

**“It’s All in the Name”: Amorous Vision and Poetic  
Creativity in Ronsard’s *Sonets pour Helene***

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In his final sonnet sequence, Pierre de Ronsard unites his vision of love with his search for poetic creativity. As a poet of love, he describes the turbulence of amorous experience throughout his personal verse and, like Petrarch and his followers, details the disquiet and disappointment of unrequited love. By centering attention on his use of Petrarchism as a poetic idiom, Desonay, Stone, Gendre, and Castor have studied Ronsard’s imitation of Petrarch’s conception and expression of love and have traced a progression from an innovative handling of conventional tropes and techniques in the *Amours* (1552–53) to a personal perception into the inevitable misery and disillusionment of human existence in the *Sonets pour Helene* (1578).<sup>1</sup> These interpretations of the poet’s efforts to relate self-portrait to human portrayal deepen our aesthetic and thematic appreciation of Ronsard’s sonnet cycles, but a criticism based almost entirely on an analysis of Petrarchism precludes the numerous allusions to the poet’s perception into, and subsequent expression of, an individual experience that reflects universal reality. Even as early as the introductory poem to his first sonnet sequence, Ronsard identifies his love for Cassandre as the source of his perception into beauty and wisdom and the stimulus of his poetic creativity.<sup>2</sup> A cursory recalling of his imaginative and theoretical writings, moreover, brings again to mind his life-long aspiration to reconcile the ideal of the ancient poet-seer with the practice of the sixteenth-century poet-craftsman.<sup>3</sup> And the opening line of the closing poem of the *Sonets pour Helene* confirms the significance of this theme.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, any examination of Ronsard’s conception of the poet-lover will necessarily be more suggestive than conclusive. But, perhaps, a key to an understanding of Ronsard’s attempts to capture in verse his insight into love and beauty lies in his interpretation of names, a technique that seems especially prevalent throughout the *Sonets pour Helene*. Thus, through a reading of selected sonnets that suggest a borrowing of the Neoplatonic theory of names and its application to the identity of H el ene de Surg eres, this study will describe some of the onomastic strategies that enable Ronsard to relate the force of his perceived love to the inspiration of poetic creativity.

The reference to H el ene de Surg eres as “une Heleine” in the closing sonnet proposes a multivalence that presents many more questions than answers. Although Fernand Desonay identifies the place of H el ene de Surg eres in Ronsard’s life, he acknowledges the ambivalence of the name and documents the numerous comparisons that Ronsard establishes between her and Helen of Troy.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, in the introductory sonnet of the sequence (I.1), the poet’s apostrophe to H el ene situates the poem within a sixteenth-century context, but the invocation to her brothers Castor and Pollux fixes, subtly but decidedly, an ambiguity between H el ene de Surg eres and Helen of Troy. An identification between the historical H el ene and the legendary Helen recurs in I.3 and the first *chanson*. Both hidden and direct allusions to Helen of Troy recall the Judgment of Paris and the subsequent Trojan War, and they suggest the force of an overwhelming physical beauty which, capturing and stirring human passions, results in death and destruction. Implication, though, is not necessarily expression; and, if the poet is referring to the beauty of Helen of Troy, he is describing the virtue of Helen of Sparta,

who, reconciled with her husband, returns home and remains faithful.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, both Helens share the same identity as the wife of Menelaus; but the physical beauty of a Helen that incites the war recounted in the *Iliad* contrasts with the exemplary fidelity of a Helen that prevails in Sparta described in *Odyssey* IV. Similarly, in I.3.v.1 the poet employs Petrarchistic antithesis to depict the effects exerted by his “douce Helene” (“sweet Helen”). But instead of concentrating on a physical beauty, he perceives her as a “douce haleine” (“sweet breath” or “inspiration”) which, as a virtue, uplifts his mind and enables him to recognize in her a knowledge and strength identified with the constancy and courage of Odysseus’s wife Penelope.

As the poet records in the third sonnet, the name Helen enables him to transcend his earthy limitations: “Nom, qui m’a jusqu’au ciel de la terre enlevé” (“Name, which has snatched me from earth to heaven,” I.3.v.12). If Helen of Sparta directs and inspires the persona to attain spiritual perfection, Helen of Troy lurks behind this moral and metaphysical vision. The poet cannot withdraw from his situation in time and place. Although his soul strives for fulfillment and contentment, his senses are consumed by pangs of rapture that can translate only into despondency and despair. The persona cannot separate the two sorts of loves; and in I.6 he employs Petrarch’s image of the seaman seeking a safe harbor to detail his drive to consummate amorous desire.<sup>7</sup> This single love composed of two contrary forces is a passion that inebriates the poet with a sensual madness and, at the same time, impels his unconscious drive for spiritual completion. All the aspects of this love which are conveyed both by grace and beauty and by gentleness and kindness become the subject of his verse. And the two Helens expressive of a single encompassing love represent an erotic furor that is the breath of creation. Through the dual but opposing forces of Helen, Héléne de Surgères embodies the Muse and becomes, in fact, “une haleine” (“an inspiration”), instilling within the poet the means to visualize and the intention to penetrate and to concretize in verse the mystery of Love.

The necessary interrelation between will and love, moreover, is explicitly affirmed in the first two lines of I.13 that immediately follows the sonnet describing the twin Venuses:

Soit que je sois hay de toy, ma Pasithee,  
Soit que j’en sois aimé, je veux suivre mon cours (I.13.vv.1–2).

(“Whether I am hated or loved by you, my Pasithee,  
I want to follow my course.”)<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the consequences, the persona has determined his course of action: that is, the pursuit of a love with Héléne who is now named Pasithée. Etymologically, this address suggests a goddess who represents the All (*pasa* all + *thea* goddess). Within the context of Pléiade thought, the name recalls the lady who, in Pontus de Tyard’s *Solitaire premier*, initiates the interlocutor into the workings of divine madness. The persona’s volition to cast his destiny to the love transmitted by Héléne reflects a choice.<sup>9</sup> Just as Helen of Troy is present but hidden behind the image of Helen of Sparta, the name Pasithée suggests, in sound, the mythological figure of Pasiphæ who, abandoning intercourse with a bull, becomes mother of the minotaur and an indirect agent of death.

For Ronsard the poet-lover, the name H el ene represents both signifier and signified. Whereas the appellation in I.3.v.12 uplifts the persona from his physical surroundings, six sonnets in the second book elaborate on this magical force which, residing in the meaning of the name, directs the poet to an amorous vision and poetic creativity. Although Ronsard labels II.6 an anagram, the poem appears, on first reading, to be an accumulation of Petrarchistic conventions that apotheosize his lady. She is, he writes, his heart, blood, and goddess; and her love is so captivating that it becomes “un r e” (“a net,” II.6.v.2) entangling and entrapping his soul. Through the eyes the poet penetrates H el ene’s inner being and thereby discovers honor, virtue, foresight, and wisdom. Such praise for the beauty and knowledge of a lady is hardly innovative. But in expressing this spiritual force, Ronsard employs the anagram which, based upon the name Elene de Surgeres, becomes “le r e des genereux” (“the trap for noblemen,” II.6.14). This appellation underscores the description of the net-like power of H el ene to seize the minds of “genereux,” or gentlemen of dignified spirits, willing to relinquish themselves for the sake of ennoblement. Thus the name Elene de Surgeres becomes a perceptible symbol or tangible covering that protects and reflects the poet’s previous description of her as “le R e bienheureux/ Qui prend tant seulement les hommes genereux” (“The fortunate trap/ Which only seizes noblemen,” II.6.vv.2–3).

Ronsard’s use of the word “retz” recalls his description of Cassandre (*Amours* 3 vv.6–7), in which he compares her sensual beauty to nets. The borrowing of this convention from Petrarch and Ariosto, though, goes beyond description;<sup>10</sup> and, like his contemporary Etienne Jodelle, who plays upon this image and the name of his lady Madame de Retz, Ronsard employs an onomastic technique to strengthen his description of amorous passion.<sup>11</sup> Whereas punning appears sufficient for Jodelle, Ronsard acknowledges the strength inherent in the significance of words: “Les noms (ce dit Platon) ont tresgrande vertu” (“Names [according to Plato] possess a very great strength,” II.6.v.9).

This reference to Plato brings to mind ancient concepts of language as techniques in the imitation of reality. In his *Life of Pythagoras*, Iamblichus, for example, attributes to the Pythagoreans the wisdom contained in the name of things. For Pythagoras, numbers represent the more effective metaphor to concretize divine abstraction. But names offer a system of correspondences between the perception of a supra-sensible idea and its articulation in intelligible and tangible form.<sup>12</sup> As we know, Plato explores the relation of names and their meaning in his *Cratylus*. Throughout this dialogue a scepticism toward language prevails. According to Socrates, language is a social convention that interacts with truth, thereby confusing man’s understanding of reality. In theory, language is a viable mode of the representation of knowledge; but, in practice, the word-maker can be deceived, and language is often a capricious, unreliable expression of truth. In refuting Hermogenes’s argument of the validity of words, however, Socrates affirms the relationship between the material of the sounds and syllables of the name itself and the meaning inherent in its nature. Although Heracleitean flux in enunciation, orthography, and etymology impedes man from penetrating the mystery of the meaning of names, the function of language deals necessarily with the nature of things. And the analysis of words, letters, and syllables into vowels, semivowels, and consonants enables man to discover signs that may relate and coordinate the elements found in tangible things with the truth contained in abstract forms. Drawing upon thoughts proposed by

the early sixteenth-century humanist Cornelius Agrippa, Rabelais, in his *Quart Livre*, chapter 37, has Pantagruel apply the phonetic suggestion or etymological meaning of a name to an interpretation of divine reality.<sup>13</sup> Words and accompanying pictures are therefore symbols which become the means to direct man to a fuller understanding of the cosmic mysteries.

Unlike the fifteenth-century Rhétoriciens who mastered the techniques of linguistic games, Ronsard does not employ anagram solely for the sake of form. Although he does not theorize the function of the technique, he does seem to rely upon Joachim Du Bellay's conceptualization of the trope. In the *Deffence et Illustration de la langue françoise*, Du Bellay describes the technique as practiced by Lycophron; and he notes that the second-century A.D. Hellenist Artemidorus Daldianos saw anagrams as indicants of dreams and higher realities.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, for Ronsard, the entrapment suggested by the magical force inherent in the anagram reminds him, in the subsequent sonnet (II.7), of the relationship between the control exercised by Hélène de Surgères and Helen of Troy. Moses and Minos received from Jahweh and Jupiter respectively insights into the nature of justice that became the basis of law. Ronsard the poet recognizes this system of governance; and, just as the Hebrews were commanded to free their slaves in the seventh year, Ronsard resigns himself to the spiritual bonds fastened by his "Grecque Helene" ("Greek Helen," II.7.v.12).

But like the covenant between Moses and Jahweh and the relationship between Minos and Jupiter, Hélène becomes for Ronsard an intermediary that stimulates him to re-create in art the love and beauty reflected by his lady. In the frequently anthologized sonnet that follows, "Je plante en ta faveur cest arbre de Cybelle" ("I plant in your favor this tree of Cybele," II.8), Hélène becomes the source of his poetic inspiration, thereby justifying the phonetic similarity of the name Hélène (elen) with the French word "haleine" (alen) or breath. Hélène's beauty prompts the poet to plant an evergreen which, because of its constancy of foliage, resists the rigors of heat and cold. Representative of eternity, the pine is associated with the goddess Cybele who, as Ronsard tells in an earlier poem "Le Pin" ("The Pine," 1569), transforms her lover Atys into a pine. The name Cybele plays upon the French "si belle," or "so beautiful"; and, just as Cybele submits to amorous passion and elevates her lover to immortality, Hélène possesses Ronsard, impelling him to engrave their names on the bark of the tree. The names reflect the force of their love; and, by inspiring shepherds to record in music the remembrance of Ronsard's love for Hélène's beauty, the carvings become onomastic indicants of a higher reality. And like the Tablets that Moses transmitted from Jahweh to the Chosen, the Pine becomes a "Tableau" that immortalizes in language the sacrificial nourishing of the sacred Pine with milk and lamb's blood.

Clearly, the allusion to Helen of Troy expands the description of the beauty of Hélène de Surgères and permits the poet to describe the turbulence of his unrequited love. In II.9, "Ny la douce pitié, ny le pleur lamentable" ("Neither sweet pity, nor lamentable weeping"), Ronsard develops the relationship between the legendary lady who inflicted war upon men and the historical personage who, as a *filie d'honneur* of Catherine de Medicis, drives him to battle for her love. Militaristic imagery reinforces the metaphor that likens the pillaging of Troy with the torments of the poet-lover's soul. According to the poet, the name Hélène excludes the meaning "douce pitié" which its etymological

association with the verb *elein* “to have pity” would suggest. Rather, the poet stipulates that

...Helene vient d’oster,  
De ravir, de tuer, de piller, d’emporter  
Mon esprit et mon coeur...(II.9.vv.2–4).  
(...Hélène has just taken away, snatched, killed,  
pillaged, carried off my soul and my heart....)

As Paul Laumonier and Henri and Catherine Weber have correctly commented, the verb “ravir” suggests another meaning of the name Hélène which, coming from the Greek verb *elein*, has the aorist infinitive of *aireo*, “to grasp” or “to seize.”<sup>15</sup> Contextually, this interpretation completes the analogy between the physical destruction wrought by the fictional Helen of Troy and the spiritual disturbance engendered by the historical Hélène de Surgères. The name transcends the centuries, and both Helens reflect the meaning of a “nom fatal” which, through an amorous passion stirring and surging in man, results in turmoil and tumult, but which enables the poet to immortalize his personal but universal perception of the human situation.

The erotic furor that impels the poet to seek and perceive the ideal of “Vertu” (“Virtue”) embodied by Hélène culminates in the recognition and resignation of failure. As the persona acknowledges in II.53, the pursuit of an unattainable vision ends in disappointment, humiliation, and unworthiness. Man’s earthly situation denies attainment of spiritual perfection; and the ideals of physical beauty and divine virtue revealed by the opposing Helens and Venuses define the crucible of human existence. The persona is obsessed by the joy instilled by the heavenly Hélène. But like Helen of Troy, Hélène de Surgères conveys the full significance of a “nom fatal” which, according to its etymology, surfaces and expresses death in its literal meaning and contextual connotation. Death and love become inextricably related. Although Ronsard comes to terms with this truth succinctly stated in the closing verse, Ficino explains the paradox in his commentary on Plato’s *Symposium*. Reciprocated love, according to Plato, requires a voluntary death, for the denial of self precedes a complete relinquishing to the other. As a desired death this self-abandonment can lead to an expanded, more profound insight into life. But the love that Hélène rejects and the friendship for Charles IX that death destroys go beyond self-abnegation and are finalized in an existential nothingness. The rejected love to which man relinquishes his being and with which he identifies is destroyed. The spirit that served as his being does not exist in the soul of the beloved; and, after abandoning himself to a higher reality, he is exiled and alone. Thus, the starkness of Ficino’s statement, “Ibi omnino mortuus est amator” (“In this situation the lover is completely dead”),<sup>16</sup> becomes for Ronsard the painful recognition of a universal truth, “l’Amour et la Mort n’est qu’une mesme chose” (“Love and Death are only the same thing,” II.54.v.14).

The magical force of names becomes therefore a key to the thematic structure of this sonnet cycle. The poet becomes a *vates*, or seer, into the nature of things; and, enraptured by the divine beauty of Hélène who infuses him with erotic furor, he extends the limits of human vision to the dimensions of a philosophic perception that is recorded in verse. Language designates the object, and the name Hélène is a sign that

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directs and becomes the persona's vision to a higher, more complete reality. For the Stoics, the Trojan War represented man's spiritual struggle to attain peace,<sup>17</sup> and Ronsard affirms their interpretation of the name *Hélène*, or *elenon*, as the one who ravishes or seizes the spirit of man. As a demonic or intermediary spirit, *Hélène* inculcates the poet with a vision of love; and, through his search to realize the full force of this experience, he finds the source and substance of his verse. The human struggle to escape earthly limitations and become united with the perfection of beauty and virtue represents one of the major themes of this sonnet sequence. And the multiple meanings of the name *Hélène* enable Ronsard the poet-philosopher to depict, in inspired verse, man's quest to perceive divine order and cosmic truth.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fernand Desonay, *Ronsard, poète de l'amour*, 3 vols. (Brussels: Gembloux J. Duculot, 1951–59); Donald Stone, Jr., *Ronsard's Sonnet Cycles: A Study in Tone and Vision* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1966); André Gendre, *Ronsard: Poète de la conquête amoureuse* (Neuchâtel: La Balconnière, 1970); Grahame Castor, "Petraichism and the Quest for Beauty in the *Amours* of Cassandre and the *Sonets pour Helene*" in *Ronsard the Poet*, ed. Terence Cave (London: Methuen, 1973), 79–120. See also Henri Weber, *La Création poétique au XVIe siècle en France*, 2 vols. (Paris: Nizet, 1956), 2, Chapt. 5, "La poésie amoureuse de la Pléiade (étude de thèmes)."

<sup>2</sup> Pierre de Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Paul Laumonier, Raymond Lebègue, and Isidore Silver, 20 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1914–67), 4:4 and 5:102, vv.9–14. All subsequent volume, page, and verse references to Ronsard's works will correspond to this edition. In citing passages from the *Amours* (1552–53) and the *Sonets pour Helene*, I identify the passage by book (if available), poem, and verse; all references correspond to the edition listed above. All English translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, Grahame Castor, *Pléiade Poetics: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Thought and Terminology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1964); Isidore Silver, *The Intellectual Evolution of Ronsard, Vol. II, Ronsard's General Theory of Poetry* (St. Louis: Washington UP, 1973), 335–60; and my article, "Ronsard's Concept of the 'Poète humain,'" *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 45 (1982) 87–101.

<sup>4</sup> "Je chantois ces Sonets, amoureux d'une Heleine" (17: 294–95; II.54.v.1: "I used to sing these sonnets, in love with a Helen.").

<sup>5</sup> Desonay, 3, chapter 7, "Hélène de Surgères," and 3: 243–47.

<sup>6</sup> In I.3.vv.9 and 14, Ronsard identifies his Helen with Odysseus's Penelope. Although he alludes to Helen's exile in Troy, the virtue of Menelaus's wife resembles the loyalty of Penelope. It should be noted that the two opposing aspects of Helen of Troy (or Sparta) were frequently depicted in ancient literature: see, in particular, Stesichorus, ed. J. Vürtheim, *Stesichoros' Fragmente* (Leiden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1919) 64 ff., and Euripides's plays *Helen* and *Electra*. For a description of the tale, see Herodotus,

**Histories**, ed. and trans. A.D. Godley, 4 vols., Loeb Classical Library (NY and London: Heinemann and Putnam, 1920) 1: 400–412 (Book II: 112–120).

<sup>7</sup> Petrarch, **Rime**, ed. G. Carducci and S. Ferrari (Florence: Sansoni, 1899), *Sonetti e Canzone* 123 (“Chi è fermato di menar sua vita”), 123–25.

<sup>8</sup> The dual nature of Venus is a commonplace that, probably originating in Plato’s **Symposium** (180–81), receives considerable attention in Ficino’s Latin translation of, and commentary on, this dialogue. According to Ficino’s interpretation of Pausanias’s discourse on love, the heavenly Venus directs man to a vision of divine beauty, whereas the earthly Venus incites man to discover the presence of heavenly beauty in physical substances and thereby assures its procreation in physical forms. See, in particular, Marsilio Ficino, **Commentaire sur le “Banquet,”** ed. and trans. Raymond Marcel (Paris: Société d’édition “Les Belles Lettres,” 1956) 153–55.

<sup>9</sup> “...j’ay par election  
Et non à la volée, aimé vostre jeunesse:  
Aussi je prens en gré toute ma passion.  
Je suis de ma fortune autheur, je le confesse” (I.1.vv.9–12).  
“...I have chosen  
And not without thought, having loved your youth:  
Thus I willingly accept all my passion.  
I am the author of my fortune, I admit.”

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Petrarch, *Sonetti e canzoni* 59, “Perchè quel che me trasse ad amar prima,” p. 89, and 198, “L’aura soave al sole spiega e vibra,” pp. 284–85; and Lodovico Ariosto, **Rime** (Venice: Iacopo Modanese, 1546), *Sonetti*, “La rete fu di queste fila d’oro,” fol. 5r. See also commentary notes by Laumonier, 4:8, note 1, and Pierre de Ronsard, **Les Amours**, ed. H. and C. Weber (Paris: Garnier, 1963), 507, commentary note 2 to **Amours** 3.

<sup>11</sup> See, in particular, Ronsard, **Les Amours**, ed. H. and C. Weber, p. 750, note 2 to **Sonets pour Helene** II.6.

<sup>12</sup> Iamblichus, **De vita pythagorica**, ed. and trans. (Latin) M. Theophilus Kiessling (Leipzig: C.G. Vogel, 1815), Chapters 23, 28 and 29, discusses the power of language, and Ficino, in his **De triplici vita**, III, Chapter 21, asserts, “Pythagorici verbis et cantibus, atque sonis mirabilia quaedam Phœbi et Orphei more facere consueti” (“The Pythagoreans have become accustomed to create certain marvelous things through words, songs, and even sounds in the way of Phœbus Apollo and Orpheus”), **Opera omnia**, ed. M. Sancipriano and Paul Oskar Kristeller, 2 vols. (Turin: Bottega d’Erasmus, 1959) 1:562. For a discussion on the force of words in antiquity and the transmission of this concept into sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thought, see D.P. Walker, **Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella**, Studies of the Warburg Institute 22 (London: Warburg Institute, 1958), especially pages 37–39.

<sup>13</sup> François Rabelais, **Le Quart livre**, ed. Robert Marichal, Textes littéraires français (Lille and Geneva: Giard and Droz, 1947), 165, summarizes the belief of the magical

force inherent in words as proposed by Cornelius Agrippa, *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum* (Paris: J. Petrus, 1536), Chapt. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Joachim Du Bellay, *Deffence et Illustration de la langue françoise*, ed. Henri Chamard (Paris: A. Fontemoing, 1904), II, Chapt. 6, 276–77. According to Chamard, pp. 276–77, note 7, Du Bellay became aware of the work of Lycophron through the edition and commentary of his works by the twelfth-century Byzantine grammarian Tzetès, whose *Alexandra* was published by J. Oporin in Basel in 1546.

<sup>15</sup> Laumonier, 17:254, note 2; H. and C. Weber, p. 752, note 2 to *Sonets pour Helene* II.9.

<sup>16</sup> Ficino, *Commentaire sur le “Banquet,”* 156–59, especially 156.

<sup>17</sup> Félix Buffière, *Les Mythes d’Homère et la pensée grecque* (Paris: Société d’édition “Les Belles Lettres,” 1956), 65 and 411–12.

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