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Commentary on Translating Heinrich Heine, Charles Baudelaire, and Martial

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Commentary

For “A Woman” I wished to reproduce the short lines and tight rhyme scheme of this poem and to use a bouncy iambic tetrameter for ironic contrast to the cynicism of the content. The challenge in translating this poem is to get “laughed” at the end of each stanza, although the word has few useful rhymes in English. As the man’s situation becomes direr, the woman’s laugh seems more heartless. By using “laughed away” instead, I opened up a wider range of possible rhymes and suggested continuing laughter. *Spitzbüb*in can mean “swindler” or “hussy,” but the reference to “bed” in stanza one suggested to me that the sexual nature of the deceit should be emphasized. Similarly, *Schelmenstreiche* or “roguish tricks” could refer to the man’s thieving, but if the woman is throwing herself on the bed in the next line, it could also be a euphemism for sexual activity. In the last stanza, “at six,” “at seven,” and “at eight” set up an inexorable progression of events, so I wished to make the sequence parallel to emphasize that.

In “The Cat” I chose to make the lines all iambic tetrameter, instead of alternating ten syllables and eight syllables as Baudelaire does. Alternating lines of pentameter and tetrameter would have come close to Baudelaire’s approach, but that particular pattern is quite rare in English, and I felt more comfortable sticking with all-tetrameter lines. Shorter lines tend to sound more lyrical; longer ones, more talky. The lyrical mode seemed to fit this poem better. I did mix perfect rhymes with slant rhymes as a way of suggesting the slightly off-balance quality of the French lines, while also enabling me to stick closer to the meaning than I would with only perfect rhymes. French verse counts syllables, but English meter is stress-based. I used iambic tetrameter, which has four stresses per line, but can vary in syllable count from seven to nine. To avoid monotony in iambic verse, it is essential to vary the meter reasonably often with pauses created by punctuation within the line and with occasional metrical substitutions, such as a trochee (a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable) in place of an iamb (at the beginning of line seven and after the first comma in line eleven); a headless iamb (one that lacks the unstressed syllable, such as the one at the beginning of line five); a double iamb (two unstressed syllables followed by two stressed syllables, as at the beginning of line fourteen); or an anapest (two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable, in the last foot of the last line). The substitutions make the verse more conversational, but also

more musical. Although at the beginning of line seven “and sense” would be closer to the French wording than “sensing” is, the latter creates a more elegant rhythm in the line without changing the meaning significantly.

For Martial 11.99 I have made small changes such as calling a tunic a “dress” and conflating the names “Symplegades” and “Cyanean Rocks” into the better-known term “Clashing Rocks,” which describes what the legendary rocks did. While that change loses the comically inflated diction, it gains intelligibility to contemporary readers. I have dropped the repetition of Lesbia’s name as unnecessary, and have added rhyme in alternate lines to add impact to the jokes. Part of the humor of the poem lies in the contrast between the erudite mythical references (Clashing Rocks) and the coarse humor of the obscene terms (*culi* for “ass” and *pedicant* for “bugger”), as well as the impossibility of Martial’s proposed solution for Lesbia’s problem.

Martial 2.53 alludes to the Roman client-patron relationship, in which poor men would dance attendance on wealthy patrons in order to be rewarded with a small monetary dole, invitations to dinner, and gifts at holidays. The first line might suggest that Maximus is a slave who wants to be free, but the facts that he drinks wine, pays prostitutes, and has his own home suggest that he is merely poor. Martial consistently refers to the wine of Veii as a cheap wine, and its undesirability can be inferred from the context. The name “Cinna” is not meant to refer to a specific individual (Martial denies that he targets actual people in his epigrams). “Cinna” is just a common Roman name, and rich showoffs of this sort would have been equally common. Martial often jokes about his own poverty, as in his self-deprecatory allusion to his inferior toga. *Venus* in the seventh line of the Latin does not refer here to the goddess of love; instead the word is used metaphorically to denote a sex partner, in this case a whore. I have omitted an equivalent for *plebeia* (meaning “common”) because *gemino asse* (“two coins of low value”), which I translated as “two-bit,” suggests that the whore is both cheap and common. Parthia, a Near Eastern country that traditionally was Rome’s enemy, was known for its luxury. Martial does not rhyme (nor did other poets of his time) but English light verse traditionally does rhyme, and the rhymes add punch to the jokes. I tend to rhyme every other line, however, to keep the need to rhyme from distorting the meaning much. I end with a rhymed couplet to add closure. Martial’s poem is written in elegiac couplets, in which a line of dactylic hexameter is followed by one of dactylic

pentameter. But dactylic meter is rare in English, and hexameters tend to drag, so I have written the whole poem in iambic pentameter, which better fits the rhythms of English and sounds natural and conversational.