CHAPTER 7

Hearts on Fire: Compassion and Love in Nicolas Houel's *Traité de la Charité chrétienne*

*Susan Broomhall*

In 1578 Nicolas Houel, an apothecary with contacts at the French court, prepared a richly illustrated manuscript, the *Traité de la Charité chrétienne*, to present to Henri III. The work was a key tool in Houel's campaign to secure funds for his charitable institution, the Maison de la Charité chrétienne. The Maison aimed to provide orphan boys with pharmaceutical training, and to offer the fruits of their labours, drawn from its medicinal garden, freely to Paris's poor and needy. This was, however, just the first stage in an ambitious vision; Houel also hoped to provide education in the liberal arts, schooling for girls, and respite for the ill and elderly. Through this manuscript—one of a series of texts targeting different donor groups—Houel hoped to inspire the king, and the French Catholic citizens of Paris, to support and expand his facility. He provoked readers by appealing to a variety of motivations, including even national pride, but chief among them were fellow feeling, compassion, and love. Here, Houel articulated in textual and visual form emotions that would drive his vision forward, and the organ in which they were located: the heart.

This chapter explores the role of emotions—love and compassion in particular—in Houel's attempt to seek patronage for the Maison. If what was to drive both monarch and citizens to participate was the heart though, the benefits that Houel stressed might accrue from their charitable acts concerned the mind and the soul. They would produce practical gains for Parisian society, promising order in social relations between richer and poorer inhabitants of the shared urban space, and they would also produce spiritual benefits, since these devotional practices would enable faithful Catholics to order their souls in relation to God. This essay analyses how an educated man from the professional ranks of sixteenth-century Paris sought to convey this message and his vision, negotiating the attentions, interests and identities of his multiple and varied audiences—from kings and queens to the everyday women and men of Paris.

I examine Houel's strategy through the texts and images that he devised and composed in the *Traité de la Charité chrétienne*, teasing out in particular his textual and visual performance of emotional acts, expressions and gestures.
in the pursuit of his vision. The composition was inflected by Houel’s understanding of selfhood and community, and their relationship to social status, gender, and faith. It was also shaped by his comprehension of the theology and politics of contemporary Catholic devotional practices. Finally, it was framed by his conceptualisation of the emotions, and particularly their power to drive human behaviour. These ideas informed Houel’s work and reflected how he understood social relations in a sixteenth-century city experiencing the fervour of new ascetic and penitential practices of Catholic renewal; that is, the dynamics of individuals and communities in relation to each other and to the divine, which were critical to emotional states such as pity, compassion and love.

Houel’s Academy of All Piety and Science

Nicolas Houel has been studied by historians of pharmacy, art, and charity, and this diverse attention reflects the multifaceted nature of his endeavours.1