to the lines since Ovid too compares himself to another rower.

Ovid's song exists in ironic counterpoint to Du Bellay's because Ovid, as I noted above, was banished from Rome whereas Du Bellay sees himself as banished to that place. Pierre Maréchaux astutely invokes the metaphor of the "chassé-croisé"—a complex criss-cross dance movement—to describe the intertextual relation between Ovid and Du Bellay. Maréchaux sees that relation as rhythmic because it moves repeatedly across poetic lines and across geo-temporal spaces: the movement is also triangular, because it is an unstable liaison between Ovid, Du Bellay as "latiniste," and Du Bellay as "poète français" (Maréchaux, "Le Masque d'Ovide," 272). Building on
Maréchaux’s insights, I would describe the relation as triangular in another way; it exists between the poet’s present feelings, his work, and the material conditions imposed by the galley-master, who figures the distant power of the Emperor, in Ovid’s case, or the French monarchs, in Du Bellay’s. Ovid describes his oars as “lentos:” which Wheeler translates as “pliant:” but which can also mean “slow:” —a connotation that carries an ironic hint of resistance into the scene of the poet’s compliance to the Emperor’s will. Du Bellay hints more strongly at the poet’s agency and powers of resisting what is given: his galley slave, as we’ve seen, “makes the sea around him foam” (“fait esucer les flots à l’environ.” 1.14. Helgerson 40–41)—an image not in Ovid’s text—even as the French poet also makes his Ovidian “tristes chants” “accord” with the rhythm of his own (French) oars. In the act of “accordant,” which is an act of cultural and linguistic translation, Du Bellay claims, as Ovid also does, to make a new, more bearable reality: he sings “so that his oar will seem lighter” (“Pour esprouver la rame plus legere.” 1.16). The comparison of the poet’s labor to that of the galley slave clearly has a mystificatory dimension: the poet has considerably more freedom to vary his rhythm than a galley slave would have had. Nonetheless, the comparison serves, in both Ovid’s and Du Bellay’s texts, to signal and invite reflection on the element of repetitive compulsion in the labor of poetic line-making, a labor governed, at least in part, by the will of distant, ungenerous patrons and by the constraining “matter” of the mother tongue.

Du Bellay continues to follow the flow of Ovid’s verse in the two quatrains that compare the poet to the Greek figures of Achilles and Orpheus; both comparisons serve further to complicate the meditation on the nature of the poet’s labor and both—by introducing the traditional idea of poetry as a consolation for a specifically erotic loss—bring problems of masculinity into the meditation on poetic labor. Achilles sings to console himself for the loss of his mistress Briseis while he is notoriously not performing his warrior’s work on the battlefield; Orpheus sings powerfully to the stones and trees, but only to lament his absent wife—lost, as Du Bellay remarks, “for the second time” (1.22). Both comparisons stress the poet’s inability to possess a beloved erotic partner in the face of opposition from a more powerful, and older, male figure. Agamemnon in Achilles’ case. Hades in that of Orpheus. The comparisons lead both Ovid’s and Du Bellay’s poetic persona to consider (again) the figure of the Muse.

With the naming of the Muse, who is invoked as a consolation and figurative substitute for the erotic losses just mentioned, the Roman and French poet part ways. Although both initially praise the Muse for helping them “to endure the trouble of this sad time” (“Passer l’ennuy de la triste saison”), as Du Bellay puts it (1.27), Ovid looks back at a Muse who was his “partner” in error because she inspired him to write the love poem that contributed to Augustus’s decision to banish the poet to the “barbarous” shores of the Danube: Ovid carefully distinguishes between the “fault (“culpa”) he and the Muse jointly committed and a “crime” (“acta rea”), which he avers that he did not commit. He briefly regrets having dedicated himself to the “service” of the Muses (shifting suddenly to a plural epithet: the Pierian ones), and he likens his Muse-inspired songs to the “strange lotus” tasted by Ulysses and his companions during their long voyage.

Du Bellay follows Ovid in moving from thanking the Muse to seeing her as a cause of his present dilemma, but Du Bellay does much more than Ovid does to associate the Muse with a mother, and Du Bellay also turns on the Muse much more bitterly than Ovid does—in a way that anticipates the turn from invocation to reproach one finds in Du Bellay’s famous sonnet apostrophizing “France mere des arts.” Anticipating that poem, Du Bellay here conceives the Muse as having once given the poet “rest and life”; now, however, in that repetitive present Du Bellay is so adroit at rendering, the Muse becomes a cause of his poverty and an occasion for a desire to undo his life-path: “Je voudrois bien (car pour suivre la Muse/J’ay sur mon doz chargé la pauvreté)/Ne m’estre au trac des neuf soeurs arresté/Pour aller voir la source de Meduse.” Helgerson translates this tortuous quatrain as follows: “I wish—for in following the Muse I have assumed the burden of poverty—that I had not set myself in the path of the nine sisters to visit the Medusan spring” (1.41–44, pp. 42–43). But the term “arresté” could also be translated as “stopped.” This past participle, stronger than “set,” seems paradoxical only until one realizes that the poet is wishing that he had never begun a doomed journey on the “track” of the nine Muses (notice that he has here shifted from one Muse to a band of female figures) because he sees the journey as leading—possibly—to a “death by sight,” a death by gazing at the Medusa. Unlike Freud, however, du Bellay does not focus on the Medusa’s head. Instead, Du Bellay uses an ambiguous phrase—“source de Meduse”—that, like Erasmus’s famous title Encomium Mortiae (Praise of Folly), can be read both as a subjective and as an objective genitive. The phrase has no exact Ovidian equivalent though it clearly alludes to a passage in Ovid’s long poem about the Roman calendar, the Fasti. Book 5 of that text begins with the poet describing his uncertainty about the origin of the name “May.” The hesitation is politically significant, since Ovid will eventually find the word’s origin in the awe-inspiring concept of “majesty”: a mistaken choice might be dangerous. To dramatize his uncertainty, Ovid constructs an elaborate comparison: “As a wayfarer stands in doubt, and knows not which way to go, when he sees roads in all directions, so, because it is possible to assign different reasons. I know not where to turn: the very abundance
Medusa in Athena’s temple. Perseus’s act of striking Medusa’s body, which both saves his own life and creates that of Pegasus, is symbolically yoked to Pegasus’s act of striking the earth, creating the inspirational spring beloved of the Muses.

Both Ovid and Du Bellay give a matrical aura to their evocation of the Muses at the site of a spring or fountain that both poets describe in a way that stresses its relation to the dead mother of the creature that made it, although Du Bellay stresses that relation more strikingly (as it were) than Ovid does. “Hippocrene” means well of the horse, and Ovid uses that name when he directly addresses the Muses in Fasti 5. 7–8 (quoted above). Du Bellay, in contrast, omits the fountain’s association with its horse-maker and goes, as it were, directly to the source of the source in the chilling and enigmatic phrase, “source de Meduse.” For Ovid’s clever internal rhyme on the son’s name—“hippo”/“Agenippo”—Du Bellay substitutes an internal slant rhyme on the name of the dead mother: “source”/“Meduse.” Both Ovid and Du Bellay take on aspects of the mirror-using Greek hero and the magical flying horse, who both create liquidity—an apt symbol for the flow of a poetic line—in place of a hard stoniness that would have been Perseus’s fate had he not struck off Medusa’s head. Perseus indeed gives life to Medusa’s son in the moment of creating a gushing spring from what was the mother’s neck; several ancient writers including Strabo and Ovid himself stress this grotesque detail of Pegasus’s birth scene.31 In the Metamorphoses’ account of the origins of the Hippocrene, the connection between the mother’s death and the fountain’s birth is again made by the tactic of referring to Pegasus as a creature belonging to the Medusa. Athena, whose shield carries the “sign” of the Medusa’s head, comes to visit the Muses on Mt. Helicon in order to learn more about the inspirational fountain. “The fame of a new spring has reached my ears,” says Athena, a spring “which broke out under the hard hoof of the winged horse Medusa” (“fama novi fontis nostrae pervenit ad auraa/dura Medusaei quem praepetis ungula rupit,” 256–57). Both in the Metamorphoses and in the Fasti, Ovid’s phrasing implies that the fountain is co-created by the monstrous mother with her fecund blood and by the magical horse-son, a hybrid creature who is also monstrous. The mother’s creative power, however, exists only as it is channeled through her son Pegasus. Neptune the progenitor is nowhere to be seen, though the name of one of his sons, Triton, is graphically related to an epithet that Ovid’s Muses use to address Athena (“Tritonia,” I. 270) when she comes calling, eager to learn about the “new spring.”

The Ovidian intertexts about Medusa, Perseus, Athena, Neptune, and Pegasus are rich ones for Du Bellay, who takes on aspects of both Perseus and Pegasus in his account of going to “see” the “source of Medusa.” The

of choice is an embarrassment. Declare to me, ye who haunt the springs of Aganippian Hippocrene, those dear traces of the Medusaean steed” (“ut stat et incertus qua sit sibi nescit eundum /cum videt ex omni parte, viator, iter/sic, quia posse datur diversas reddere causas /qua ferar, ignoro, copiique ipsa nocet/dicite, quae fontes Aganippidos Hippocrenes gratia Medusaei signa, tenetis equi”).28

It seems significant that Du Bellay exercises his poetic will in choosing this Ovidian source to imitate here, a passage about abundant but possibly risky choice among different reasons—or “causes”—for proper names. In a way that an attentive reader with competence in both French and Latin can observe, Du Bellay abandons one textual source-path—Tristia. 4.1, which he has been following closely—for another Ovidian text from an entirely different poem. The passage from the Fasti emphasizes a “confusing” abundance of choice whereas the Tristia poem laments the poet’s poverty of choice, his inability to follow his will to return to Rome. The Ovidian poetic persona—the source for Du Bellay’s poem—is split and doubled by the later poet’s imitative move, and this seems thematically appropriate since the Fasti text presents an emotional conflict in the poet’s mind that is itself doubled by a conflict among the Muses. Instead of behaving as a unified source of inspiration, they are represented as doubtful, divided, squabbling in an almost comic fashion. When Ovid asks them to “declare” or “explain” the “traces” of the “Medusaean steed,” that is, the gushing fountains made by Pegasus’s hoof striking the hard rock, the goddess-Muses “disagree” (“disensere deae,” Fasti 5. 10). Ovid invokes the Muses to help him in his dilemma of discovering a name’s origin, but before the Muse of “sacred song,” Polyhymnia, derives “Maia” from “Maieistas,” majesty. Ovid shows the Muses disagreeing about the meaning of an etymological source while he also creates ambiguity about whether the Muses haunt one or two sources of water on Mt. Helicon—Agenippe and Hippocrene. Ovid conflates these fountains into one proper name modified by another.31 He then conflates two mythical moments, as he does also, though in slightly less compressed form, in Metamorphoses 5: one is the moment when Perseus, advised by Athena, with whom Medusa had foolishly competed for a prize for beauty, struck off the latter’s head; her blood gave birth to the winged horse Pegasus.32 The other is the moment when Pegasus struck the ground of Mt. Helicon with his hoof, creating the Hippocrene spring. Perseus becomes something like a male artist figure by virtue of his ability to kill Medusa through watching her reflection in a mirror and thus avoiding her power to turn to stone those who looked upon her face and snaky hair. Perseus also in effect becomes a second father to Pegasus, who was initially engendered, as I have remarked, when Neptune—the master god of Horace’s Ode 5:1 and Regress 128—allegedly ravished
quest to see something dangerous leads the French poet to a densely layered set of Ovidian sources that serve—or so the evidence of the printed poem suggests—as a test of his masculine competitive mettle. Far from being petrified or terrified by an image of castration, the modern poet—as if armed with a gorgonian mirror—makes something new from the “matter” he finds in Ovid’s text(s): he signals his safe passage through and beyond the singular “source de Meduse.” I suggest, by depicting himself, in the next stanza, as a winged creature (1. 48). As such, he resembles both Pegasus and Perseus: the latter received winged shoes on his quest to kill Medusa. Du Bellay immediately ionizes the achievement of freedom symbolized by “mes aëelles” (“my wings”), however, even as he obliquely recalls the French pun on feathers and pens (“plumes”) through the image of his wings. This image, absent from the Ovidian source text, is part of a larger metaphor of the poet as a bird that the Muses, now more and more like the Sirens, have entrapped with glue: 53 “Mais que feray-je à fin d’eschapper d’elles?/Leur chânt flateur a trompé mes esprits,/Et les appaz aux quels elles m’ont pris;/D’un doux lien ont englué mes aëelles.” “But what can I do to escape them? Their flattering song has misled my wit, and the charms with which they have captured me have limed my wings with a sweet bond.” II. 45-48. Helgerson 42-43. With the brilliant homophonism of “aëelles” and “aëelles”—at once conceptually rich and phonically, indeed graphically, poor—Du Bellay finds a complex equivalent for the notion of a poet’s wings “glued” to a linguistic source. But in this case, the source is imaged as plural (the Muses not the Muse) and is, moreover, conceptually plural as well: it blends an idea of the French mother tongue with the textual fact that Du Bellay is imitating a Latin text in French. By fragmenting and multiplying the figure of the source, Du Bellay makes room for a display of certain linguistic freedoms.

In the following stanzas, Du Bellay returns to following Ovid’s words closely and introduces a general (and, as we have seen, oft-repeated) analogy between the voyage of the exiled poet and the voyage of Homer’s Ulysses. Du Bellay, however, develops the analogy freely, exhibiting as Ulysses himself does a clever power to free himself from forms of bondage even as the poem focuses, thematically, on a condition of being entrapped and emasculated. Ovid compares the power of song to that of the “strange lotus” tasted by Ulysses’s companions (Odyssey IX); Ovid is like those companions insofar as he finds pleasure in that which harms him. his own books of poetry, his “song” (Tristia 4.1. II. 38-39). Du Bellay also mentions the “fruit” that exerted a “sweet power” over Ulysses’s companions (“d’Avanson,” II. 52, 51): the French poem elaborates Ovid’s analogy by interpolating another episode of the Odyssey into the picture: that of the Sirens, already foreshadowed, as I’ve suggested, in the images of the Muses entrapping the poets’ wings through the “sweet bond” of their “charms” (“appass,” which also means “bait” or “lure”). Du Bellay turns now to a slightly different image of bondage, one conceptually halfway between the image of honey as a kind of glue (1. 48) affecting the poet’s wings and the image of the lotus as a dangerous “fruit” enervating Ulysses’s companions. The “in between” image is that of a “doulece force” that is said to have “bound” (“tiez”) Ulysses’s companions. The “force” can be read proleptically as the power of the lotus fruit: but the phrasing, the delicate hesitation on the Petrarchan phrase “doulece force,” invites the reader to think not only of the Lotus episode but of a later one in Homer’s poem, though in Du Bellay’s it comes earlier. This is the episode in which Ulysses caused himself to be “bound” to the phallic mast so as not to succumb to the Sirens’ powerful song. Through echoes of Ovid that blend into echoes of Petrarch, Du Bellay’s poetic persona defines himself as irretrievably split, divided between being like Ulysses’s companions, who are trapped by the Lotus eaters until their captain rescues them, and Ulysses himself, who is capable of exercising his reason at least to the extent that he binds himself against temptation even as he opens his ears to experience the Sirens’ song. That song is associated, as we have seen, with the power of the Muses. They shift, as the male poetic persona does, from a singular to a plural mode of being—and back again.

With the specter of matricide hovering over this scene of journeying, Du Bellay presents himself as a poet wounded since birth by some action of a Muse. Fittingly, the Muse who “Dès le berceau . . . m’a laissé/Cest aigui-lon dedans la fantaisie” (“from the cradle, left this thorn in my fancy.” II. 59-60), becomes, in the penultimate quatrains, like “la vineuse prestresse,” the priestess of Dionysus. One such priestess famously killed her son, Pentheus: and Dionysus’s own mother. Semele, a mistress of Zeus, was killed when pregnant for looking on the face of Zeus in his divine form. This is not a scene where mothers and sons live in happy harmony, but they do share (incestuously, competitively?) in the work of giving birth to the book that Du Bellay ends by offering to the male patron father, hoping that he will find the gift agreeable (II. 105-06. Helgerson 46-47). The book will contain “fruits” born of “la douceur” and consisting of “les soupirs et les larmes non feintes” (“sighs and tears that are not feigned.” II. 75-76. Helgerson 44-45). The poems are thus figured as oddly immaterial phenomena that are allegedly “non feintes.” That phrase can mean both “not fictional” (i.e., true, real) and “not shaped”: the Latin root is fingere, to shape or mold. This claim to truth is of course wholly unverifiable and, at the level of the poem’s ontology, manifestly false. So the reader moves from the prefatory poem of Les Regrets into the sonnet sequence “proper” without quite knowing what “fruits” of poetic labor she or he is about to taste, or whether the labor is a masculine
voyaging such as that of Aeneas ("hoc opus, hic labor est"), a female child-birth, or a mixture of the two. The poet himself describes the fruits' likely taste, however, as "doux x amer"—sweet-bitter, a variant on the type of "beau mot compose" he had recommended in the Deffence as a way to "enrich" the vernacular. In that text, his example was "aigredoulx" (Deffence 193). Here, he both follows his earlier advice and changes the example. The compound, now lacking a hyphen between its parts, turns the sound of the French substantives for "sea" and for "mother" into part of a new substantive derived from a Latin adjective, "amarus." In the fecund domain of language, hybrids are welcome: the monstrous mother and her monstrous son-horse are yoked to the act and art of representation, reminding us that "monstrer" in French means "to show." In Du Bellay's Roman poems, the Medusa laughs, and so, at times, and often while lamenting, does the poet-son as he weaves words carrying the memory of Medusa's blood to the Muses' fountain.

NOTES


3. On the epistolary features of the Regrets, and, specifically, on the multiple addresses to male friends (and rivals for royal favor) such as Dorat and Ronsard, see Mark Bizer, Les lettres romaines de Du Bellay: "Les Regrets" et la tradition epistolaire (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2001). See also Timothy Hampson's discussion of Du Bellay's and Ronsard's exchanging texts as if they were instances of the historically new financial instrument, the "lettre de change," in Literature and Nation in the Sixteenth Century: Inventing Renaissance France (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 168.


5. In the poem "Ad Lectorem" which stands between two parts of the Poëmata volume, Du Bellay creates a striking, four-part analogy likening his French Muse to a wife and his Latin Muse to a mistress. According to the logic of this comparison, writing in Latin is a form of adultery on the part of the French poet: "Gallic Musa mihi est, fateor, quod nupta marito: Pro domina colitur Musa Latina mihi. / Sic igitur dices, ad terrae nuptia / Quo puncto saeva bella est sed magis ista placet." I "The French Muse is to me. I confess, what a wife is to a husband: as my mistress I cherish the Latin Muse. The former is pretty, indeed, but the latter is more pleasing." Œuvres Latines, ed. Demerson, 78–79. 1. 5–81. For a valuable discussion of this passage, and a translation which I have relied on here, see William Kennedy, The Site of Petrarchism: Early Modern National Sentiment in Italy, France, and England (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 140. For a reading that accepts the idea that Du Bellay's French muse is "chaste," his Latin muse "erotic," see Dorothy Gabe Coleman, The Chaste Muse: A Study of Joachim Du Bellay's Poetry (Leiden: Brill, 1980).

6. See ll. 87–94 of Heroides 1. Penelope's letter to Ulysses, from the Loeb bilingual edition with a translation by Grant Shwermer, 2nd ed., revised by G. P. Gould (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 16–17. Penelope is threatened not only by the suitors and her own fears but also by her father Icarius, who chides her for her "measureless delay" in remarrying ("immensus ... moras"). That phrase (ll. 83) could apply as well to Ulysses. Ovid suggests indeed that each spouse could be seen by the other as potentially unfaithful.

7. "D'Escrire en sa Langue" is in Œuvres Poétiques, ed. Chamard 3.97–100; see also the poem to Marguerite that opens the Poematum Libri Qvator 1. in Œuvres Latines, 35–36. ll. 23–24.

8. Du Bellay's Roman poems include a tissue of coded complaints about a Queen who is extravagantly praised (see e.g. Regrets 181). but who is also obliquely reminded, again and again, that she has favored others including several of
Du Bellay's "Source de Meduse"


25. See Christian Paulre, *De la répression de la mendicité et du vagabondage en France sous l’ancien régime* (Paris: L. Larose & L. Tenin, 1906), 55 on the increase in vagabonds in sixteenth-century France and on the efforts made by the emergent state to distinguish between the “valid poor,” who were employed in “ateliers publics” and in the ongoing business of fortifying the city, and “vagabonds étrangers,” poor people who lacked official recognition and who were sometimes chained together as unpaid workers on the city’s fortifications. In the 1540s and ‘50s, there was insufficient money for “regulating” the growing Parisian population of vagrants, as Paultre shows (see esp. 85–89).


27. Compare this line with Ovid’s parallel though not identical claim in *Tristia* 4.1.6: “indocili numero cum grave mollit opus” [*lightening with untutored rhythm his heavy work.*] Wheeler 158–59.

28. Thomas M. Greene argues that the poet’s comparison of himself to a “shivering lamb” in this sonnet “leads to a reductive sentimentalization of the nourishing source which inevitably dries up her breasts.” Greene thus blames the poet-son’s lack of verbal “art” for the phenomenon the poet (mis)represents as the mother country’s failure to nourish her child. Greene is brilliant on the poem’s melodrama, but by reading the poem as the representation of a psychic and stylistic failure, he overlooks what seems to me the most unusual aspect of the otherwise all too familiar story of a poet reenacting a mother-figure for failing in her gifts to him while giving generously to others. See Greene, “Regrets Only: Three Poetic Paradigms in Du Bellay,” *Romantic Review* 84.1 (1993), 1–18. here 10.


30. The phrase “Medusan steed” suggests that the mother still somehow possesses or marks the son; compare the similar passage in *Fasti* III. 450, where the reader is enjoined to look in the sky to see “the neck of the Gorgonian steed” [“Gorgonei colla vide supe.”] Loeb 152–53. A strong memory of the mother’s neck blood lurks in the horse-son’s neck as refuged in the constellation Ovid enjoins the reader to view.

31. According to *A dictionary of Greek and Roman biography and mythology* [www.ancientlibrary.com/smith-bio/2499.html, accessed Dec. 20. 2009.], when Ovid uses “aganippis” as an epithet of Hippocrene, its meaning “is not quite clear.” Although it is the name of a separate fountain, it is also designates the Muses in the form “Aganippides,” so “Aganippis” Hippocrene may mean “Hippocrene, sacred to the Muses.

32. See *Met* 5. 255–56. Loeb 256–57, where Athena comes to the Muses to see the “new fountain” and remarks that she saw with her own eyes the horse “born from his mother’s blood.”

33. See for instance Strabo, *Geography* 8.6, describing the Pyrenean stream: “And here, they say, Pegasus, a winged horse [that] sprang from the neck of the Gorgon Medusa when her head was cut off, was caught while drinking by Bellerophon. And the same horse, it is said, caused Hippo-crene [‘horse’ spring,” also spelled
34. As Tucker notes, Du Bellay had described himself (following Horace) metamorphosing into a swan in his early ode “Contre les envious poètes à Pierre Ronsard,” which includes the striking line “Mes ailes sont mes écrits” ["my wings are my writings"] in the context of praising Queen Marguerite (The Poet’s Odyssey, 34-35).

Chapter 11

The Jacobean Prodigals

Michael O’Connell

In his first play, written for the Lord Chamberlain’s company, Ben Jonson creates a character who might have stepped from the milieu that Richard Helgerson describes in his first book, The Elizabethan Prodigals. Lorenzo Senior in the 1598 version of Everyman in His Humor, who will become Knowell when the play is given its London setting in 1605, worries that his son is a prodigal: “How happy would I estimate myself/Could I by any means retire my son/From one vain course of study he affects.” But as far as the audience can tell, the father is worrying in vain: his son does not appear to be spending his time in “idle poetry” nor to be in any sense a prodigal. Rather, he has, as the father acknowledges, won a good report as a scholar “in all our academies” (“in both our [English] universities” in 1605). Rather it’s Lorenzo/Knowell himself who acknowledges that he was a prodigal in his youth, a fictional part of that earlier literary generation, the generation of George Gascoigne, John Lyly, Robert Greene, Thomas Lodge, and Philip Sidney, whose sense of a literary career was bound up with the idea of prodigality. For that generation poetry and the writing of prose fiction were the activities of a prodigal youth. Knowell recollects his younger years as a member of that generation:

Myself was once a student, and indeed,
Fed with that selfsame humour he is now,
Dreaming on nought but idle poetry,
That fruitless and unprofitable art,
Good unto none, but least to the professors;
Which I thought the mistress of all knowledge:
But since, time and truth have waked my judgment,
And reason taught me better to distinguish
The vain from useful learnings. (1.1.15–23: 1605 text)