

'OUT OF TUNE AND HARSH'

As a young teenager I studied the part of Ophelia for the school play. I was chosen partly for my soprano voice, for Ophelia sings several songs, some of which still circle in my brain 'How should I my true love know/from another one?/By his cockle hat and staff/And his sandal shoon' I chirped in A minor. When Hamlet feigns madness, his music sounds 'out of tune and harsh' to Ophelia. And this is what happened when I tried to translate the poem 'Scheppinge' by the Dutch poet Jacobus Revius (1586–1658).

The fact that I need to find out what various parts of the lute are called in English is only a slight stumbling block, as such information can now be accessed by Googling. The exception to this is 'met clavieren betrecken', where I am stuck for sensible dictionary definitions. Since the world is compared to a lute that is played on by God, the only sensible thing God can have done to prepare for playing is to **string** it. So I have had to guess that this is what the first two lines are referring to. The **bass** strings and the quint are some of the strings later referred to; the others are called 'the rest'. The strings of the lute, I discover, are arranged in what are called 'courses', usually of two strings each, though the highest-pitched course usually consists of a single string. This is known as the quint, or the **chanterelle**. The chanterelle is the first course and this means that an 8-course Renaissance lute usually has 15 strings. In the later Baroque lute, the first two courses could have single strings, so that a 13-course Baroque lute would probably have 24 strings (see: http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_many_strings_does_a_lute_have). Each course in the poem is an aspect of God's creation, e.g. earth, sea, sky, trees, animals. The other parts of the lute mentioned can be seen from a website showing a lute-builder at work. The **bowl** is the body of the lute; the **ribs** are the alternate strips of different woods applied to the back of the bowl that give it a light-dark pattern, sometimes with thin black strips in-between; the **rose** is the round aperture covered with beautiful fretwork that lets out the sound. There are sometimes two of them, one smaller than the other – hence the 'sun and moon'.

The problem with Revius' poem is that its 'music' does not fit the English language. This has to do with two things: the frequency of feminine rhymes, and the sheer length of the lines. I am used to dealing with sonnets that alternate between 10 and 11 syllables, but this one has 12 and 13. Trying to retain the rhyme scheme (except for allowing myself a CDDC in lines 5–8) and the syllable count gave me a poem that sounded out of tune and harsh. I ended up with the usual excess of words ending in –ING, adding 'now', 'then', 'all' and similar 'line-extenders'. I had a first line ending in 'world as' (so that 'A lute' could start line 2) rhyming with 'are whirling' in line 4, for example. And 'roaring' for line 5 rhyming with 'of every calling' in line 8. The translation lurched along without any poise or pulse.

The Dutch sonnet tradition (or the Danish or German for that matter) often faithfully adheres to its Italian template, and can afford to do so, since it has plenty of words ending on a weak syllable. The English sonnet, however,

mutated during the 16th century as regards both form and content. Most of the 11-syllable lines had become 10-syllable lines by Shakespeare's time, although he was not averse to throwing in some pairs of 11-syllable lines in some of his sonnets. [And the down-to-earth English poets found worshipping idealised women on pedestals a waste of time and brought them down to earth, sometimes even parodying the Italian paeon of praise (e.g. 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun').] The English sonneteers gradually replaced the harmonious outward-inward journey of the two halves of the octet ABBA ABBA (sometimes compared to the intake and outlet of air) and the often circular development of the sestet CDE EDC by, in Shakespeare's case, a gradual build-up of dramatic tension: ABAB CDCD EFEF, capped by the dénouement of the final couplet GG (e.g. 'That time of year thou mayst in me behold...' '...This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong/To love that well which thou must leave ere long').

Revius has a very clear construction that has similarities with both traditions: lines 1–2, what God has done; lines 3–8, the nature of the comparison in a neutral present; lines 9–11, what God the lutenist did, in the past tense; lines 12–14, the unenviable position of man, unless God decides to be merciful. In these final three lines, Revius reverts to an 'eternal' present.

Translating such a poem as this means that I have to straddle two traditions. Should I try and retain the form of the Dutch poem unaltered (i.e. reproduce all the lines with 13 syllables), or I can graft onto the poem enough of the English tradition qua form that it sounds, more or less, like a recognisable English sonnet? What is fidelity in a translation? Is it slavishly adhering to the form of the original, or can it include changes that mean the English reader has similar cultural nerves that are 'set vibrating', if I may use a fitting image? And speaking of mood, chronologically speaking we are somewhere between Shakespeare and Milton.

SCHEPPINGE

God heeft de werelt door onzichtbare clavieren
Betrocken als een luyt met al sijn toebehoor.
Den hemel is de bocht vol reyen door en door,
Het roosken, son en maen die om ons hene swieren.

Twee grove bassen die staech bulderen en tieren
Sijn d'aerd en d'ocean: de quinte die het oor
Verheuget, is de locht: de reste die den choor
Volmaket, is t'geboomt en allehande dieren.

Dees luyte sloech de Heer met sijn geleerde vingers,
De engels stemden in als treffelicke singers,
De bergen hoorden toe, de vloeden stonden stil:
Den mensch alleen en hoort noch sangeren noch snaren,
Behalven dien 't de Heer belieft te openbaren
Na sijn bescheyden raet en Goddelijcken wil.

*kwint = hoogste vioolsnaar, dunste snaar van een snaarinstrument
bescheiden⁴ = verstandig, oordeelkundig. de bescheiden lezer
Gods raad = het eeuwige plan dat Hij met de wereld en de mensen heeft*

CREATION

God with his wires invisible has strung the world
As 'twere a lute, with all of its accoutrements.
The welkin is the bowl, full-ribbed from end to end,
The rose, the sun and moon whose orbits round us twirl.

The two coarse bass strings that forever boom and roar
Are earth and ocean: the high chanterelle, so sweet
Upon the ear, the sky: the others that complete
The choir are the trees and beasts of every sort.

This lute th'Almighty plucked with His accomplished fingers,
The angels then joined in as His proficient singers,
The mountains listened rapt, the rivers all stood still:
And man alone hears neither singers nor the strings,
Unless it please God to reveal to him such things
According to His prudent plan and heav'nly will.