

Women of later centuries were not as independent in actuality as were the noble women of the 12th century, nor were they as self-assertive; unrequited love was described by them as a shattering and devastating experience. Thus, the poet Louise Labé of Lyon (1525–66), a woman of the artisan classes who was married to a ropemaker and kept a cultural salon, wrote with great frankness in a series of remarkable poems of her adulterous love for a man who abandoned her:

I live, I die. I burn myself and drown.
I am extremely hot in suffering cold:
my life is soft and hardness uncontrolled.
When I am happy, then I ache and frown.
Suddenly I am laughing while I cry
and in my pleasure I endure deep grief:
my joy remains and slips out like a thief.
Suddenly I am blooming and turn dry.
So Love inconstantly leads me in vain
and when I think my sorrow has no end
unthinkingly I find I have no pain.
But when it seems that joy is in my reign
and an ecstatic hour is mine to spend,
He comes and I, in ancient grief, descend.³

In another of her poems Labé expressed not only her distress but anger at her lover's betrayal:

What good is it to me if long ago
you eloquently praised my golden hair,
compared my eyes and beauty to the flare
of two suns where, you say, love bent the bow,
sending the darts that needled you with grief?
Where are your tears that faded into the ground?
Your death? by which your constant love is bound
in oaths and honor now beyond belief?
Your brutal goal was to make *me* a slave
beneath the ruse of being served by you.
Pardon me, friend, and for once hear me through:
I am outraged with anger and I rave.
Yet I am sure, wherever you have gone,
your martyrdom is hard as my black dawn.⁴

Another theme relating to a common female experience, the grief of the widow, is beautifully expressed in one of Christine de Pizan's poems:

c. 1380-1420

I am a widow, robed in black, alone:
my face is sad and I am plainly dressed.
Dark is my daily life. I am distressed,
for bitter mourning dries me to the bone.

Of course I feel dejected, dead like stone,
in tears, silenced, in every way depressed.
I am a widow, robed in black, alone.

For I have lost the one who makes me own
the memory of pain with which I am obsessed.
Gone are the days of joy I once possessed.
With poison herbs my hard terrain is sewn.
I am a widow, robed in black, alone.⁵

from Gerda Lerner
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Feminist Consciousness

pp 70-71