ty; Alberto Moreiras, specialist in contemporary Latin American literature, of the University of Wisconsin; Ann Murphy, specialist in 19th and 20th century French literature, of Virginia Tech; and David J. Viera, specialist in medieval Spanish, Catalan, and Portuguese literature, of Tennessee Technological University.

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Following the Artist's Blueprint in *Les Sonnets pour Hélène*

Jean M. Fallon
Hollins College

Readers generally regard Ronsard's love poetry as witty, beautiful, and traditional. They have also cited its uneven and repetitious qualities. Few studies have examined in depth the harmony and unity of one entire cycle of sonnets. Furthermore, when the sonnet cycles do receive attention, the *Sonnets pour Hélène* excites the least amount of commentary. One of few critics to address the issue of unity in Ronsard's sonnet sequences, Donald Stone in his *Ronsard's Sonnet Cycles*, traces the influence of Petrarch and others on Ronsard's work while simultaneously pointing out the personal aspects of Ronsard's perspectives which give his poems their unique tone and style. Stone takes the ambivalent symbol of the fictive subject, Hélène, as a key toward resolving some of the conflicts in the cycle's tone and style, whereas this examination focuses on the narrator himself as the subject of his work. Stone's work, moreover, is based on the earlier 1578 edition of the *Sonnets pour Hélène* while this study seeks to examine the 1584 *Hélène* sonnets in light of their artistic harmony, their unity and their closure. The *Sonnets pour Hélène* constitutes the last sonnet sequence that Ronsard addressed to a fictional love interest, and the 1584 edition is the last version that Ronsard edited in his lifetime, since the later 1587 edition was the work of his editor.[1]

The search for unity is a *topos* which appears again and again in Renaissance literature. Although writers of the period widely professed a love of unity, the closure of their texts often seems to undermine it: loose ends are not always tied up, riddles are not always solved. By examining several groups of related sonnets, however, we can distinguish a definite pattern or order to the *Hélène* sonnets—an order which calls attention to artistic principles and practices that were consistent during Renaissance times.

Certainly one of the most striking features of the *Sonnets pour Hélène* is the system of dualities which underscores the work thematically and structurally. Readers note almost immediately the comparison between Hélène de Surgères and Helen of Troy, Ronsard's heroine and Homer's. The work is divided into two books of sonnets and the first sonnet in each book comprises an address—the first sonnet in Book One is addressed to

Hélène while the second book commences with a message to its readers. More subtle frameworks underscore the text—for example, the first and last sonnets refer to the month of May. These two references to May, however, differ fundamentally, for the first operates appropriately as a beginning while the second functions as a sign of closure. A few lines from the first sonnet demonstrate that May is treated as a fertile, natural burst of vitality:

> Ce premier jour de mai, Hélène, je vous jure
> Par Castor, par Pollux, vos deux freres jumeaux,
> Par la vigne enlacée à l'entour des ormeaux,
> Par les prés par les bois hérissés de verdure
> Par le nouveau Printemps, fils aîné de Nature,
> Par le cristal qui roule au giron des ruisseaux,
> Par tous les rossignols, miracle des oiseaux,
> Que seule vous serez ma dernière aventure. . . (I, I, ll. 1-8)[2]

In the closing sonnet, the narrator refers to May as ". . . ce funeste mois que mon prince mourut. . .." History records May 30, 1574, as the date of Charles IX's death, and this solemn occasion stands in stark contrast to the surge of positive emotions which opens the work. In that first poem, the mention of Hélène's brothers, Castor and Pollux, provokes further thoughts of dualities, for the twins symbolize a unit, further accentuated in that sonnet by the listing of other pairs. Hélène remains significantly single in the poem, the narrator pointedly referring to her as "seule vous" and then as "vous seule." He searches, of course, to link himself with her throughout the cycle. Each of these details supports the system of pairs that serve as a foundation to the entire sonnet cycle. One other such pattern concerns the narrator's use of water as a symbol in the *Sonnets pour Hélène*.

In this sonnet cycle, water appears twice as a fairly prominent image. Again we can identify a pattern at work in the cycle, for the first water reference appears in the sixth sonnet, and the second appears six sonnets from the end. And, once again, this pattern demonstrates appropriate opening and closing developments. Throughout the sonnet sequence we will witness a transformation of the narrative voice from helpless lover to controlling poet. The earlier water reference emphasizes the lover's misery while the latter showcases an author's power. Moreover, the first water reference occurs in a single sonnet, while the closing water reference appears in a series of three poems—an indication of the breadth and development of the poetic voice that ultimately dominates the sonnet cycle. In the earlier sonnet, water takes the form of "flots d'amour" in which the poet's boat founders. A sample reads:

> . . . Naufragé je mourrai: car je ne vois reluire
> Qu'une flamme sur moi, qu'une Hélène qui tire
> Entre mille rochers ma navire à la mort.
> Je suis seul me noyant, de ma vie homicide,
> Choisissant un enfant, un aveugle pour guide. . . .(I, VI, ll. 6-10)

The error of following Cupid's lead in this poem is rather soundly counterbalanced in the closing series of three poems—two sonnets and one longer piece, the "Stances de la Fontaine d'Hélène." In these poems Ronsard returns to the inspiration of the fountain or poet's source which fostered his earler "Fontaine Bellerie" (1550), elaborating detail upon detail as the readers encounter ". . . cette belle fontaine" (II, LXXII, l. 4). The narrator describes:

> . . . Pasteurs, que vos troupeaux frisés de blanche laine
> Ne paissent à ces bords: y fleurisse le thym,
> Et tant de belles fleurs qui s'ouvrent au matin,
> Et soit dite à jamais la Fontaine d'Helene.
> Le passant en Été s'y puisse reposer
> Et assis dessus l'herbe à l'ombre composer
> Mille chansons d'Hélène et de moi lui souvienne. . . .(II, LXXII, ll. 5-10)

This fountain receives more specified description in the "Stances" and the remaining sonnet in the series of water poems, so that when, compared with the overwhelming "flots d'amour" of the earlier water reference, the fountain is entirely the artist's creation, his domain, under his control. This use of water as two very different symbols corresponds to the change in narrative tone and vision that shapes the entire *Sonnets pour Hélène*. Much of the uneven character of the poems occurs to a large extent as the result of a "narrative feud" which transpires throughout the work, where desire for physical union is eventually replaced by desire for textual union, where a lover and woman as object of his affections are overtaken by an author and subject—his text. In this, yet another sub-pattern of the whole, the narrator as a lover grows more and more distant from his love interest, while the narrator as an author grows closer and closer to unity with his subject. Homer's Helen replaces Hélène de Surgères as the narrator's ultimate goal, in achieving the kind of prominence which would place Ronsard, as he states in an earlier poem, "entre Homère et Virgile" ("Elégie à Loïs des Massures Tournisien," 1560).

This ascendance of the poetic vision over the baser amorous desire occurs over the course of a multi-layered interpretive reading of the *Sonnets pour Hélène*. A graphic representation of this development appears as a subset within the larger whole, a *myse en abysme*, and it constitutes the single most significant aspect of this focus on harmonic patterns and structures. A group of sixteen sonnets stands apart from the other poems of the work, and I have borrowed from Robert Garapon the term "tableau sonnet" for my remarks about them (115). These sixteen sonnets are all prominently linked with the visual arts, for they call attention to form, color, position and movement. During the Renaissance period, the discovery and observation of the laws of visual perspective were manifested in the widespread use of scenography in paintings and drawings. Settings, set-pieces, and grandiose backgrounds were employed as dramatic backdrops against which subjects were portrayed. In conjunction with the popularity of scenography and set-pieces in painting, Renaissance architecture—particularly in what is often deemed the "Mannerist movement"—gave careful attention to the staircase, the doorway, the window, the fireplace, the fountain and garden layouts (18).[3] These architectural features were ornamental as well as functional aspects of many Renaissance structures. It is, therefore, especially noteworthy to learn that fourteen of the sixteen tableau sonnets allude to these architectural features: three mention a staircase, three a fireplace, two a window, one a door, three a garden, while two speak of grand interiors in general terms. Of the remaining two, one mentions a tomb, another item associated with structures and/or materials, while the other highlights color and movement rather than an edifice of any kind. This entire subset of sonnets, furthermore, portrays "scenes" much like a theatrical sketch or painting would (thus, the name "tableau"). These scenes call our attention to interaction between the narrator and Hélène: the first *tableaux* make specific mention of the two characters together, while in subsequent *tableaux*, presence and interaction become increasingly more vague and indistinct, until at the end of the series, separation of the two is implied when not specifically stated. Dialogue and interaction between narrator and Hélène is a second, distinguishing characteristic of these sixteen sonnets. Often the added mention of color and/or detail of light and shadows enhances the visual quality of these sonnets. In short, these poems all highlight encounters that readers can easily imagine, making the characters of narrator and Hélène more life-like than in the other poems in this collection. Their actions are easy to imagine, as they depict what we would consider "everyday occurrences" —a walk in the garden, a chat by the fireplace, a panoramic intake of the city before an open window, and so on. The down-to-earth quality of these sonnets is further hightened by a casual conversational tone of address

where the narrator often reminds Hélène of past events, punctuating his remarks by mentions of time or of place—"Je liai. . . votre bras l'autre jour" or "Te regardant assise auprès de ta cousine" (Book One, Sonnets XXIV and XVI, respectively).

The sixteen tableau sonnets present both a step forward in the progression of the thematic development of the *Sonnets pour Hélène* as well as mark certain structural refrains within the group. We can comprehend something of their pattern if we look briefly at the first and last tableau sonnets (occuring in Book One, Sonnet IX and in Book Two, Sonnet LXV, respectively), where we can observe the harmony and unity of the tableau series as a group.[4] Once we study them as a mini sonnet cycle within the larger cycle, we find that they record in a tighter version the same concern of the entire work—namely that love may perish, but a work about love will survive. The allusions to architecture represent Ronsard's firm belief in the endurance of his poetry. We have his blueprint before us in the tableau sonnets, where coherence, unity and closure present a working model of his artistic concepts.

The first and last *tableaux* feature a staircase, which symbolically allows us entry into and exit from this creative domain. Just as the entire sonnet sequence opens and closes with May treated in two different ways, the staircase of the first and last tableau sonnets encourages two very distinct interpretations. In the first tableau sonnet, the scene portrays the narrator as pausing, immobile on a stairstep, while Hélène sweeps by, killing him with the impersonal penetration of her glance, yet providing him hope with a gesture of her hand. The sonnet contains few verbs of action, but a basic stirring to motion conveys the impression of a sensual awakening, for the text of the poem itself moves toward life: the last words read "donner la vie." Hélène's gesture emphasizes her power, for it is her hand that initiates the narrator's life. The narrator, in esteeming Hélène's hand, describes it as "belle" and "blanche." These two adjectives foresee the assimilation with the mythical Helen, an assimilation which is called into focus by the mention of the swan: "Main blanche qui se vante être fille d'un Cygne." The allusion to Helen's lineage reminds us of Jupiter's forceful seduction of Leda, Helen's mother, and reinforces the notion of birth or beginnings which launches the movement in this sonnet, in the tableau series, and in the entire sonnet sequence. The narrator refers twice to the gesture made by Hélène's hand as "ton signe." This word "S-I-G-N-E" repeats phonemically the homonym "cygne" or swan, making a total of three times within the space of four lines that we hear this set of phonemes. The image of the swan, moreover, suggests both a natural creature and a created disguise fashioned by the creator Jupiter to seduce Leda. Ronsard's repeated emphasis of Hélène's hand—"ta belle main" in

Leda. Ronsard's repeated emphasis of Hélène's hand—"ta belle main" in line nine, "main blanche" in line ten, "ton signe" in line thirteen, and "ta main" again in line fourteen—prompts us to look at his own hand, his handiwork in the crafting of this sonnet, and by extension, of the entire tableau sequence. The narrator, a very prominent protagonist here in the tableau series, calls attention to his birth, his coming to life as an artist. The life of the narrator generates, in turn, the life of the narrative.

During the course of the tableau sonnets, Hélène as a physical presence and object of desire, appears consistently closed off from the narrator, and the many attempts to portray the two within the confines of the tableau decors gradually give way to larger, less intimate settings and finally to settings where contact between the two no longer exists. This diminishing of contact reminds us that the work is not about physical but poetic desire. Physical union is denied, but a textual control of Hélène by the narrator is achieved. The disappearance of any notion of union between Hélène and the narrator is counterbalanced by the notion of man-made constructions, creation, textual enclosures and surroundings erected as part of the means of preserving the movements of this entire work. The tableau sonnets serve as a "monument" to the eternal glory that Ronsard foresaw for his last sonnet cycle.

In the final tableau sonnet, we encounter once again the flight of stairs, this time as an aging narrator climbs slowly and breathlessly to Hélène's room high in the Louvre palace. In his self-portrait, the narrator paints the unflattering image of a man sweating, panting, and experiencing difficulty in climbing the stairs. The direction, however, is upward, toward Hélène's residence, which the narrator calls "ta cyme hautaine" and which he compares to Mount Olympus. In addition to this reference to the site of Jupiter's palace, the name "Jupiter" appears twice in the final two lines of the poem. The mention of Jupiter *alone* contrasts with the coupling allusion to *Jupiter and Leda* presented in the first tableau. The portrait of the aged narrator counters the stirrings of life and birth that the earlier tableau offers. And, finally, when the narrator refers to his loss of breath—"je perds l'halaine"—the word *breath* (halaine) reminds us that Hélène was his early life source, the focus of his text. Here, however, in the final tableau and near the end of the entire sonnet cycle, the loss of Hélène is synonymous with the completion of the story. Age and resolution lead the narrator not to the earth but upward toward the sky, toward a divine stratosphere inhabited by Hélène. As she is divine, so shall he be when, as author, he immortalizes her story. His existence on earth concerns constructing a monumental edifice (the text of the *Sonnets pour Hélène*) which commemorates Hélène and himself. In the final pages of the sonnet

cycle, the symbolic erection of a fountain will represent both the poet's source and his achievement—the body of the sonnets.

This interpretation of the *Sonnets pour Hélène* proposes then that we read this work as a coherent, unified whole, but one in the tradition of a mannerist composition where we can approach the text in many ways. Michel Butor has postulated that mannerist painting served as a compositional model for Montaigne's writings. Such an approach to Ronsard's last sonnet cycle may indeed offer fresh insights to our understanding. Butor points out that mannerist (or post-Raphaelite) art tends to frame the subject among margins and bands of decorative garlands. Montaigne's *Essais* sandwich potent passages between labyrinths of details which beckon the reader's involvement. Hidden prologues, stories within stories, messages inside of messages are, in fact, also typical of Rabelais (we recall his "substantifique moelle" among other significant metaphors). Montaigne's prose is full of crossroads and bifurcations—one often looks for a "road-map" by which to follow his essays. Ronsard's *Sonnets pour Hélène* highlights windows, doors, interior constructions. Thus, we can look for a "blueprint" to lead us through the design of the sonnet cycle, from which we can seize the essence of the whole. By following the progression which the tableau sonnets recount, we read of the distancing of a lover and his lady, and we witness the development of a new narrative voice where an artist and his subject approach a fusion into one. Love dies while poetry endures. The changing focus of the *tableaux* foregrounds the evolution of the narrator from helpless to powerful, as well as Ronsard's quest to position himself beside the poets he so admired, particularly Homer.

Homer's Helen serves as a point of departure for Ronsard's Hélène, and Hélène becomes known in the last tableau as the narrator's "halaine"—his very breath, his creative force. These sixteen sonnets project in a verbal display the entire thematic progression of Ronsard's ideas in his last cycle of sonnets. Because they accentuate the interaction between author and subject, and because they so pointedly mention details of architecture or form, we recognize that Ronsard was leaving his readers an edifice of art—a monument or temple—to serve as a "textually tangible" reminder of the prominent niche that he carved for himself among the greats. As Ronsard himself remarked in the Preface to the *Franciade*, "[les excellents poètes] d'une petite cassine font un magnifique Palais. . . ."

APPENDIX

Book One, Sonnet IX appears in Laumonier's edition as follows:

L' autre iour que i'estois sur le haut d'un degré,
Passant tu m'aduisas, & me tournant la veuë
Tu m'esblouis les yeux, tant i'aurois l'ame esmeuë
De me voir en sursaut de tes yeux rencontré.
Ton regard dans le coeur, dans le sang m'est entré
Comme un esclat de foudre alors qu'il fend la nue:
I'euz de froid & de chaud le fiéure continue,
D'un si poignant regard mortellement outré.
Lors si ta belle main passant ne m'eust fait signe,
Main blanche, qui se vante estre fille d'un Cygne,
Ie fusse mort, Helene, aux rayons de tes yeux:
Mais ton signe retint l'ame presque rauie,
Ton oeil se contenta d'estre victorieux,
Ta main se resiouyt de me donner la vie.

Book Two, Sonnet LXV appears as follows:

Ie ne serois marry si tu contois ma peine,
De conter tes degrez recontez tant de fois:
Tu loges au sommet du palais de nos Rois:
Olympe n'auoit pas la cyme si hautaine.
Ie pers à chaque marche & le pouls & l'haleine,
I'ay la sueur au front, i'ay l'estomac penthois,
Pour ouyr un nenny, un refus, une vois
De desdain, de froideur & d'orgueil toute pleine.
Tu es comme Deesse assise en tres-haut lieu.
Pour monter en ton ciel ie ne suis pas un Dieu.
Ie feray de la court ma plainte coustumiere
T'envoyant iusqu'en haut mon coeur deuotieux.
Ainsi les hommes font a Iupiter priere
Les hommes sont en terre, & Iupiter aux cieux.

● NOTES

[1] Donald Stone's work is devoted to all of Ronsard's major sonnet cycles, but pages 159-243 focus specifically on the *Sonnets pour Hélène*. Stone believes that the poetic achievement of the 1578 edition is significantly undermined by the 1584 edition with its addition of thirty-five sonnets that had previously been included in the *Amours Diverses* collection. On page 243 he states that "in 1584 one can only be aware of the particular successes as the intimate relationship of the parts can never be reworked to admit the divergent aspects of tone and vision inserted after 1578." I respectfully disagree with Stone's statement, for the point of my argument maintains that the 1584 text reveals an intricate, harmonious and unified cycle of poems. The changes that Ronsard made in the 1584 work, particularly in supplementing it with poems from the *Amours Diverses*, allow us to view the 1584 collection as a different text from the 1578 publication. Indeed, the 1584 version demonstrates very prominent patterns, refrains and unifying structures.

[2] All quotations from the text of Ronsard's *Les Sonnets pour Hélène* are from *Oeuvres Complètes de Pierre de Ronsard*, Tome Premier, edited by Paul Laumonier (Paris: Librairie Alphonse Lemerre, 1914-1919). The 1584 edition used by Laumonier was the last one edited and published during Ronsard's lifetime. Isidore Silver admirably continued Laumonier's work, and, while I have certainly consulted his voluminous editions of Ronsard's poetry, I have chosen to use the Laumonier text, as it is closest in date to Ronsard's last edition. I have modified spellings in short citations to reflect more modern usage, but I have kept the old orthography in the two sonnets which appear complete in the Appendix to this paper. "J" is represented as "i" and "v" appears as "u" and "v" in Laumonier's text. The *Hélène* sonnets are divided into two books, and Laumonier records the sonnets by noting first the book, which he denotes by I or II, and then follows the book with roman numerals to number the sonnets. I have kept that same practice throughout this paper whenever I have made reference to individual sonnets.

[3] John Shearman defines the Mannerist period by its absolute attention to style. See particularly page 18 of his *Mannerism* where he treats the concept of *maniera* in people and in their works of art.

[4] For the complete text of these two sonnets, see the Appendix to this paper.

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