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Four poems from *Sonnets pour Hélène* by Pierre de Ronsard

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Ann Lauinger
Four Sonnets from Ronsard

Pierre de Ronsard
Sonnets pour Hélène

Whoever reads me, fool for love or wise

11. 1

Whoever reads me, fool for love or wise,
and sees my grizzled head ought not to wonder
I write of love. Old firewood that lies
half-burnt hides yet a spark in the gray cinder.
Green wood, blown on, is hardly coaxed to light;
with no coaxing, the dry will always burn.
The Moon was wooed and won with fleece of white;
her old Tithonus was not despised by Dawn.
Reader, I don't aspire to Plato's school
(to preach us virtue, but the practice shun)
nor to the lethal daring of the utter fool,
stubborn Icarus or clumsy Phaethon.
Yet without playing charioteer or high-flier,
I burn and drown myself in my own desire.

These long winter nights, when round its circuit ll. 42

These long winter nights, when round its circuit,
the idle moon so slowly turns her car,
when the cock heralds break of day so late,
and to care-filled minds a night feels like a year,
I'd die of grief, but for your doubtful form,
which lightens my love's burden through a cheat
and, settling wholly naked in my arms,
misleads me with a lying joy so sweet.
The real you is savage, proudly cruel.
In private, I enjoy the seeming you,
and, pleased by your counterfeit in full,
I drowse at peace beside your shade. It's true,
kind sleep's deceit abuses my lover's pain:
such loving self-abuse, I count as gain.

I do not wish my heart's jailer dead

l. 62

I do not wish my heart's jailer dead.
However, Love, if only to avenge
the six years of my weeping, do this: change
her, seed thickly with snowy hairs that head.
If you wish it, vengeance is near at hand;
you shorten years, you can linger them out.
Don't suffer her, in your own camp, to flout
your old brawler. Age her, heed my demand.
She glories in her curls, her youth's fresh green,
the thousand darts she harbors in her keen
eyes that, glancing, launch them in every breast.
Helen, why do you pride yourself on something,
beauty, which is no more than wind, a nothing?
Beauty's roses scarcely the day outlast.

I'd mind less, if you only took account

11.65

I'd mind less, if you only took account
of my pains, the stairs I count and re-count often,
the sum to the palace summit I must mount
to reach your rooms: Olympus was not so lofty!
At each visit, sweat courses down my face;
my pulse races; breathless, I puff and pant,
and all to hear your refusal, in a voice
full of disdain and cold pride—a torment.
Goddess-like, you're throned in the most high;
I can't ascend your heaven: I'm no god.
I'll send my devout heart up to your sky,
lamenting as usual, but from the yard.
To Jove in heaven, that's how we men pray,
keeping firmly on earth our feet of clay.

Commentary

In translating Ronsard's *Sonnets pour Hélène* I hoped not so much to reproduce the exact structure and rhyme-scheme as to capture the astonishing variety of tone Ronsard achieves even in a single sonnet. This variety is all the more remarkable, since Ronsard's style in these sonnets is limpid and straightforward, with lines that are syntactically simple and end-stopped more often than not.

Ronsard's sonnets are written in alexandrines and are Petrarchan in form: an octave rhyming *abba abba*, a sestet more freely organized around two or three new end-rhymes. My translation substitutes iambic pentameter and the familiar Shakespearean three quatrains and couplet—for English-language readers the prototype of the love sonnet—and employs occasional half-rhymes. Practically speaking, the stress patterns of English make hexameter lines feel much heavier in English than in French; and the relative poverty of rhymes in English, compared to the romance languages, makes the Petrarchan octave on only two rhymes more constraining in English. However, I hope the half-rhymes I've used are not just an evasion of constraint but help to recreate the nimble, even colloquial, voice of Ronsard.

Whoever reads me, fool for love or wise

The story of how Pan seduced the Moon by luring her into the woods with a white fleece (disguising himself as a ram?) is found in Vergil's Third *Georgic*:

Munere sic niveo lanae, si credere dignum est,
Pan deus Arcadiae captam te, Luna, fefellit,
In nemora alta vocans; nec tu aspernata vocantem. (391-3)

[Thus with a prize of snow-white wool, if the story is worth believing, Pan, the god of Arcadia, tricked and caught you, Luna, calling from the deep woods; nor did you spurn him when he called.]

These long winter nights, when round its circuit

This witty and self-mocking sonnet is directly indebted to one of the best-known of Ovid's *Amores*, "Aestus erat, mediamque dies exegerat horam" ["It was hot, and deep mid-afternoon"] (I. 5), in which the speaker's summer afternoon nap is deliciously interrupted by the unexpected appearance of Corinna, and all proceeds just as he could have wished it. Ronsard jokingly reverses Ovid's poem in several ways. Here, the setting is not summer but winter, not day but night, and the speaker is insomniac. Where Ovid's poem balances beautifully our uncertainty as to whether the experience was real, Ronsard clearly depicts an erotic dream. The speaker falls for the fake Hélène, and so the sonnet is self-mockery—or rather, mock self-mockery, since, as Ovid everywhere maintains, fake is good. Lie to me, Ovid begs (*Amores* I. 4 and III. 14), and he promises to collude in the lies his lover will tell to cover up her infidelities. In this sonnet too, Ronsard collaborates happily in his self-deceit and enjoys its fruits. The play on the word "abuse" in the final couplet of the translation renders the double-entendre of Ronsard's last two lines: "...*abuse* par le faux.../ *S'abuser* en amour..."). This translation doesn't fully capture the mimetic skill of Ronsard's first two lines, with their repetitions of sound and meaning creating the slow passage of the night ("Ces longues nuicts d'hiver, où la Lune ocieuse / *Tourne* si lentement son char *tout à l'*entour").

I do not wish my heart's jailer dead

I have followed the envelope structure of Ronsard's octave but allowed myself four rhymes, not two.

"Your old brawler" (8) is an attempt to render the pejorative sense of *soudart*: a career soldier—thus, a ruffian or desperado, according to Renaissance popular opinion (an opinion not without empirical basis at the time). Ovid's *Amores* is the source of the military metaphor for Cupid and the lover.

The trope of the stand-offish beloved getting her or his comeuppance with age is familiar, most notably perhaps in Horace's *Odes* (see I. 25, IV. 10, IV. 13), and is often paired with the exhortation to seize the day, as in the most famous of the *Son-*

nets for Hélène, “Quand vous serez bien vieille” (II. 43). Here, however, *les roses* are the sonnet’s final words; left unplucked, they stand simply as an emblem of the brevity of mortal beauty and a rebuke to vanity.

I'd mind less, if you only took account

A jokey sonnet, whose ironic wit targets both the lady and the poet-lover. Hélène’s goddess-like elevation is actually a palace apartment up many flights of stairs, and the poet’s ascent to her hyperbolically Olympian abode is a catalog of his corporeal ills: a fine romance!

The first two lines of the original (“...si tu *contois* ma peine,/ De *conter* tes degrez *recontez* tant de fois”) pun multiply on the repeated verb, which can mean to enumerate, to take account of, and to recount or narrate; and at the root of which lurks a bawdy pun. I’ve tried in the first three lines of the translation to recreate Ronsard’s sound repetitions and suggestiveness by additional repetitions and the exploitation of a different pun, based on his *sommet* (summit) in line 3. The last two lines of this sonnet are densely linked in the French by diction and sound: “Ainsi les hommes font à Jupiter priere:/ Les hommes sont en terre, et Jupiter aux cieux.” My free translation eliminates the repeated phrases but adds “feet of clay” to convey the mocking self-deprecation of the original.

N.B. French quotations above follow the source text I’ve used, in which some words lack their modern accents: Ronsard, Pierre de. *Oeuvres Complètes*. Edited by Gustave Cohen, vol. 1, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade-Éditions Gallimard, 1950, pp. 243, 259, 241, 268–69.