

Reading Europe in the Renaissance: continent, personification and myth in Ronsard's Discours de l'alteration et change des choses humaines

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In *A Word-Index to the Poetic Works of Ronsard* A. E. Creore identified seventy-one instances of the word 'Europe' in the oeuvre of the famous poet of the French Renaissance and a separate eleven instances of what he labelled 'Europe [myth.]'¹ French is one of the many languages—English being a notable exception—in which there is no morphological and phonological distinction between the terms for Europe the continent and Europa the mythological princess abducted by Zeus/Jupiter in the form of a bull. Whereas Creore's work emphasizes the semantic difference between the continent and the myth, this article asks if in practice the homonyms were so readily distinguished from one another. For Pierre de Ronsard and his contemporary readership, the Europa myth was part of the cluster of associations they had about the word 'Europe' that they would bring to mind when reading and writing about the continent. To Renaissance readers, the rich literary and visual tradition of Europa and the bull was imbricated with vivid personifications of the continent as a queen, both as allegorical figures and anthropomorphic maps. Such associations helped to develop the political and cultural meanings of the term 'Europe' so that it signified much more than a geographical space.

This article explores how the Europa myth can shape interpretations of the word 'Europe' in instances where its primary denotation is the continent rather than the mythological princess. It does this by focussing on the example of Ronsard's *Discours de l'alteration et change des choses humaines* (1569/1584), situating it in relation to the uses of the word 'Europe' both within Ronsard's wider work and within Renaissance writing more generally, as well as exploring the influence of the traditions of visualizing the continent as a female figure.² Scholarship on conceptions of Europe in the early modern period has identified personifications as central processes in the development of ideas about Europe as a unity and as superior vis-à-vis the other continents, while

¹ A. E. Creore, *A Word-Index to the Poetic Works of Ronsard*, 2 vols. (Leeds: W. S. Maney, 1972), Vol. 1, 533.

² Originally published in 1569 as *Discours a Maistre Julvain Chauveau*, the poem was retitled *Discours de l'alteration et change des choses humaines* in 1584.

finding that the myth of Europa and the bull was used less in such discourses.³ I argue that both of these traditions of representing the continent as a woman were so intertwined with geographical discourse that the word ‘Europe’, when denoting the continent, could be read as a female figure, thereby suggesting associations that enriched the meaning of the word and the ideas it signified. A reading of ‘Europe’ in the *Discours de l’alteration et change des choses humaines* as a woman evokes the sexual violence of the Europa myth and, in this way, extends and enhances a political critique of the Ottoman Empire beyond that offered by the denotative meaning of Europe as continent.

Ronsard referred to Europe in his verse throughout his career. If the homonyms referring to the continent and the mythical princess are considered together, ‘Europe’ is within the 1000 most frequently used words in his poetry or, put another way, within the top 9%.⁴ As Ronsard was a court poet, much of his work is political and the instances of the term ‘Europe’ in his oeuvre reflect this.⁵ He uses the word as part of a vision of French universal monarchy, as in one ode addressed to the eldest son of Henri II: ‘Tu penseras en ton cœur | D’acquérir l’Europe encore’ [‘You will still think in your heart of acquiring Europe’].⁶ It is also used in relation to the Ottoman Empire, either in works urging peace between warring Christian states or in poems celebrating imagined French conquests.⁷ These poems depict a cultural and political clash between what is represented as a Christian Europe and a Muslim Ottoman Asia. Similarly, the word ‘Europe’ appears five times as part of references to the Trojan War, which Ronsard presents as a battle between Europe and Asia.⁸ Troy is not the only mythological reference Ronsard makes in relation to Europe as he also refers to the princess Europa as the continent’s

³ Michael Wintle, *The Image of Europe: Visualizing Europe in Cartography and Iconography throughout the Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 236–79; Isabella Walser-Bürgler, ‘Europe without the Bull? Reflections on the Absence of the Ancient Myth of Europa in the Neo-Latin Discourse on Europe’, *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 44 (2019), 81–103.

⁴ In his word index, Creore includes 11,889 headwords.

⁵ On the political nature of Ronsard’s poetry, see Francis Higman, ‘Ronsard’s Political and Polemical Poetry’, in Terence Cave (ed.), *Ronsard the Poet* (London: Methuen, 1973), 241–85.

⁶ Pierre de Ronsard, *Ceuvres complètes*, eds. Jean Céard, Daniel Ménager and Michel Simonin, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), Vol. 1, 734.

⁷ ‘Non, ne combattez pas, vivez en amitié [...] ‘le Turc n’est | Si esloigné d’ici [...] ils ont (sans coups ruer) en Europe passé’ (Vol. 2, 807–8) [‘No, don’t fight, live in friendship [...] ‘the Turk is not so far away from here [...] they have (without inflicting great blows) passed into Europe’]; ‘Comme Alexandre, auez l’ame animée | Du chaud desir de conduire une armée | Outre l’Europe, et d’assauts vehemens | Oster le Sceptre aux puissans Ottomans’ (Vol. 2, 47) [‘Like Alexander, you will have a spirit inspired by the fervent desire to lead an army beyond Europe and, with fierce attacks, to remove the Sceptre from the powerful Ottomans’].

⁸ In Sonnet 45 of *Le Second Livre des Sonnets pour Helene* Ronsard writes that Helen of Troy ‘fist par sa beauté | Opposer toute Europe aux forces de l’Asie’ (Vol. 1, 401) [‘made by her beauty all Europe oppose the forces of Asia’].

eponym: 'Qui fut Princesse en son printemps si belle | Que nostre Europe a porté le nom d'elle' ['who was a princess so beautiful in her spring time that our Europe carried her name'].⁹ Though humanists tended to doubt that the continent's name was derived from myth and Ronsard himself elsewhere used the figure of Europa without explicit reference to the continent, this example demonstrates that the association of the two was utilised by Ronsard in his poetry. As a result, it is worth examining whether readings of the word 'Europe' could be enriched by exploring the interplay of myth and continent.

The example that will be considered here appears in the *Discours de l'alteration et change des choses humaines*, a consideration of the human consequences of change inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Ronsard predicts the collapse of the Ottoman Empire:

Le Turc seigneur de tant de villes fieres,
De tant de mers, de ports et de rivieres,
Qui ose seul une Europe assaillir,
Doit quelque jour s'amoindrir et faillir.¹⁰

[The Turk, lord of so many proud towns,
Of so many seas, ports and rivers,
Who alone dares to assail a Europe,
Must some day weaken and fail.]

This is one of six of Ronsard's poems that both makes direct reference to the Turks and includes the word 'Europe'. Outside of his oeuvre one of the discursive contexts in which the word 'Europe' appeared most often was commentary on the Ottoman Empire, which, especially since the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and its subsequent expansion into eastern and central Europe, was seen to present an increasing threat to the continent as a whole. In this extract, Ronsard conveys the might and power of the Ottoman Empire, as well as its territorial extent through its lordship of towns, seas, ports and rivers. With the word 'Europe' trapped in the middle of the line, four syllables either side, Ronsard neatly conveys the sense that the danger the Turks pose is not to one particular state but rather to the entire continent, an idea that drew on contemporary anti-Ottoman crusading rhetoric.¹¹ Used in this way, the word clearly refers to the continent and articulates a political and cultural conception of the geographical space as under threat from an external political and cultural force. Nonetheless, can the word be read also as a woman?

⁹ Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 2, 664.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 747.

¹¹ On Renaissance crusade rhetoric, see Michael J. Heath, *Crusading Commonplaces: La Noue, Lucinge and Rhetoric against the Turks* (Geneva: Droz: 1986) and James Hankins, 'Renaissance Crusaders: Humanist Crusade Literature in the Age of Mehmed II', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 49 (1995), 111–207.

There are two relevant cultural and intellectual traditions that point towards an answer in the affirmative: one is the Europa myth; the other is the personification of the continent as a woman. Johannes Putsch's 1534 anthropomorphic map of Europe in the form of a queen inaugurated a tradition of similar cartographic depictions, ensuring that the geographical discourse about Europe was associated with personifications of Europe.¹² Anthropomorphic maps were often related to ideas of universal monarchy and Europe united under the political authority of one monarch, an idea that was particularly prominent in Habsburg circles. Putsch's map depicts Spain as the head and the Holy Roman Empire as the centre of the body, thereby figuring the Habsburg dynasty as the leaders of the continent. Indeed, Putsch praises Charles V and his brother in a poem accompanying the woodcut image, which provoked the humanist Hubert de Suzanne to counter with a poetic reframing, praising the French king Francis I and stressing France's place at the heart of Europe.¹³ Personifications of the continent as a woman emerged from the tradition dating back to classical antiquity of female representations of cities and nations. As well as anthropomorphic maps, there was a proliferation of allegorical representations of Europe as a queen. These adorned maps, cosmographies and triumphal arches and tended to be produced alongside representations of Asia, Africa and America as women, invariably depicting a hierarchy of continents with Europe as a superior.¹⁴ In the second edition (1603) of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, a collection of allegorical figures, a crowned Europe sits beside a cornucopia, with her feet resting on crowns and a papal tiara to convey her political power.¹⁵ There was also a literary tradition of personifying Europe as a woman that emerged from Putsch's visual depiction; for example, in the Spanish humanist Andrés Laguna's Latin oration *Europa Heautentimorumene* [*Europe the Self-Tormentor*] of 1543 Europe weeps before

¹² Elke Anna Werner, 'Anthropomorphic Maps: On the Aesthetic Form and Political Function of Body Metaphors in the Early Modern Europe Discourse', in Walter Melion, Bret Rothstein and Michel Weemans (eds.), *The Anthropomorphic Lens: Anthropomorphism, Microcosmism and Analogy in Early Modern Thought and Visual Arts* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 251–72. Putsch's map was long thought to date to 1537, but an earlier version was recently discovered; see Nicolas Detering and Dennis Pulina, 'Rivalry of Lament: Early Personifications of Europe in Neo-Latin Panegyrics for Charles V and Francis I', in Nicolas Detering, Clementina Marsico and Isabella Walser-Bürgler (eds.), *Contesting Europe: Comparative Perspectives on Early Modern Discourses on Europe, 1400–1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 13–38 (17–21).

¹³ Detering and Pulina, 'Rivalry of Lament', 13–38.

¹⁴ Wintle, *The Image of Europe*, 236–79; Elizabeth McGrath, 'Humanism, Allegorical Invention and the Personification of the Continents', in Hans Vlieghe, Arnout Balis and C. Van de Velde (eds.), *Concept, Design and Execution in Flemish Printing* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 43–71. For a study of early modern personifications of the continents, see the essays in Maryanne Cline Horowitz and Louise Arizzoli (eds.), *Bodies and Maps: Early Modern Personifications of the Continents* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

¹⁵ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia ovvero descrizione di diverse imagini cavate dall'antichità, et di propria inventione, trovate, et dichiarate* (Rome: Lepido Facii, 1603), 333.

the Christian princes who have been warring with one another.¹⁶ This drew on the trope of *Europa lamentans* or *Europa deplorans* [Europe lamenting], a popular contrast to the contemporaneous trope of *Europa triumphans* [Europe triumphant]. The former used the figure of a helpless woman to urge peace in the continent, whereas the latter offered a more bombastic image of political power with the figure of Europe as a queen. Ronsard himself employed a personification of Europe in his work:

L'Europe avoit les cheveux blonds,
Son teint sembloit aux fleurs décloës,
Les yeux verds, et deux vermeillons
Couronnoient ses lèvres de roses.

Sur sa robe furent portrais
Maints ports, maints fleuves, maintes isles,
Et de ses plis sourdoient espais
Les murs d'un million de villes.¹⁷

[Europe had blonde hair,
Her complexion resembled fully bloomed flowers,
Her eyes green, and vermillion
Crowned her rose lips.

Portrayed on her dress were
Many ports, many rivers, many isles,
And from the thick folds emerged
The walls of a million towns.]

Europe here is blonde in the Petrarchan tradition, although her eyes are not blue but green, signalling the fertility and verdancy that was supposed to mark out Europe from the other continents. The towns and ports are markers of the human cultivation of the natural world—another domain in which Europe was regarded as superior to the rest of the world.

The two stanzas are taken from one of a group of three odes, each addressed to a different son of Henri II, king of France from 1547 to 1559. Each imagines a son as the lord of a whole continent: Europe under the rule of the Dauphin; Asia Christianized by the Duke of Orléans, the future

¹⁶ A modern edition and translation into Spanish is Andrés Laguna, *Europa Heautentimorumene, es decir, que miseramente a sí misma se atormenta y lamenta su propia desgracia*, ed. Miguel Ángel González Manjarrés (Valladolid: Junta de Castilla y León, 2001). For a study of the text, see Ronny Kaiser, 'Tota caduca et dehiscens—Europe's Critical Condition in Andrés Laguna's *Europa* (1543)', in Nicolas Detering, Clementina Marsico and Isabella Walser-Bürgler (eds.), *Contesting Europe: Comparative Perspectives on Early Modern Discourses on Europe, 1400–1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 39–53 and Isabella Walser-Bürgler, 'Staging Oratory in Renaissance Germany: The Delivery of Andrés Laguna's *Europa Heautentimorumene* (1543)', *Rhetorica*, 38 (2020), 84–117.

¹⁷ Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 1, 746.

King Charles IX; and Africa governed by Henri's youngest son. This division of the world among Henri's sons echoes the Biblical division of the world among Noah's three sons, each of whom was conventionally understood as the progenitor of a different continent until the intellectual discovery of America challenged the tripartite model of the world.¹⁸ In this vision of French power and glory, Europe is figured as the top of a hierarchy of continents and France as the leading power. As such, this is one of the instances referred to above of the use of the word 'Europe' as a vehicle for articulating a French universal monarchy. Ronsard's personification of Europe is the conceit of the final ode in the series in which Africa and Europe bicker about which of them will have Henri's new-born son ('On vit autour de son berceau | Se battre l'Afrique et l'Europe').¹⁹ Europe argues that the son was born there ('il estoit nay chez elle'), whereas Africa claims that he is hers by destiny ('il estoit sien par destinée') and wins out ('la pauvre Europe [...] quitta l'enfant à l'Afrique').²⁰ The disagreement between Europe and Africa was adapted from the dispute between the two continents in the guise of women over the possession of the princess Europa in Moschus's second-century BC Greek version of the myth, one of the sources that was known in the Renaissance. This indicates how closely associated the geographical concept of Europe was with the Europa myth, the second tradition relating to depictions of Europe as a woman.

The Phoenician princess abducted by Jupiter and carried to Crete was widely regarded as the eponym of the continent, even if it was not always considered to be a plausible origin for the name.²¹ As François de Belleforest put it in his 1575 *Cosmographie universelle*: 'c'est tout fabuleux, que ce qu'on dit de celle dame Tyrienne, que on dit avoir esté ravie par Jupiter: car ce seroit une trop grande absurdité, de donner le nom de ceste-cy au pays Européen, veu qu'elle n'y fut onc' ['it's entirely fabulous what is said about this Tyrian lady who is said to have been ravished by Jupiter: because it would be too great an absurdity to give her name to the European land, considering that she had never been there']'.²² Like many of his contemporaries, Belleforest believed Crete to be a part of Asia, not Europe. The ambiguity about the myth and its relationship to the name of the continent helps to explain why the myth of Europa and the bull is absent from the abundant Neo-Latin writing on the geographical, political and cultural

¹⁸ The idea was traced back to Genesis 9. 18–19: 'And the sons of Noah, that went forth of the ark, were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth: and Ham is the father of Canaan. These are the three sons of Noah: and of them was the whole earth overspread'.

¹⁹ Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 1, 745.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 746.

²¹ On the origins of the name of the continent, see Peter H. Gommers, *Europe—What's in a Name* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001), 9–67.

²² François de Belleforest, *La Cosmographie universelle de tout le monde, augmentée, ornée et enrichie par F. de Belleforest*, 3 vols. (Paris: Michel Sonnius, 1575), Vol. 1, 27.

identity of Europe.²³ Nonetheless, the myth was well known in Renaissance art and literature, with paintings by Titian and Veronese, and poetic depictions by Poliziano and Rémy Belleau, as well as editions and commentaries of the classical works by Ovid, Horace and Moschus that feature the myth.²⁴ Whether the Phoenician princess really was believed to be the source of the continent's name or not, the myth was undoubtedly one of the mental associations that people had about the continent. That Belleforest raised the idea of Europa as the origin of the name only to dismiss it indicates how common the idea was and how closely associated the princess and the continent were in the reading public's imagination.

The historical veracity of this link was not the only question mark about the myth of Europa since the narrative itself is fundamentally ambivalent: is it a tale of love and romantic seduction, or is it about a violent rape?²⁵ The word 'abduction' ('enlèvement' in French), which has been frequently applied to the myth, evades the question of whether the events lead to a consensual betrothal or something else. In *La métamorphose d'Ovide figurée* of 1557, a series of verse adaptations of Ovid accompanied with illustrations, the woodcut paired with the written account of 'Europe ravie' stages the equivocation.²⁶ Europa is pictured departing the island sitting aside the back of the bull. Her expression is not clear, but she certainly does not look distressed, especially in comparison with Titian's slightly later painting (1559–62) in which Europa is sprawled across the bull, her clothes falling off. Likewise, Europa's two attendants in the woodcut seem more confused than anxious, their arms outstretched in what could be farewell or supplication. The text is more definitive as it describes the next phase of the story, placing emphasis on the lack of consent: 'Mais las! Deçue, en fin se vid ravie' ['But alas! Tricked, she was, in the end, ravished']. By contrast, in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Lucentio makes the myth a scene of courtly love: '[Europa's beauty] made great Jove to humble him to her hand | When with his knees he kiss'd the Cretan strand' (I. i. 169–170).²⁷ Similarly, Jupiter's love is foregrounded in the 1544 French translation of Peter Apian's *Cosmographie*,

²³ Walser-Bürgler, 'Europe without the Bull?' 81–103.

²⁴ On the history of the reception of the Europa myth, see Gommers, *Europe*, 70–191; Françoise Gange, *Le Mythe d'Europe dans la grande histoire: Du mythe au continent* (Tournai: La Renaissance du Livre, 2004); Luisa Passerini, *Il mito d'Europa: radici antiche per nuovi simboli* (Florence: Giunti, 2002); Maria Consiglia Alvino, Matteo Di Franco, Federica Rossetti and Gabriella Rubulotta (eds.), *Le voyage d'Europe au fil des siècles—Europa's Journey through the Ages: Histoire et réception d'un mythe antique* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021).

²⁵ On how Renaissance poets played with different interpretations of the myth, see Gaëlle Ginestet, "'She, whom Jove transported into Crete": Europa, between Consent and Rape', in Janice Valls-Russell, Agnès Lafont and Charlotte Coffin (eds.), *Interweaving Myths in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 149–72.

²⁶ Anon., *La métamorphose d'Ovide figurée* (Lyon: Jean de Tournes, 1557), 34. This work features 148 woodcut illustrations by Bernard Salomon, each one alongside a huitain by Barthélemy Aneau, Charles Fontaine and Jean Vauzelle.

²⁷ The amorous interpretation of the Europa myth has been associated with the courtly love tradition and the notion of 'Europe in love'. On this, see Luisa Passerini, *Europe in Love, Love in Europe: Imagination and Politics in Britain between the Wars* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 4–8.

a description of the features and locations of the cosmos, in which the Phoenician princess is cited as the origin of the name of Europe the continent. Where the Latin source text emphasises Europa's lack of consent, stating that she 'a Jove ex Africa *rapta* in Cretam abducta fuit' ['having been *seized* by Jupiter was removed from Africa to Crete'], the French translation provides a softer interpretation of the god by opting for a participle with a more benign meaning, claiming that Europa 'en Asie *aymee* de Juppiter fut transportee en Crete' ['*loved* by Jupiter in Asia was taken to Crete'].²⁸

In his work Ronsard makes use of a range of ideas about the myth that relate to Europa's status as a beautiful object of love and desire. He refers to Europa's sense of suffering in Crete in a 1567 *discours* addressed to Mary Stuart who, after her departure from France to Scotland, was separated by the sea like Europa:

Vous n'estes seule à qui ceste marine
S'est fait cognoistre envieuse et maligne:
Hero le scaït, Helles, et ceste-là
Que le Toreau desguisé viola.²⁹

[You are not the only one to whom the sea
Became known as invidious and malignant:
Hero understood it, Helle, and the one
Whom the disguised Bull violated.]

Here the myth is conveyed from the position of Europa as subject, focusing on the impact of Jupiter's violence on her. More frequently, though, Ronsard makes use of the myth as an amorous motif and considers Jupiter as subject and Europa as object. In Sonnet 20 of *Le Premier Livre des Amours* the poetic voice compares the love object to Europa and wishes that he could transform himself into a bull: 'Puis je voudroy en toreau blanchissant | Me transformer pour sur mon dos la prendre' ['Then I wish I could transform myself into a white bull so as to take her on my back'].³⁰ The violence in Ronsard's fantasy is more marked elsewhere: 'Las! que ne suis-je en ceste trope | Un Dieu caché sous un Toreau? | Je ravirois encore Europe' ['Alas, why can I not be in this troop a god hidden under a bull? I would snatch Europa away again'].³¹ In a further example, it is the eroticism of the myth

²⁸ The emphases in italics are mine. Petrus Apianus, *Cosmographicus liber* (Landshut: Johann Weissenburger, 1524), fol. 65v; *La Cosmographie de Pierre Apian, livre tresutile, traictant de toutes les regions et pays du monde par artifice Astronomicque, nouvellement traduit de Latin en François. Et par Gemma Frison Mathématicien et Docteur en Médecine de Louvain corrigé* (Antwerp: Gregoire Bonte, 1544), fol. 30v. The change from Africa to Asia is testament to the geographical ambiguity of the myth.

²⁹ Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 2, 664. In the 1578 edition, Ronsard changed the final line to 'Que le Toreau sur sa croupe en-vola' ['Whom the Bull stole on his back'], which softens Jupiter's cruelty but does not efface it.

³⁰ Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 1, 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 869.

that is emphasized: ‘S’Europe avoit l’estomach aussi beau, | Sage tu pris le masque d’un toreau, | Bon Jupiter pour traverser les ondes’ [‘If Europa had a breast so sweet, you were wise to put on the mask of a bull, Great Jupiter, to pass over the waves’].³² As well as presenting Jupiter as someone to be emulated, Ronsard also depicts him as a potential rival:

Je pensois voir Europe sur la mer,
Et tous les vents en ton voile enfermer,
Tremblant de peur te regardant si belle,
Que quelque Dieu ne te ravist aux Cieux.³³

[I thought I saw Europa on the sea,
And all the winds enclosed in your veil,
Trembling with fear that, seeing you so beautiful,
Some God would carry you off to the Heavens.]

The poetic voice compares the beloved to Europa and alters the narrative to imagine Jupiter falling for her when he sees her crossing the sea. While the starting point for each reference to the myth in Ronsard’s poetry is Europa’s beauty, a variety of different associations emerge. Europa can be subject or object; her emotions can be considered or ignored. The story can be framed as more amorous than sexual and vice versa. Jupiter’s trickery and violence can be acknowledged or effaced. As in Renaissance culture more widely, the Europa myth in Ronsard’s work is ambivalent: it is a love story and it is a rape story; it is titillating and it is tragic.³⁴

Having surveyed contemporary uses of personifications of Europe and the Europa myth, I return now to the question of whether in Renaissance writing the word ‘Europe’ could have been read as a woman, as well as the continent. More specifically, are there any grounds for reading the example of Ronsard’s ‘une Europe assaillir’ in the *Discours de l’alteration et change des choses humaines* as a woman? The first point to note is the use of the indefinite article: ‘une Europe’, a Europe. Elsewhere in his poetry Ronsard precedes the noun ‘Europe’ with either a definite article—as with ‘L’Europe avoit les cheveux blonds’—or no article. In referring to the threat the Ottoman Empire poses to the continent, he uses both the definite article and no article. In a poem addressed to Charles IX following the 1564 siege of Malta there is an accompanying definite article:

³² *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 328.

³⁴ For an overview of the roles of mythology in Ronsard’s poetry see Terence Cave, ‘Ronsard’s Mythological Universe’, in Terence Cave (ed.), *Ronsard the Poet* (London: Methuen, 1973), 159–208; see also Ann Moss, *Poetry and Fable: Studies in Mythological Narrative in Sixteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 118–50.

Comme Alexandre, aurez l'ame animée
 Du chaud desir de conduire une armée
 Outre l'Europe.³⁵

[Like Alexander, you will have a spirit inspired
 By the fervent desire to lead an army
 Beyond Europe.]

By contrast, an article is not used in the 1584 *Discours ou dialogue entre les Muses deslogées, et Ronsard*:

Mais le barbare Turc de tout victorieux,
 Ayant vaincu l'Asie et l'Afrique, et d'Europe
 La meilleure partie.³⁶

[But the barbarous Turk is victorious over all,
 Having vanquished Asia and Africa, and of Europe
 The worthier part.]

The indefinite article in 'une Europe assaillir' is thus unusual. Though it suits the metrical scheme of the poem, it also suggests Europe not as a category—that is, the only one—but as a type. In other words, the existence of a Europe suggests the existence of other Europes, which is clearly more suitable for a person than for a continent.

A second reason for reading a woman in this example is the use elsewhere of the verb of which 'Europe' is the object, 'assaillir' ['to assail'], in relation to women. Although the word 'assaillir' was found mostly in a military context in this period, there was use of military metaphors to refer to relations between men and women, such as in Étienne Pasquier's amorous dialogue *Le Monophile* (1554): 'à la femme est reservée la liberté de se defendre, et à l'homme la puissance de l'assaillir' ['to woman is reserved the freedom to defend herself, and to man the power to assail her'].³⁷ The verb, then, had the potential to signify sexual violence, an association that, through the juxtaposition of 'Europe' with 'assaillir', both recalls and is recalled by the Europa myth. The relevance of the myth to readings of the poem is above all underscored by the focus on change and flux in the *Discours*, the main source of which is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.³⁸ Equally, in the specific example of 'une Europe assaillir' the westward expansion of the Ottoman Empire that Ronsard is describing parallels the forced movement from east to west of the mythical Europa. The dual military and sexual

³⁵ Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 2, 47.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁷ Estienne Pasquier, *Le Monophile* (Paris: Estienne Groulleau, 1554), fol. 135r.

³⁸ For a study of Ronsard's philosophical vision in the *Discours*, see Malcolm Quainton, *Ronsard's Ordered Chaos: Visions of Flux and Stability in the Poetry of Pierre de Ronsard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 31–7.

significations of 'assailir' are appropriate to the Ottoman context, given that there was a prominent stereotype of the Ottomans as sexual aggressors; for instance, the Sultan Mehmed II was said to have raped a girl on the high altar of the Hagia Sophia during the conquest of Constantinople.³⁹

A further reason for understanding Europe as both woman and continent in Ronsard's verse is the interconnectedness of discourses about Europe. As indicated above, the geographical discourse of Europe had rich cultural and political associations. The term was not neutral but denoted a perceived superiority that was articulated again and again as a commonplace in geographical descriptions of Europe, presenting the continent as a *locus amoenus*. The German scholar Sebastian Münster's description in his bestselling *Cosmographia* is typical:

Est itaque Europa regio reliquis orbis partibus minor, sed populosissima, fertilissima atque cultissima [...] Nam in Europa non inveniuntur tam vastae solitudines, tam steriles arenae et tam ingens calor omnia exurens ut in Africa. Nullus est locus aut regio in Europa tam abiecta, in qua homines sibi non fecerint mansiones, et ubi vitae necessaria non commode sibi parare queant.⁴⁰

[So Europe is a smaller region of the world than the other parts, but the most populous, the most fertile and the most cultivated [...] For in Europe there are not found wastelands so empty, deserts so barren and heat so powerful as to burn everything as there are in Africa. There is no place or region in Europe so abandoned, in which people do not build homes for themselves, and in which they cannot conveniently acquire the necessities of life for themselves.]

The image of Europe as a queen articulated this sense of superiority. Cartographic depictions which incorporated this image are testament to the intertwined nature of the different threads of thinking about Europe in this period. Indeed, the two traditions of personified Europe and the Europa myth, though different, were not separate from one another.⁴¹ In *De Europae Virginis, Tauro insidentis, topographica atque historica descriptione* of 1588, Michael Eitzinger included an anthropomorphic map of Europe as a queen riding a bull, thereby drawing the two traditions together in the depiction of the mythical Europa as the queen of the continent.⁴² In this image, the crowned and smiling Europe/Europa is a *femme forte*, confidently straddling the bull and holding a sceptre aloft, conveying power and control in line with the *Europa*

³⁹ On anti-Ottoman stereotypes in the period, see Robert Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent: The Renaissance Image of the Turk, 1453–1517* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969); Hankins, 'Renaissance Crusaders'; Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). On the accusation of rape against Sultan Mehmed, see Bisaha, 63–4.

⁴⁰ Sebastian Münster, *Cosmographiae universalis libri VI* (Basel: Heinrich Petri, 1550), 40.

⁴¹ Walser-Bürgler argues that humanists adopted personifications of Europe in place of Europa due to the ambiguities of the ancient myth: 'Europe without the Bull?' 92–3.

⁴² Michael Eitzinger, *De Europae Virginis, Tauro insidentis, topographica atque historica descriptione* (Cologne: Gottfried van Kempen, 1588). On the image, see Wintle, *The Image of Europe*, 250–1.

triumphans trope. It offers a political and cultural statement about the continent's place in the world, just as the *Europa lamentans* trope was used elsewhere to offer comment on war and peace. The conception of Europe embodied as a woman was an important vehicle for the communication of such ideas. As a woman—often explicitly a virgin—Europe signified purity and was therefore concretized as an object both of desire and of protection. Since ideas about Europe were mutually reinforcing and representations of the continent as queen and mythical princess were entwined with these ideas, it almost becomes necessary to ask why a reader encountering the word 'Europe' would not imagine a woman.⁴³

Reading Europe in Ronsard's *Discours de l'alteration et change des choses humaines* as a woman heightens the danger posed by the Ottomans since it adds a sexual menace to the more overt political and cultural threat. The danger is underscored by the territorial extent of the Ottoman Empire, emphasised in the description of 'Le Turc' as 'seigneur de tant de villes fieres, | De tant de mers, de ports et de rivieres'. This also presents a cultural challenge since, as Münster's sketch of the continent shows, one of the features that was supposed to distinguish Europe as an autonomous space was human settlement and cultivation of the land. With the reference to towns and ports, the suggestion in Ronsard's verse is that the Turks, who are portrayed as originating from outside of Europe, have acquired some of these markers of superiority. In this way, Ronsard is articulating a particular idea of Europe, one that is threatened from without by the Ottoman Empire. The juxtaposition of the word 'Europe' with the verb 'assaillir' sexualizes the danger through allusion to the traditions of female personification. For the largely male Renaissance readership, this sexualization of the Ottoman threat would enhance the emotional impact of the lines. The female body of Europe is figured as an object of male desire and force in need of protection from the Ottoman attack. The trait of virginity promoted in personifications of Europe and through association with the mythical Europa further heightens the stimulus to protect her. The interplay of desire, force and protection resembles the scene mentioned above in which Ronsard imagines his beloved as Europa taken away by Jupiter. The dynamic is the same here, albeit the feared rival who might seize Europe is the Ottoman Empire.

It is the violent eroticism of the image, created by the verb 'assaillir', that makes the Europa myth so relevant to a reading of the verse. The mythological narrative can be separated into three chronological periods: (1) the encounter between Europa and the bull; (2) the journey over the sea and (3) sexual consummation, whether voluntary or not, in Crete. The verb 'assaillir' suggests that Europe is at the mid-point of the story: Europe is in the

⁴³ Wolfgang Schmale has argued that the sixteenth century was the high point for representations of Europe the continent as a woman, and that the figuration of Europe as a woman was a carnal gendered discourse intended for the male gaze to provoke sensual reactions: 'Europa—die weibliche Form', *L'Homme. Zeitschrift für Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft*, 11 (2000), 211–33.

process of being assailed by the Turks, but the ending is still to be written. As such, Ronsard's poem serves as a warning to respond to the danger, for though it offers the consolation that the Ottoman Empire must 's'amoindrir et faillir', the temporal marker 'quelque jour' is notably vague. The fall may well come too late for Europe. Indeed, the *Discours* as a whole is concerned above all with change and death, and the fear for Europe is framed within the context of fear for France and the bloody religious civil wars.⁴⁴ In common with other sixteenth-century works decrying internecine conflict in Christian Europe, Ronsard in this poem offers war against the Turks as an alternative: 'Et vaudroit mieux faire bien loin la guerre | Aux Sarrasins, qu'en nostre propre terre' ['And it would be much better to wage war far away against the Saracens than in our own land'].⁴⁵ Both France and Europe face an existential threat and require human intervention.

The image of Europe used in the *Discours* to illustrate this argument is a passive one, within the tradition of *Europa deplorans* rather than *Europa triumphans*. In representing the incursion by the Ottomans against the body of Europe, the verse offers a political critique of the state of the continent. Europe needs to be saved but she is not a *femme forte* who can save herself. France also, as the poem presents it, needs saving, yet has the capacity to save itself. Where Europe is passive, France and the French are active. This sentiment is made more explicit in poems where Ronsard uses the word 'Europe' in conjunction with the notion of French universal monarchy. A 1578 sonnet addressed to Henri III opens with the claim that 'L'Europe est trop petite, et l'Asie et l'Afrique, | Pour toy qui te verras de tout le monde Roy' ['Europe is too small, and Asia and Africa, for you who will see yourself as king of the whole world'] and closes with a reference to Jupiter: 'Jupiter et Henry l'Univers partiront, | L'un Empereur du Ciel et l'autre de la Terre.' ['Jupiter and Henry will share the Universe, one the Emperor of Heaven and the other of Earth.']⁴⁶ The comparison between Jupiter and Henri is not unusual; it is a relatively frequent rhetorical move on the part of Ronsard to compare a French king to Jupiter. Doing so in a poem that also includes the word 'Europe'—and this sonnet is not the only one to do so—is striking, a further indication that the myth of Europa and the bull was evoked by reference to the continent.⁴⁷ It suggests the associations of the myth are related to Ronsard's conception of the continent in that the passivity of Europe and the agency of the French king parallel the passivity of the princess Europa faced with the agency of Jupiter. The subject/object positions and the male/female dynamic of the myth are key to the allusion.

⁴⁴ See Quainton, *Ronsard's Ordered Chaos*, 31–7.

⁴⁵ Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. 2, 749.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 469.

⁴⁷ The conjunction of the idea of French universal monarchy with both the word 'Europe' and reference to Jupiter also occurs in 'Si les souhaits des hommes avoient lieu' (Vol. 2, 47), a poem addressed to Charles IX, and *Hymne de Henry deuxiesme de ce nom* (Vol. 2, 467).

In the political imagination, Europe as woman is liable to male conquest in the manner of the figure of Europa as used elsewhere by Ronsard in the poetic voice's amorous imagination of sexual consummation. Although Europe personified could be an image of glory (*triumphans*) or victimhood (*deplorans*), the mythical princess offered an embodiment of passivity. Whereas the idea of Europe as a unity was conveyed frequently in Neo-Latin writing, the conception of Europe in early modern vernaculars was much more ambivalent, and so the meanings attached to the Europa myth may well have been more valuable in vernacular literature praising the nation.⁴⁸ Although a passive Europa might not offer a writer a positive vision of a powerful continent, as an object of male conquest she could prove more useful in a vision like Ronsard's of one nation aspiring to universal monarchy with a king analogous to Jupiter who will pacify Europe and thereby save her from the Ottoman threat. The ambiguity of the myth is vital to this function in Ronsard's verse, for while the suggestion of rape provokes anxieties about the Ottoman Sultan when he is figured as assailing Europe, the more amorous connotations can resonate when it is the French monarch who is positioned as Jupiter.⁴⁹

A variety of discourses on Europe circulated in the early modern period, and commentary on the continent was not confined to geographical or political works.⁵⁰ Given the polysemous nature of the word 'Europe', readers who encountered the term would bring a cluster of associations and mental connections to bear on their interpretation, and not only when engaging with the works of allusive poets such as Ronsard, whose educated readers were primed to make intertextual connections. The possibilities of the dynamic interplay of myth, personification and geographical space generated enriched

⁴⁸ On ideas of Europe in Neo-Latin writing see Isabella Walser-Bürgler, *Europe and Europeanness in Early Modern Latin Literature*. *Fuitne Europa tunc unita?* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); on German writing see Nicolas Detering, *Krise und Kontinent: Die Entstehung der Deutschen Europa-Literatur in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2017); on French writing see Niall Oddy, 'Conflicts of Meaning: the Word *Europe* in Sixteenth-Century French Writing', in Nicolas Detering, Clementina Marsico and Isabella Walser-Bürgler (eds.), *Contesting Europe: Comparative Perspectives on Early Modern Discourses on Europe, 1400–1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 174–90.

⁴⁹ An example of the amorous relationship between a personified Europe and a monarch is Johann Lauterbach's *Europa Eidyllion* (1558), in which Europe is depicted as the bride of Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I. On this, see Isabella Walser-Bürgler, '*Europa Exultans*: The Personification of Europe as a Representation of the Habsburg Universal Monarchy in Johann Lauterbach's Pastoral Poem *Europa Eidyllion* (1558)', *Lias*, 45 (2018), 1–43.

⁵⁰ On the diversity of discourses on Europe in the early modern period, see the contributions in Nicolas Detering, Clementina Marsico and Isabella Walser-Bürgler (eds.), *Contesting Europe: Comparative Perspectives on Early Modern Discourses on Europe, 1400–1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2019) and Anthony Molho and Diogo Ramada Curto (eds.), *Finding Europe: Discourses on Margins, Communities, Images* (New York: Berghahn, 2007). An outline of the different discourses on Europe can be found in Walser-Bürgler, *Europe and Europeanness in Early Modern Latin Literature*, 31–116.

meanings and uses of the signifier 'Europe' to which we should be attentive. Reading the continent as a woman, as this article has done, has the potential to identify fresh interpretations of the term, not just as it was used in French but also in other vernaculars and in Neo-Latin, and therefore deepen our understanding of the ways in which the continent of Europe was imagined as a geographical, political and cultural entity.

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Abstract

Renaissance readers were familiar with two traditions of visualizing the continent of Europe as a woman: the myth of Europa and the bull, and personifications of Europe as a queen. This article examines the impact of these traditions on the geographical, political and cultural discourses of Europe through the example of the French poet Ronsard's *Discours de l'alteration et change des choses humaines*. It argues that the reference in the *Discours* to the Ottoman Empire assailing Europe the continent would evoke for readers a female figure. The article conducts an analysis of the poem in light of this, exploring how the spectre of sexual violence associated with the Europa myth enhances the political critique of the Ottoman Empire in the *Discours*. As such, the article shows how the dynamic interplay of myth, personification and geographical space enriched the meanings and associations of the signifier 'Europe'. In doing so, it articulates a method for approaching how 'Europe' was used and understood in Renaissance texts.