



# LUÍS VAZ DE CAMÕES

(Portugal, 1524/5-1580)

[Monday 1 January 2007]

**Generally regarded as the greatest poet of the Portuguese language, at least until Fernando Pessoa came along, Camões led a rambunctious but uncertain life, much of his biography being based on conjecture and what we can extract, or extrapolate, from his poems. He was probably born in Lisbon, the son of minor, impoverished aristocrats, and definitely died there in 1580. In between, he lived or sojourned in many places: Coimbra, where he is assumed to have studied at the university; Morocco, where he lost an eye during combat as a soldier for the Portuguese army; India, where he served as a soldier for three years, after which he probably held administrative posts; Arabia and the East African coasts, on military expeditions launched from western, Portuguese-ruled India; Macao, in the employ of the Portuguese government; and Mozambique, without funds enough to continue the journey back home. Some friends came to his aid, sharing the cost of his passage to Lisbon, where he arrived in 1570, after 17 years abroad.**

Two years later Camões published *The Lusiads*, one of the last great historical epics, in certain respects modeled after the *Aeneid* and taking Vasco da Gama's voyage to India as its immediate theme. Although the poem was well received, earning its author a small pension from the crown, Camões died in poverty and was buried in a collective pit for plague victims. That same year – two years after a disastrous expedition to North Africa in which the heirless King Sebastião and thousands of Portugal's most able-bodied men were slaughtered – the country fell under Spanish rule, which would last until 1640.

From public records and four surviving letters signed by Camões, we know he was a rowdy and lusty sort, who landed himself in a Lisbon jail for roughing up a court official during a religious feast, and in a Goan

jail for failure to pay his debts. And his one and only eye was continually on the lookout for women, whether they belonged to nobility or to brothels.

It makes no sense to pit Camões against Pessoa in a contest to decide who was greater – they are too far apart in historical and poetic time for that. But it is interesting to note how Portugal's two master poets had diametrically opposed sensibilities. The twentieth-century poet was the great negator, who divided himself into fictional 'heteronyms' capable, he claimed, of experiencing and feeling life better than he himself could. Pessoa wrote about politics, but his ideology was utterly utopian. He read hundreds of books and wrote hundreds of pages about assorted religions but committed himself to none. And love was for him such a thoroughly literary matter that he very probably died a virgin.

Camões was the opposite of all that. A Falstaffian lover of life, he never conceived of his writing as a substitute for living but as its literary embodiment. Camões is wholly, passionately present in most of what he wrote – if not literally so, then in the manner of his writing, probably comparable to the way he made love. And when, in his last years, he "got religion", it wasn't a scholarly inquiry; he embraced the Roman Catholic faith with ardor, repenting the carnal loves of his younger days. Pessoa, in contrast, could only repent (and did somewhat repent in his later poems) for not having ever loved except in theory. Which is not to say that the 16th-century poet was a 'natural' who simply wrote out of experience. He was an intellectual with an enormous capacity for synthesis, drawing on the philosophy and literature of antiquity (Plato, Aristotle, Hesiod, Virgil, Ovid, Plutarch), on Neo-Platonist thought, on Petrarch and his followers (especially Garcilaso de la Vega and Juan Boscán), and on the Portuguese popular and formal poetic tradition that preceded him.

*The Lusiads* has been so widely read and translated that Camões's vast and no less impressive body of lyric poetry has tended to be overlooked. Over the centuries, there have been at least ten complete translations of *Os Lusíadas* into English, but only several large-scale translations of his lyrical oeuvre, which includes about 200 short poems in popular verse forms, over 150 sonnets, a sestina, and poems of larger scope: odes, elegies, songs (or canzones), octaves and eclogues. Camões's sonnets are comparatively well known (Wordsworth pays them homage in his 'Scorn Not the Sonnet', where he also mentions the sonneteers Shakespeare, Petrarch, Tasso, Dante, Spenser and Milton), but his full powers as a lyric poet are revealed by some of the longer poems, which succeed in sustaining a narrative across 150 or even 250 verses, interwoven with lessons from mythology, ancient history and philosophy. The excerpted octaves from 'On the World's Chaos and Confusion', for instance, retell a story from antiquity which is perfectly integrated into the longer story (thirty octaves in all) announced by the poem's title.

Camões's sonnets are thematically far more diverse than those of Petrarch or Shakespeare. Some are retellings of Biblical tales ('Jacob') or Greek myths, often with a new twist; or they present historical or mythological figures in new scenarios, as in the sonnet which has the goddesses Diana and Venus discussing the merits of trapping animals versus ensnaring human hearts ('While Phoebus was lighting up the mountains'). Other sonnets take up the theme of the world's disorderedness and the inevitability of change ('Times change, desires change'), life's brevity ('Oh how long, year after year'), and the hardships imposed by exile ('Epitaph for Pero Moniz'). But love, for Camões as for most Renaissance poets, is an ever-present hope and complaint, a source of pain alternating with ecstasy, a rich symbol and a chimera – an inexhaustible subject of poetic and existential exploration. Love, in the sonnets and sestina presented here, is not merely a

hankering after an idealized and beatified 'senhora' (lady); it is a psychological territory for self-discovery. This is most blatantly the case in the celebrated 'Transforma-se o amator na cousa amada', a twentieth-century remake of which 'The Lover Transforms' by Herberto Helder was produced by Herberto Helder (b. 1930).

Because the Renaissance world and its world-view are so far removed from our own, a reader of Camões needs to make an imaginary leap, for no translation can possibly bridge the gap in consciousness between 16th-century Portugal and the 21st century in whatever part of the world. In dealing with that wider-than-usual gap, the four translators into English of the poems presented here have remarkably different approaches. See 'Translating Camões'<sup>1</sup> for a brief discussion of the problems they face and how they try to resolve them, or elude them!

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<sup>1</sup> see article mentioned after the "Poems" section

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## **POEMS**

**CRUEL SENHORA**

**DEAR GENTLE SOUL, YOU THAT DEPARTED . . .**

**DROWNED LOVER**

**FEW AND WEARISOME YEARS I LIVED . . .**

**JACOB**

**LOVE IS A FIRE THAT BURNS UNSEEN . . .**

**MAY LOVE SEEK OUT NEW ARTS, DEVISE A PLOT . . .**

**MY ERRORS, CRUEL FORTUNE AND ARDENT LOVE . . .**

**OH HOW LONG, YEAR AFTER YEAR . . .**

**ON THE WORLD'S CHAOS AND CONFUSION (EXCERPT)**

**SESTINA**

**SHIPWRECK**

**SINCE MY EYES DON'T TIRE OF WEEPING . . .**

**THE LOVER BECOMES THE THING HE LOVES . . .**

**TO A GARDEN LUXURIOUSLY VERDANT . . .**

**WHILE PHOEBUS WAS LIGHTING UP THE MOUNTAINS . . .**

**WHOEVER, LADY, SEES PLAINLY ON VIEW . . .**

## CRUEL SENHORA

Cruel Senhora, I've always been wary. I knew  
I needed to watch you closely in case  
your doubts would surge to disaffection and  
erase  
our love. Then I'd be ruined, since I love only  
you.  
And now, everything I'd hope to have is lost:  
you're pursuing another lover. So I detach  
myself, believing your retribution will match  
the sacrificial depths my love has cost:  
I've given my soul, my senses, and my life to  
you;  
I've given you everything I have within me,  
and you promised love, but now, there's only  
disdain.  
Lost and hopeless, I don't know what to do,  
yet I know the day will come when this memory  
will crush you down with terrifying pain.

© Translation: 2005, William Baer  
From: *Selected Sonnets*  
Publisher: University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005

## Dear gentle soul, you that departed . . .

Dear gentle soul, you that departed  
this life so soon and reluctantly,  
rest in heaven eternally  
while I remain here, broken-hearted.

If there in the ethereal skies  
memories are still allowed to move,  
do not forget that ardent love  
you once saw shining in my eyes.

And if you judge there might be merit,  
however small, in this pain that stays,  
grieving with nothing to repair it,

petition God, who cut short your days,  
to take me to you, in that reckless spirit  
he used to summon you from my gaze.

© Translation: 2006, Landeg White

Sempre, cruel Senhora, receei,  
medindo vossa grã desconfiança,  
que desse em desamor vossa tardança,  
e que me perdesse eu, pois vos amei.  
Perca-se, enfim, já tudo o que esperei,  
pois noutra amor já tendes esperança.  
Tão patente será vossa mudança,  
quanto eu encobri sempre o que vos dei.

Dei-vos a alma, a vida e o sentido;  
de tudo o que em mim há vos fiz senhora.  
Prometeis e negais o mesmo Amor.

Agora tal estou que, de perdido,  
não sei por onde vou, mas algũ' hora  
vos dará tal lembrança grande dor.

© 1668, Luís Vaz de Camões  
From: *Rimas*  
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

Alma minha gentil, que te partiste  
tão cedo desta vida descontente,  
repousa lá no Céu eternamente,  
e viva eu cá na terra sempre triste.

Se lá no assento etéreo, onde subiste,  
memória desta vida se consente,  
não te esqueças daquele amor ardente  
que já nos olhos meus tão puro viste.

E se vires que pode merecer-te  
algũa cousa a dor que me ficou  
da mágoa, sem remédio, de perder-te,

roga a Deus, que teus anos encurtou,  
que tão cedo de cá me leve a ver-te,  
quão cedo de meus olhos te levou.

© 1595, Luís Vaz de Camões  
From: *Rimas*  
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

## DROWNED LOVER

Dearest enemy, so often unkind,  
my life was in your hands, until that wave  
of the sea deprived you of an earthly grave,  
depriving me, as well, of peace of mind.  
The selfish drowning waters keep us apart,  
enjoying your lovely beauty within the vast  
cold sea, but as long as my broken life will last,  
you'll always be alive within my heart.  
And if my ragged poems can last for long  
enough, your love, so spotless, will persist  
forever and ever, as I, on your behalf,  
will praise you always with my singing song;  
as long as human memories exist,  
my poems will be your missing epitaph.

© Translation: 2005, William Baer  
From: *Selected Sonnets*  
Publisher: University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005

## Few and wearisome years I lived . . .

Few and wearisome years I lived  
in the world, enduring vile hardship;  
the light of day went dark on me  
before I saw my twenty-sixth year.

I traveled distant lands and seas,  
trying to find a cure for life,  
but perilous ventures can't attain  
what Fortune, finally, doesn't will.

Portugal brought me up in dear  
green Alenquer, my home, but rotten  
air in my earthen vessel changed me

into food for your fish, O vicious  
sea that rages by Abyssinia,  
so bleak and far from my happy homeland!

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

\*Pero Moniz was presumably a fellow soldier of Camões, whose own experience when stationed in the Gulf of Aden, near Mount Felix, is recorded in one of his Songs. The "rotten air" of the first tercet refers, perhaps, to a disease that took the speaker's life. Alenquer, a small town north of Lisbon, is mentioned elsewhere in Camões's poetry, leading biographers to wonder if he might have been born or partly raised there.

Cara minha inimiga, em cuja mão  
pôs meus contentamentos a ventura,  
faltou-te a ti na terra sepultura,  
porque me falte a mim consolação.

Eternamente as águas lograrão  
a tua peregrina fermosura;  
mas, enquanto me a mim a vida dura,  
sempre viva em minh'alma te acharão.

E se meus rudos versos podem tanto  
que possam prometer-te longa história  
daquele amor tão puro e verdadeiro,  
celebrada serás sempre em meu canto;  
porque enquanto no mundo houver memória,  
será minha escritura teu leteiro.

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From: *Rimas*  
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

No mundo poucos anos, e cansados,  
vivi, cheios de vil miséria dura;  
foi-me tão cedo a luz do dia escura,  
que não vi cinco lustros acabados.

Corri terras e mares apartados,  
buscando à vida algum remédio ou cura;  
mas aquilo que, enfim, não quer ventura,  
não o alcançam trabalhos arriscados.

Criou-me Portugal na verde e cara  
pátria minha Alenquer; mas ar corruto  
que neste meu terreno vaso tinha,

me fez manjar de peixes em ti, bruto  
mar, que bates na Abássia fera e avara,  
tão longe da ditosa pátria minha!

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From: *Rimas*  
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

## JACOB

For seven years, the shepherd Jacob slaved  
for the father of beautiful Rachel, working not  
for the man,  
but only for her, knowing ever since he began  
that she alone was the only reward he craved.  
His days, dreaming of the wedding that lay  
ahead,  
passed by, content to see her from time to time,  
until her father plotted his duplicitous crime,  
by placing Leah in Jacob's marriage bed.  
Learning the cruel deception, Jacob, in tears,  
had lost the one he loved, as if, somehow,  
he hadn't truly earned the proper wife.  
But he starts all over again, for seven more  
years,  
saying, "If life wasn't so short, beginning right  
now,  
I'd serve even longer for Rachel, the love of my  
life."

© Translation: 2005, William Baer  
From: *Selected Sonnets*  
Publisher: University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005

## Love is a fire that burns unseen . . .

Love is a fire that burns unseen,  
a wound that aches yet isn't felt,  
an always discontent contentment,  
a pain that rages without hurting,  
  
a longing for nothing but to long,  
a loneliness in the midst of people,  
a never feeling pleased when pleased,  
a passion that gains when lost in thought.  
  
It's being enslaved of your own free will;  
it's counting your defeat a victory;  
it's staying loyal to your killer.  
  
But if it's so self-contradictory,  
how can Love, when Love chooses,  
bring human hearts into sympathy?

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Sete anos de pastor Jacob servia  
Labão, pai de Raquel, serrana bela;  
mas não servia ao pai, servia a ela,  
e a ela só por prémio pretendia.

Os dias, na esperança de um só dia,  
passava, contentando-se com vê-la;  
porém o pai, usando de cautela  
em lugar de Raquel lhe dava Lia.

Vendo o triste pastor que com enganos  
lhe fora assi negada a sua pastora,  
como se a não tivera merecida;

começa de servir outros sete anos,  
dizendo: — Mais servira, se não fora  
para tão longo amor tão curta a vida.

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From: *Rimas*  
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

Amor é um fogo que arde sem se ver,  
é ferida que doi, e não se sente;  
é um contentamento descontente,  
é dor que desatina sem doer.

É um não querer mais que bem querer;  
é um andar solitário entre a gente;  
é nunca contentar-se de contente;  
é um cuidar que ganha em se perder.

É querer estar preso por vontade;  
é servir a quem vence, o vencedor;  
é ter com quem nos mata, lealdade.

Mas como causar pode seu favor  
nos corações humanos amizade,  
se tão contrário a si é o mesmo Amor?

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From: *Rimas*  
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

### **May Love seek out new arts, devise a plot . . .**

May Love seek out new arts, devise a plot  
to kill me, and discover new disdain;  
for robbing me of hope will be in vain,  
since it can scarcely take what I've not got.

Behold the kind of hopes on which I stand!  
And see how perilous my certainties!  
For I fear neither change nor enmities,  
ploughing the sea, lost far from any land.

And yet, although one cannot pay grief's toll  
where hope is gone, still Love has hidden there  
for me an ill, that kills and can't be seen;

how long ago did Love place in my soul  
I don't know what, born I don't know where,  
come I don't know how, nor why it aches so  
keen.

© Translation: 1998, Alexis Levitin

### **My errors, cruel fortune and ardent love . . .**

My errors, cruel fortune and ardent love  
conspired to bring about my ruin;  
the errors and fortune were superfluous,  
since love alone would have done as much.

Although it's over, the dreadful pain  
of what I suffered is still so vivid  
that I, with bitter rage, have learned  
never to try to be happy again.

In life and words I've always strayed,  
giving Fortune cause to punish  
my poorly founded hopes.

In love I've known just brief illusions.  
Oh! if only my ruthless Genius  
would have its fill of wreaking vengeance!

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

Busque Amor novas artes, novo engenho,  
para matar-me, e novas esquivanças;  
que não pode tirar-me as esperanças,  
que mal me tirará o que eu não tenho.

Olhai de que esperanças me mantenho!  
Vede que perigosas seguranças!  
Que não temo contrastes nem mudanças,  
andando em bravo mar, perdido o lenho.

Mas, conquanto não pode haver desgosto  
onde esperança falta, lá me esconde  
Amor um mal, que mata e não se vê.

Que dias há que n'alma me tem posto.  
um não sei quê, que nasce não sei onde,  
vem não sei como, e doi não sei porquê.

© 1595, Luís Vaz de Camões

From: *Rimas*

Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

Erros meus, má fortuna, amor ardente  
em minha perdição se conjuraram;  
os erros e a fortuna sobejaram,  
que para mim bastava o amor somente.

Tudo passei; mas tenho tão presente  
a grande dor das cousas que passaram,  
que as magoadas iras me ensinaram  
a não querer já nunca ser contente.

Errei todo o discurso de meus anos;  
dei causa [a] que a Fortuna castigasse  
as minhas mal fundadas esperanças.

De amor não vi senão breves enganos.  
Oh! quem tanto pudesse que fartasse  
este meu duro génio de vinganças!

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From: *Rimas*

Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

### **Oh how long, year after year . . .**

Oh how long, year after year,  
my weary journey has kept on going!  
How short a space until my brief  
and useless human rambling ends!

Time wastes away and my ruin increases;  
a remedy I used to have is gone.  
If we can judge from past experience,  
every large hope is a grand illusion.

I chase some good that can't be had:  
when halfway there, I've lost the trail;  
falling a thousand times, I despair.

It flees, I lag; and if, in my lagging,  
I look up to see if it's still there,  
it's lost from sight and lost from hope.

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

Oh! como se me alonga, de ano em ano,  
a peregrinação cansada minha!  
Como se encurta, e como ao fim caminha  
este meu breve e vão discurso humano!

Vai-se gastando a idade e cresce o dano;  
perde-se-me um remédio, que inda tinha;  
se por experiência se adivinha,  
qualquer grande esperança é grande engano.

Corro após este bem que não se alcança;  
no meio do caminho me falece,  
mil vezes caio, e perco a confiança.

Quando ele foge, eu tardo; e, na tardança,  
se os olhos ergo a ver se inda parece,  
da vista se me perde e da esperança.

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From: *Rimas*

Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

### **ON THE WORLD'S CHAOS AND CONFUSION (excerpt)**

Happy the man who never places  
his small and humble fantasy  
in anything greater than simply leading  
his cattle to drink from the cold spring  
and drawing their milk so that he can drink!  
However Fortune may stir things up,  
he'll never feel any greater grief  
than the weight of knowing his life is brief.

He'll see the rising sun's red face  
and see the clear spring always flowing,  
not wondering where the water comes from  
nor who on the horizon hides the light.  
Playing the flute where his cattle graze,  
he'll know the grass that covers the hill;  
in God he'll simply and calmly believe,  
not pondering truths he can't conceive.

### **SOBRE O DESCONCERTO DO MUNDO (excerto)**

Quem tão baixa tivesse a fantasia  
que nunca em mores cousas a metesse  
que em só levar seu gado à fonte fria  
e mungir-lhe o leite que bebesse!  
Quão bem-aventurado que seria!  
Que, por mais que Fortuna revolvesse,  
nunca em si sentiria maior pena  
que pesar-lhe da vida ser pequena.

Veria erguer do sol a roxa face,  
veria correr sempre a clara fonte,  
sem imaginar a água donde nasce,  
nem quem a luz esconde no horizonte.  
Tangendo a fruta donde o gado paze,  
conheceria as ervas do alto monte;  
em Deus creria, simples e quieto,  
sem mais especular nenhum secreto.



Among the things of Antiquity,  
it's written of a certain Thrasyllus  
that, due to a grave infirmity,  
he lost his senses for a long season,  
during which time, bereft of reason,  
he claimed and believed that all the ships  
which at the port of Piraeus landed  
were ships he owned if not commanded.

He took himself for a mighty lord  
and enjoyed as well a happy life,  
since he lost nothing when ships were lost,  
and rejoiced for those that landed safely.  
Time went by till one day Crito  
his brother returned after a long absence  
and, seeing how Thrasyllus had lost his wits,  
was moved by fraternal love to pity.

He gave him to doctors, charging them  
to perform the cure thus far refused.  
Alas! By restoring his brother's senses,  
he robbed him of his sweet easy life!  
The herbs of Apollo, without delay,  
gave him back his former health.  
Now of sound mind, Thrasyllus thanked  
his brother for caring, not for his act.

For when he saw himself in danger  
of the toils that sanity would impose  
and saw no more that state of privilege  
conferred on him by his fantasy,  
he sighed: "O enemy brother, pretended  
friend, why did you take from me  
that life so calm and free of pains,  
which can't be had by anyone sane?"

"What king, or duke or mighty lord  
would I have wished to trade places with?  
What did I care if the world ended  
or if Nature's order suddenly changed?  
Now dear life is a heavy burden,  
for I know what toil and sadness are.  
Restore me to that state of bliss;  
the only sane condition is madness."

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De um certo Trasilau se lê e escreve,  
entre as cousas da velha antiguidade,  
que perdido um grão tempo o siso teve  
por causa d'ũa grande infirmitade;  
e enquanto, de si fora, doudo esteve,  
tinha por teima e cria por verdade,  
que eram suas as naus que navegavam,  
quantas no porto Píreo ancoravam.

Por um senhor mui grande se teria  
(além da vida alegre que passava),  
pois nas que se perdiam não perdia,  
e das que vinham salvas se alegrava.  
Não tardou muito tempo quando, um dia,  
um Crito, seu irmão, que ausente estava,  
à terra chega; e vendo o irmão perdido,  
do fraternal amor foi comovido.

Aos médicos o entrega, e com aviso  
o faz estar à cura refusada.  
Triste, que por tornar-lhe o caro siso  
lhe tira a doce vida descansada!  
As ervas Apolíneas, de improviso,  
o tornam à saúde atrás passada.  
Sesudo, Trasilau ao caro irmão  
agradece a vontade, a obra não.

Porque, depois de ver-se no perigo  
dos trabalhos que o siso lhe obrigava,  
e depois de não ver o estado antigo  
que a vã opinião lhe apresentava,  
—Ó inimigo irmão, com cor d'amigo!  
Para que me tiraste (suspirava)  
da mais quieta vida e livre em tudo  
que nunca pôde ter nenhum sesudo?

Por que rei, por que duque me trocara?  
Por que senhor de grande fortaleza?  
Que me dava que o mundo se acabara,  
ou que a ordem mudasse a natureza?  
Agora é-me pesada a vida cara;  
sei que cousa é trabalho e que tristeza.  
Torna-me a meu estado, que eu te aviso  
que na doudice só consiste o siso.

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From: *Rimas*  
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

## SESTINA

Little by little it ebbs, this life  
if by any chance I am still alive;  
my brief time passes before my eyes;  
I mourn the past in whatever I say,  
as each day passes, step by step;  
youth deserts me; what persists is pain.

And what a bitter variety of pain  
that not for an hour in so long a life  
could I give evil so much as a side step!  
Surely, I'm better dead than alive?  
Why complain, at last? What's more to say,  
having failed to be cheated by my own eyes?

Those lovely, gentle and lucid eyes  
whose absence caused me as much pain  
as her not understanding whatever I say!  
If at the end of so long a short life  
you should keep the burning ray alive  
blessings will attend my every step.

But first I'm aware the ultimate step  
must advance to close these sad eyes  
love opened to those by which I live.  
Pen and ink must witness to the pain  
in writing of so troublesome a life  
the little I lived through, and the more I say.

Oh, I know not why I write or what I say!  
If contemplating yet another step  
I envisage a sad version of life  
that places no value on such eyes,  
I cannot conceive how such pain  
could find a pen to declare I'm alive.

In my heart, the embers are still alive;  
if they found no relief in what I say  
they would now have made ashes of my pain;  
but beyond this grief I overstep,  
I'm softened by the tears of those eyes  
that, though life is fleeting, keep me alive.

I am dying alive;  
in death I live;  
I see without eyes;

## SEXTINA

Foge-me pouco a pouco a curta vida  
(se por caso é verdade que inda vivo);  
vai-se-me o breve tempo d'ante os olhos;  
choro pelo passado e quando falo,  
se me passam os dias passo e passo,  
vai-se-me, enfim, a idade e fica a pena.

Que maneira tão áspera de pena!  
Que nunca ãa hora viu tão longa vida  
em que possa do mal mover-se um passo.  
Que mais me monta ser morto que vivo?  
Para que choro, enfim? Para que falo,  
se lograr-me não pude de meus olhos?

Ó fermosos, gentis e claros olhos,  
cuja ausência me move a tanta pena  
quanta se não compreende enquanto falo!  
Se, no fim de tão longa e curta vida,  
de vós m'inda inflamasse o raio vivo,  
por bem teria tudo quanto passo.

Mas bem sei, que primeiro o extremo passo  
me há-de vir a cerrar os tristes olhos  
que Amor me mostre aqueles por que vivo.  
Testemunhas serão a tinta e pena,  
que escreveram de tão molesta vida  
o menos que passei, e o mais que falo.

Oh! que não sei que escrevo, nem que falo!  
Que se de um pensamento n'outro passo,  
vejo tão triste género de vida  
que, se lhe não valerem tantos olhos,  
não posso imaginar qual seja a pena  
que traslade esta pena com que vivo.

N'alma tenho contino um fogo vivo,  
que, se não respirasse no que falo,  
estaria já feita cinza a pena;  
mas, sobre a maior dor que sofro e passo,  
me temperam as lágrimas dos olhos  
com que fugindo, não se acaba a vida.

Morrendo estou na vida,  
e em morte vivo;  
vejo sem olhos,

tongue-less I speak;  
they march in goose step,  
glory and pain.

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e sem língua falo;  
e juntamente passo  
glória e pena.

© 1595, Luís Vaz de Camões  
From: *Rimas*  
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

### SHIPWRECK

Like the weary sailor, the refugee  
from wreck and storm, who escapes half-dead,  
and then, in terror, shudders with dread  
at the very mention of the name of the 'sea';  
who swears he'll never sail again, who raves  
he'll stay at home, even on the calmest days,  
but then, in time, forgets his fearful ways,  
and seeks, again, his fortune above the waves;  
I, too, have barely escaped the storms that  
revolve  
around you, my love, traveling far away,  
vowing to avoid another catastrophe,  
but I can't, the thought of you breaks my  
resolve,  
and so, I return to where, on that fateful day,  
I nearly drowned in your tempestuous sea.

© Translation: 2005, William Baer  
From: *Selected Sonnets*  
Publisher: University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005

Como quando do mar tempestuoso  
o marinheiro, lasso e trabalhado,  
d'um naufrágio cruel já salvo a nado,  
só ouvir falar nele o faz medroso;  
e jura que em que veja bonançoso  
o violento mar, e sossegado  
não entre nele mais, mas vai, forçado  
pelo muito interesse cobiçoso;  
assi, Senhora, eu, que da tormenta  
de vossa vista fujo, por salvar-me,  
jurando de não mais em outra ver-me;  
minh'alma que de vós nunca se ausenta,  
dá-me por preço ver-vos, faz tornar-me  
donde fugi tão perto de perder-me.

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From: *Rimas*  
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

### **Since my eyes don't tire of weeping . . .**

Since my eyes don't tire of weeping  
sorrows that don't tire of weighing on me,  
since nothing softens the fire I burn in  
for one whose heart I could never soften,

let blind Love be my tireless guide  
to lands I don't know my way out of,  
and let the whole world keep on listening  
as long as my weak voice doesn't fail.

And if there's pity in hills, rivers  
and valleys, or if there's Love in beasts,  
birds, plants, stones and streams,

let them hear my long tale of troubles  
and use my sorrow to cure their own,  
since greater griefs can cure smaller ones.

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

### **The lover becomes the thing he loves . . .**

The lover becomes the thing he loves  
by virtue of much imagining;  
since what I long for is already in me,  
the act of longing should be enough.

If my soul becomes the beloved,  
what more can my body long for?  
Only in itself will it find peace,  
since my body and soul are linked.

But this pure, fair demigoddess,  
who with my soul is in accord  
like an accident with its subject,

exists in my mind as a mere idea;  
the pure and living love I'm made of  
seeks, like simple matter, form.

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Pois meus olhos não cansam de chorar  
tristezas, que não cansam de cansar-me;  
pois não abranda o fogo em que abrasar-me  
pôde quem eu jamais pude abrandar;

não canse o cego Amor de me guiar  
a parte donde não saiba tornar-me;  
nem deixe o mundo todo de escutar-me,  
enquanto me a voz fraca não deixar.

E se nos montes, rios, ou em vales,  
piedade mora, ou dentro mora Amor  
em feras, aves, prantas, pedras, águas,

ouçam a longa história de meus males  
e curem sua dor com minha dor;  
que grandes mágoas podem curar mágoas.

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From: *Rimas*

Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

Transforma-se o amador na cousa amada,  
por virtude do muito imaginar;  
não tenho, logo, mais que desejar,  
pois em mim tenho a parte desejada.

Se nela está minh'alma transformada,  
que mais deseja o corpo de alcançar?  
Em si sòmente pode descansar,  
pois consigo tal alma está liada.

Mas esta linda e pura semideia,  
que, como um acidente em seu sujeito,  
assi co a alma minha se conforma,

está no pensamento como ideia:  
o vivo e puro amor de que sou feito,  
como a matéria simples busca a forma.

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From: *Rimas*

Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

### **To a garden luxuriously verdant . . .**

To a garden luxuriously verdant  
and enamelled with countless flowers,  
there came one day the two goddesses  
of Love, and of dense forests and Hunting.

Then Diana plucked a perfect rose  
and Venus the best of the red lilies,  
but exceeding by far all the other flowers  
in beauty and grace were the violas.

They asked Cupid, who was standing near,  
which of the blooms, in his opinion,  
was sweetest, purest and most lovely?

The youngster answered with a grin:  
— all three are gorgeous, but I much prefer  
viola-tion to mere rose and lily.

© Translation: 2006, Landeg White

### **While Phoebus was lighting up the mountains . . .**

While Phoebus was lighting up the mountains  
of Heaven with his radiant clarity,  
to relieve the boredom of her chastity  
Diana was killing time in hunting.

Then Venus who was descending secretly  
to fetter the desire of Anchises,  
seeing Diana so undisguised  
addressed her half-jokingly:

“You come with your nets to the thick wood  
to ensnare the fast-running deer,  
but my own nets capture the mind.”

“Better”, the chaste goddess replied,  
“to take the nimble deer in my snare  
than be caught in one by your husband.”

© Translation: 2006, Landeg White

Num jardim adornado de verdura  
a que esmaltam por cima várias flores,  
entrou um dia a deusa dos amores,  
com a deusa da caça e da espessura.

Diana tomou logo ãa rosa pura,  
Vénus um roxo lírio, dos milhores;  
mas excediam muito às outras flores  
as violas, na graça e fermosura.

Perguntam a Cupido, que ali estava,  
qual daquelas três flores tomaria,  
por mais suave, pura e mais fermosa?

Sorrindose, o Minino lhe tornava:  
todas fermosas são, mas eu queria  
Viol’antes que lírio, nem que rosa.

© 1595, Luís Vaz de Camões  
From: *Rimas*  
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

Enquanto Febo os montes acendia  
do Céu com luminosa claridade,  
por evitar do ócio a castidade  
na caça o tempo Délia dispendia.

Vénus, que então de furto descendia,  
por cativar de Anquises a vontade,  
vendo Diana em tanta honestidade,  
quási zombando dela, lhe dizia:

— Tu vás com tuas redes na espessura  
os fugitivos cervos enredando,  
mas as minhas enredam o sentido.

— Melhor é (respondia a deusa pura)  
nas redes leves ceros ir tomando  
que tomar-te a ti nelas teu marido.

© 1668, Luís Vaz de Camões  
From: *Rimas*  
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

## Whoever, Lady, sees plainly on view . . .

Whoever, Lady, sees plainly on view  
your beautiful eyes in their lustrous being  
without being blinded in the act of seeing  
is already not paying your face's due.

This seems to me an honest price,  
but I, for the merit of deserving them,  
gave both life and soul to serve them  
apart from which I am without resource.

Enough that life and soul and hope  
and as much as I have is all yours,  
and the proof of this I alone know.

For such good fortune is beyond scope  
giving you all that is in my power  
as the more I pay you, the more I owe.

© Translation: 2006, Landeg White

Quem vê, Senhora, claro e manifesto  
o lindo ser de vossos olhos belos,  
se não perder a vista só em vê-los,  
já não paga o que deve a vosso gesto.

Este me parecia preço honesto;  
mas eu, por de vantagem merecê-los,  
dei mais a vida e alma por querê-los,  
donde já me não fica mais de resto.

Assi que a vida e alma e esperança  
e tudo quanto tenho, tudo é vosso,  
e o proveito disso eu só o levo.

Porque é tamanha bem-aventurança  
o dar-vos quanto tenho e quanto posso  
que, quanto mais vos pago, mais vos devo.

© 1595, Luís Vaz de Camões

From: *Rimas*

Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

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## ARTICLES

### *Translating Camões*

December 11, 2006

**Luís Vaz de Camões (1524?-1580) wrote poetry in many different forms (he also wrote three plays), but here I will focus only on his sonnets, which are a little over 150 in number. Or over 350? Since virtually all his lyric poetry was published posthumously, in partial editions not organized by the author himself, it is not easy to establish with accuracy his poetic corpus. As his poetic reputation grew, so did the number of poems attributed to him. Camões criticism of the twentieth century radically pruned the overgrown canon of his presumed-to-be-authentic works, but there are several, quite wonderful sonnets whose Camonian authorship is hotly debated (among those few scholars who debate such matters).**

Having settled on which sonnets to translate, the translator must ask something like: what makes this poetry poetry? What, more specifically, are the various formal elements worth preserving, and at what price? The division into two quartets followed by two tercets, a consistent rhyme scheme and the decasyllable stand out as these sonnets' most obvious formal features. But there are others. Like Shakespeare, Camões was fond of syntactical inversions, purposeful repetitions, and various other kinds of word play. His syntax is often driven by ruthless logic, as if a sonnet were a mathematical proof. This is the case, for instance, in 'Whoever, Lady, sees plainly on view', which

is also a good example of extended metaphor, with the lexicon of commerce – paying, owing, price, profit, debt – dominating each stanza. Some of Camões’s word choices allude to philosophical concepts (‘The lover becomes the thing he loves’, for instance), and his language is concrete but also concept-oriented, rarely flowery or merely descriptive, and never long-winded.

We would love to bring everything over from one language to another – the rhyme and meter, the syntactical particularities, the lexical specificity, the tautness of the discourse – but that is never possible, and so the translator must make choices, deciding what matters greatly, what matters less. So let’s consider rhyme and rhythm. Can a sonnet (the word comes from the Provençal for “little song”) forego rhyme and not have ten – or at least roughly ten – syllables per verse and still be a sonnet? What defines a sonnet? Surely not the mere circumstance of having fourteen lines.

In his *Luís de Camões: Selected Sonnets* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005), translator William Baer has achieved perfect, natural-sounding rhymes for seventy sonnets. No easy feat, and to pull it off he has not worried too much about line length, with verses rarely having less than ten syllables but sometimes stretching out to as many as fifteen or sixteen. (The longer the line, the more room one has to maneuver and produce convincing rhymes.) According to his introduction, Baer has used “the versatile English iambic pentameter for [Camões’s] decasyllabics”. This seems to mean five stresses per line rather than five strictly conceived iambs, but I myself count four stresses for certain verses of ‘Shipwreck’ and six stresses for more than one line of ‘Jacob’. Does this matter? In the latter poem the verb *servir* is used four times in Portuguese, but ‘serve’ appears just once in English, with ‘slaved’, ‘working’ and ‘starts’ all over doing the job for the other three occurrences. English objectively has a larger vocabulary than Portuguese, so some expansion on Camões’s limited lexicon is to be expected, but the repetition of *servir* does seem to be quite deliberate. In his defense, Baer has deliberately opted for renderings in contemporary-sounding English, and they read very smoothly, making Camões readily accessible to today’s reader. Too smoothly? Is it still Camões?

Landeg White also rhymes his sonnets but is more relaxed about what constitutes rhyme. In ‘Whoever, Lady, sees plainly on view’, we find, along with some perfect rhymes, resource as a rhyme word for price, and yours rhyming with power. On the other hand, White, far from stretching out the lines, actually shortens them, into basically iambic tetrameter. Most of the lines of his ‘Dear gentle soul, you that departed’, which is Camões’s most translated sonnet, contain only eight syllables (counting up to the last accented one, that is). White had already justified this option in the Translator’s Note to his version (the most recent one in English) of *The Lusíads* (Oxford, 1997): “Time and again, rendering stanzas of *The Lusíads* into rough and ready English, I have found myself with feet or whole lines to spare, needing padding to restore the shape of the original.” English does not necessarily take up less space on the page, but it does take up less spoken space, i.e. has fewer syllables. The Portuguese word *soneto* has three syllables, while ‘sonnet’ has only two, though both words have the same number of letters. Keeping a short line and making it rhyme to boot, some problematic word choices are bound to occur. In the last poem cited, it does not make much if any difference to say “cut short your days” (the days of your life, that is) instead of the literal “cut short your years”, but “if (in heaven) memories are still allowed to move” is a more than slightly eccentric rendering of the original: “if (in heaven) memories of this life are permitted”. Rhyme so obliges, and didn’t Camões himself, to achieve all his perfect rhymes, occasionally resort to creative, eccentric formulations, which in the end actually had an enhancing effect on the poetry?

Alexis Levitin, translator of Eugénio Andrade and other Portuguese poets, employed perfect rhymes and the decasyllable (though the last two verses have nine and eleven syllables, respectively) in his rendering of ‘May Love seek out new arts, devise a plot’. The result is on the whole admirable, but

since my task here is to point out problems, I will mention that several roundabout, less-than-natural expressions – “discover new disdain”, “one cannot pay grief’s toll” – seem to have been employed to fill out (‘pad’) verses and facilitate rhyme. But again: perhaps these expressions are interesting in their own right.

My own sonnet renderings are arguably poor excuses for the form, as they make no attempt to rhyme. I worked at some rhymed versions for quite a while but finally threw in the towel, because the sacrifice seemed too great. There are other elements of Camões’s poetics which I am much more keen to preserve. In the first quartet of ‘Oh how long, year after year’, we have the long journey of the narrator’s aging life contrasted with the severe shortening of his brief and useless human *discurso*, a word that in those days meant not only spoken discourse but also spatial course or trajectory. My choice of ‘ramble’ as an English equivalent is an attempt to convey both those meanings. In the fifth verse we have the narrator’s age or years wasting away at the same rate that his ruin grows. These kinds of double meanings, contrasting expressions and logico-linguistic equations are much more interesting to me than rhyme. By dispensing with the latter I can more closely replicate the former, though not always to my satisfaction... .

The first five verses of one of the sonnets presented here [ to ‘Since my eyes don’t tire...’] would more literally translate as “Since my eyes don’t tire of weeping / sorrows that don’t tire of making me tired; / since nothing softens the fire I burn in / for someone [i.e. my beloved lady] I could never soften [i.e. make more amenable, receptive]; // let blind Love not tire of guiding me”, etc. I preferred to incorporate the fourth instance of ‘tire’ into an adjective, ‘tireless’, and I transformed “making me tired” into “weighing on me”, as the Portuguese *cansar* comprises – more readily than ‘tire’ – the notions of weariness and tedium. Rather than tire, I considered using the verb ‘weary’ throughout, but it sounds a tad antiquated today. Which of course could be a justification for using it, since the sonnet was written 500 years ago! Getting the right idiom, the right tone, is perhaps the greatest challenge in the case of poetry from a time and culture so distant from our own. And what is ‘right’ for me may strike another translator as completely misguided. That is why I consider it useful and sometimes even necessary to have various translations – based on different ground rules – of one and the same text. Taking all the good but diversely executed translations together, we can perhaps get closer to the original.

Translation is like opera – an ‘impure’ form of art, whose success lies in achieving the right equilibrium of the constituent parts. An opera cannot pursue ‘pure’ music at the expense of the dramatic action, nor focus on the overall visual impression at the expense of the music or drama. Translation, in a similar way, is a balancing act, with the translator slightly fudging on the transmission of the original, literal meaning for the sake of the poetry’s formal devices, and no one of these can be replicated to perfection if this will mean (as it almost always will) giving other poetic devices the short shrift. Translation is the art of knowing how to lose, balancing the losses so that no one part suffers. It therefore makes perfect theoretical sense to preserve rhyme, or some semblance of rhyme, by making concessions in other departments. Tossing rhyme out of the ‘opera’ is, to say the least, a dubious move.

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### **In English**

[Sonnet Central](#)

Fourteen 19th-century translations of sonnets by Camões

[Catholic Encyclopedia](#)

Biographical information

### **In French**

[Wikipedia](#)

Biographical sketch

### **In Spanish**

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Biographical sketch