

Camões the Sonneteer

Helen Vendler

Abstract. Although Camões is principally known as an epic writer he also produced a significant number of remarkable sonnets in the Petrarchan mode, some of them Petrarchan in inspiration but others that deal with historical and elegiac themes. Camões's strength as a sonneteer lies not only in his limpid vocabulary and exquisite sense of cadence, but also in his exploration of the most obscure reaches of human consciousness, especially in the delineation of states of battlement and anxiety. His technical comment is supreme, and his range of stylistic experimentation—whether allegorical, pastoral, or erotic—continually exciting.

I read Spanish but not Portuguese, and so I bring to Camões only a shadow of what a native reader could offer. But I come to Camões's sonnets as someone with a long interest in the English sonnet, and with some knowledge of the European practice of Petrarch, Sannazaro, DuBellay, and Ronsard. In sketching out the breadth of Camões's sonnet practice, I want to look more closely at some of the sonnets that seem to me most striking.

First, of course, another disclaimer. The ascription of these poems to Luis de Camões (1524?-80) is by no means certain in all cases, and his editors themselves disagree on which of the sonnets in the various *cancioneiros* are his. The attributions depend on marginal notations, on the opinion of the earliest editors, on the position of a given sonnet within what is deemed a "run" of authentic sonnets in a manuscript, on resemblances to passages in the *Lusiads*, and so on. A certain dryness comes into the voice of any editor

or critic as soon as the question of ascription arises. So, in speaking of “Camões,” we are on firm terrain when we treat his epic, but on quicksand, to some extent, when we turn to the sonnets. In what follows, I have tried to stay on relatively sure ground, drawing my examples from the 1973 Coimbra edition of the *Rimas*.¹ I am most grateful to Professor João Ricardo Figueiredo, who read my first draft and advised me about the sonnet canon; to Professor Victor Mendes, who read the sonnets aloud when I presented this essay at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth conference, and to Professor Frank Sousa, who invited me to write on Camões.

For convenience, scholars have classified Camões’s sonnets by genre, dividing them into love-sonnets, sonnets of exile, heroic sonnets, and so on. The love-sonnets are allied to the Petrarchan and pastoral conventions, the sonnets of exile are linked to Camões’s life away from Portugal (especially in Goa), and the heroic sonnets, some of them elegiac, praise masculine or feminine martial or stoic virtue. In each of these groups, one can perceive a distinct inventiveness in Camões’s practice.

Camões learned from Petrarch a plangent simplicity of diction, as we can see in his quasi-translation of one of the most famous of Petrarch’s sonnets, *Pace non trovo*. Although the Petrarch sonnet is highly stylized in its geometrical oppositions, its lexicon is transparently artless:

Pace non trovo, e non ho da far guerra;
 E temo, e spero; et ardo, e son un ghiaccio;
 E volo sopra ‘l cielo, e giaccio in terra;
 E nulla stringo, e tutto ‘l mondo abbraccio.

So it continues, until the last open and unguarded statement:

Egualmente mi spiace morte e vita:
 In questo stato son, donna, per voi.
 [*Pace non trovo, e non ho da far guerra*]

Camões imitates Petrarch’s candor of expression along with his paradoxes:

agora espero, agora desconfio,
 agora desvario, agora acerto.

And he ends with the same openness:

Se me pergunta alguém porque assi ando,
 respondo que não sei; porém suspeito
 que só porque vos vi, minha Senhora.
 [*Tanto de meu estado me acho incerto*; 4 (118); IX]

This defenseless language becomes most striking when it is placed in the otherwise “artificial” setting of Greek pastoral nymphs and shepherds. Although the setting may be “precious,” the utterances of Camões’s shepherds are often astonishingly “human” and without courtly patterning. The setting, for instance, in which the dying shepherdess Nise finds herself is rich in the crystalline rays of marquetried dawn, and she is stationed, in the sonnet’s octave, among the grand powers of Fate, Time, and Heaven:

O raio cristalino s’estendia
 pelo mundo, da Aurora marchetada,
 quando Nise, pastora delicada,
 donde a vida deixava, se partia.

Dos olhos, com que o Sol escurecia
 levando a vista em lágrimas banhada,
 de si, do Fado e Tempo magoada,
 pondo os olhos no Céu, assi dizia:

But when the shepherdess herself speaks, it is to distinguish herself from both ornamental nature and the celestial powers above. The sun and rosy Dawn may bring delight to other discontented souls, but she dies alone, and on a subjected human plane. Her language in the final tercet subsides into pure simplicity:

—Nasce, sereno Sol, puro e luzente;
 resplandece, fermosa e roxa Aurora,
 qualquer alma alegrando descontente;

que a minha, sabe tu que, desd’agora,
 jamais na vida a podes ver contente,

nem tão triste nenhuma outra pastora.

[*O raio cristalino s'estendia*; 67 (150); XCIX]

In another such case, the shepherd Liso cries out to his nymph Natércia (an anagram of “Caterina”) in those desperately simple and wounded phrases that lovers feel shame in even uttering:

—Porque te vás de quem por ti se perde,

para quem pouco te ama?

[*Na metade do Céu subido ardia*; 77 (155); LXX]

And Echo answers him in its own heartbreaking syllables: “—*Pouco te ama.*”

Camões’s pastoral speeches are not always so devoid of rhetorical self-protection, but it seems true that the more highly stylized writing tends to come earlier in a given sonnet, yielding, at the end, to the blank dismay of “artless” diction. Camões repeatedly performs lonely sincerity over against the splendor of nature or the breadth of Fate. The note of plaintive plainness, learned from Petrarch, confers the “sincerity” that we associate with Camões as lover, a “sincerity” that can arise even in the most traditional adoption of Petrarchan conventions.

This “sincerity-effect” in Camões is of course practiced by other post-Petrarchan sonneteers. We hear it in Ronsard’s “Je serai sous la terre,” in Sidney’s “Look in thy heart and write,” in Shakespeare’s “O thou, my lovely boy.” What strikes me in Camões is the variety of situations in which he employs it—not merely in the love-sonnet, but also in the sonnet of exile, the heroic sonnet, and the mythological sonnet. As I examine some of these, I’ll mention, among their other qualities, the return of the “sincere” note, and the role it plays *vis-à-vis* Camões other effects in the sonnets.

But first I want to describe Camões’s counterbalance to the “sincerity-effect”: the intellectual effect manifested in ostentatious patterning. Such patterning in any poem announces that the structure of the poem has been entirely thought through before it has been written down. Naturally, the sonnet-form itself suggests such forethought, but often sonnets aim to make us “forget” that the poem must end after fourteen lines and must express itself in a coercive rhyme-scheme. If the diction and syntax are wayward enough, we can feel a “spontaneity” in a sonnet before we acknowledge the Procrustean bed of form. But many sonnets want us to see explicitly their pre-planned state, and the most common way of displaying that planning is

in the visible repetition of a single word. When a word has been so deeply incised in the fabric of the poem, its sudden absence becomes more remarkable than its presence (a fact that Shakespeare knew and exploited more than any other sonneteer). Here is Camões's patterning of a mood of ultimate disillusion, in which the word that keeps coming up in "letters of gold"—to which the poet gives ultimate emphasis—is the verb *cantar* (in infinitive and tensed form) and its noun-form, *canto*. Two other words—*confiar/confianças* and *passado*—recur as well. All three of these important words vanish—as though they never were—in the collapse of hope at the close:

Eu CANTEI já, e agora vou chorando
o tempo que CANTEI tão *confiado*;
parece que no CANTO já passado
se estavam minhas lágrimas criando.

CANTEI; mas se me alguém pergunta: —Quando?
—Não sei; que também fui nisso enganado.
É tão triste este meu presente estado
que o passado, por ledó, estou julgando.

Fizeram-me CANTAR, manhosamente,
contentamentos não, mas *confianças*;
CANTAVA, mas já era ao som dos ferros.

De quem me queixarei, que tudo mente?
Mas eu que culpa ponho às esperanças
onde a Fortuna injusta é mais que os erros?
[*Eu cantei já, e agora vou chorando*; 109 (171); CLXVII]

There is no version of our golden *cantar* in the last tercet; the poet has ceased to sing, and *cantar* has mutated to *queixar*. There is no mention of *confianças*, or even its feeble form *esperanças*, now that Fortune has proved untrustworthy. As the past tenses of narration move into a present agony, the poet dismisses the deceiving *passado* with all its lying appearances. It is almost necessary that such an intellectually-patterned sonnet display itself to us as one that treats the past; it is only by reflecting on his former illusions, and arranging them in temporal sequence, that the poet can mournfully dismiss

them. The most extraordinary line here, of course, is the one in which we last hear the sound of lyrical voice, as the poet persists in singing to the accompaniment of the clank of his fetters. This disharmony of antithetical musical effect ends by annihilating itself, as the joyous *já* of “Eu cantei já” mutates into the painful *já* of “Cantava, mas já era ao som dos ferros.” The music dies away; we hear the last tercet as said, not sung.

Yet in spite of the highly visible patterning, the “simplicity” of which I have spoken earlier persists in the immobile root *cant-* on which the poet rings changes: *cantei*, *cantei*, *canto*, *cantei*, *cantar*, *cantava*. As we hear the changes rung, we feel acutely the absence of the present participle *cantando*, the present-tense verb *canto*, and the future *cantarei*. These crucial parts of the verb have been amputated, lopped off beyond rescue. The pang of hopelessness, so keenly felt through the impossibility of conjugating *cantar* in these absent present and future forms, confers “spontaneity” on the last songless tercet, not only in spite of, but because of, the patterning that has preceded it.

The most distinctively Camõesian sonnets are produced, it seems to me, when the sincerity-effect appears in conjunction with the intellectual effect. Among these one can certainly cite the famous *Alma minha gentil* [80 (156); XIX], with its naked grief embedded in a quasi-mathematical and highly stylized proportioning of time; but for local piety’s sake I will use as my example of the interpenetration of “spontaneous” feeling and patterned thought the sonnet *Quem vê, Senhora, claro e manifesto* [17 (125); XVI]. Elizabeth Bishop borrowed the adoring closing lines of this poem for the dedication of her volume *Questions of Travel* (1965) to her Brazilian lover, Lota de Macedo Soares: these were the first lines of Camões I ever read.

The lover of *Quem vê, Senhora* speaks at first in the present tense of axiom, saying that whoever gazes upon his beloved’s eyes should be willing to lose his eyesight as a payment—“an honest price”—for such a glimpse. The poem is one of many in which Camões imagines a love-economy of hyperbolic payment, as though only by such equations and measurings could the inestimable value of love be assessed. The speaker then passes to his own case, and, using the imperfect and preterite tenses of narrative, avers that he himself has paid far more than eyesight: he has given up life and soul and hope itself in order to be worthy of having seen and loved those eyes. Nothing of all he once possessed is left to him.

The sonnet, as it reaches its sestet, instead of continuing to dwell on the synecdoche of the lady’s eyes, focuses on the lady herself, as the word *vos*

replaces the significant multiple *los* of reference to the eyes (*vê-los*, *mereçê-los*, *querê-los*)—insisted on, one feels, to signify by recurrent rhyme an indisputable identification of *los* (the eyes) with *belos*, the word itself containing the precious *los*. The sonnet pursues further hyperboles: not only has the lover paid all that he has, but he is willing (in view of the profit he derives from his surrender) to give as much as he has and as much as he is able because—as he says in closing—“However much I pay you, the more I owe you.” In the transcription below, I have graphically distinguished these themes and the verbs attached to them: I use underlining for the “minor” payment (the loss of sight); *italics* for the qualitative “major” payment (life, soul, hope, and all); **bold** for the words quantifying the major payment—“what I have, what I can, what more,” including the four instances of “more”; ***bold italics*** for the economic vocabulary of paying, owing, pricing, and profiting; and CAPITAL LETTERS for the strikingly different wholehearted “gift-economy” of free offering in *dar*.

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 ventagem mereçê-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 *esperanca*
e **tudo quanto tenho**, *tudo* é vosso,
e o **proveito** disse 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**.
[*Quem vê, Senhora, claro e manifesto*; 17 (125); XVI]

The cognitive dissonance between *dar* and *pagar* registers the bafflement of the lover at the strange economy of love, so elusive to description. But of

course the sonnet is indirectly a plea that the exchange be mutual—that the beloved be willing to give (if only by the continued bestowal of her lovely eye-glances) as well as to be paid. The degree of intellectuality in the sonnet, as the speaker inventories the contents of his erotic ledger and looks to balance its accounts, shows how important it is to the lover to have thought out in advance his bookkeeping, evident in the sedulously-worked patterns highlighted in the different fonts above. But, as I have said, it is when plangency balances intellectuality, when surrender replaces calculation, that the Camões sonnet reaches its height. Here, it is the return of the verb *dar* in the sestet that, contradicting *devo*, lets us register love as something more than counted trading. In an ordinary material exchange, the last line would read, “Quanto mais vos pago, mais me deveis.” But in “quanto mais vos pago, mais vos devo,” the sudden coupling of paying and owing, both inscribed on the lover’s side of the account, expunges all calculation except that of “bem-aventurança,” and we feel the “spontaneous” generosity of love take over and obliterate the founding exchange-metaphor of the poem.

“Spontaneity” is suggested by a thematic surge of feeling. We can remark such surges in some of Camões’s mythological sonnets, in which he often reimagines the inherited story, as he does in his sonnet on Hero and Leander. In Ovid’s *Heroides*, the lovers, still living, address epistles to each other, but in Camões’s poem Leander is shown at the very moment of drowning, when Hero is lost to him forever. While swimming across the Hellespont towards Hero’s signal-light, Leander has been overcome by wind and waves, and has lost both strength and speech:

Seguia aquele fogo, que o guiava,
 Leandro, contra o mar e contra o vento;
 as forças lhe faltavam já e o alento,
 Amor lhas refazia e renovava.

Depois que viu que a alma lhe faltava,
 não esmorece; mas, no pensamento,
 (que a língua já não pode) seu intento
 ao mar que lho cumprisse, encomendava.

Moved by Love, but deprived of language (as the brief parenthesis tells us, its pang an aside), Leander sends a telepathic message to the conqueror sea:

his sole prayer is that the sea should spare Hero in her tower the sight of his dead body. He feels able to ask this because in the past the sea envied his happiness with Hero. Camões, in short, invents an “unrecorded” moment in the Leander story, the moment of the exhausted body and failing tongue, and identifies with the isolated Leander sufficiently to invent a dying wish, in thought-words, for him:

—Ó mar (dezia o moço só consigo),
já te não peço a vida; só queria
que a de Hero me salves; não me veja. . .

Este meu corpo morto, lá o desvia
daquela torre. Sê-me nisto amigo,
pois no meu maior bem me houveste enveja!
[*Seguia aquele fogo, que o guiava*; 61 (147); CLXXXV]

Sometimes, as in this case, Camões achieves plangency by adding an episode to the given myth, but at other times he subtracts aspects of the myth to render it more tragic. In the *Metamorphoses* (VII, 690-862), Cephalus, husband of Procris, is abducted by Aurora who, annoyed by his pining for his wife, sends him back to her with the advice that he test Procris's love, of which he is so proud. Assuming a disguise, Cephalus tempts Procris, and at length she succumbs. But Procris then turns the same trick on Cephalus: he too falls, and they are in consequence reconciled, in a typically Ovidian irony. Camões truncates the myth, even though he devotes two sonnets to it. He convinces us first of Cephalus's overwhelming love of Procris by his abandoning of the ravishing Aurora, and then he turns the sonnet tragic as Cephalus discovers, by his own underhand machinations, that his belief in Procris's fidelity was baseless:

Por sua Ninfa, Céfaló deixava
Aurora, que por ele se perdia;
posto que dá princípio ao claro dia,
posto que as roxas flores imitava.

Ele, que a bela Prócris tanto amava
que só por ela tudo enjeitaria,

deseja de atentar se lhe acharia
tão firme fé como nele achava.

Mudado o traje, tece o duro engano;
outro se finge, preço põe diante,
quebra-se a fé mudável, e consente.

The narrator, his story complete, bursts out with a warning to other lovers:

Ó engenho sutil para seu dano!
Vede que manhas busca um cego amante
para que sempre seja descontente!
[*Por sua Ninfa, Céfalos deixava*, 62 (147); CLXXXIII]

Even in the second of the two sonnets recounting the myth, Cephalus does not find pardon, though he implores it from the stony-hearted Procris. The Ovidian comic bargain is not made, and by this deletion, Camões retains a sonnet-atmosphere of loss and irony.

Yet greater than Camões's reinventions of myth are his daring invasions of the most inchoate moments of consciousness. He is not afraid to approach the forbidding precincts where we are most unintelligible to ourselves, those "dark passages" (as Keats called them) where "all is in a mist." Though many examples of his skill at such moments could be offered, I will restrict myself to one, the arresting sonnet *Busque Amor novas artes*. In this poem, the lover has lost all hope and yet he hopes; in mid-sea with his ship lost ("andando em bravo mar, perdido o lenho"), he boasts that now that he has seen the worst, nothing can dismay him. And yet—

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.

[*Busque Amor novas artes, novo engenho*, 3 (118); XV]

The “mal que mata e não se vê” would, even by itself, have an effect on us comparable to that of Blake’s “invisible worm” that consumes the sick rose. But that present-tense *não se vê* engenders a trail of other such *nãos*, each attached to a past in which the lover found in his heart a something he is unable to define—“I know not what, I know not whence, I know not how, I know not why.” The one missing term among all these *nãos* is “Um não sei quê que leva não sei aonde”: “A what-I-know-not that leads I know not whither.” As always with notable poets, what is missing is crucial. That “whither” will be, we know, the grave, the bottom of the sea where the “mal que mata” will take the shipwrecked lover.

Closely related to that frustrated apprehension of the indefinable but real interior of the psyche are the moments in which Camões allies himself to virtual rather than literal meaning, as he does in the Spanish sonnet *Pues lágrimas tratáis*. Starved for a reassurance that his beloved indeed feels pity, the lover is prepared to convert whatever she has sent into a tear intended for him. In the elaborate Renaissance literature of tears, this is a firmly-managed example (avoiding the grotesque into which Crashaw falls in his poem on Mary Magdalen, “The Weeper”). Camões, addressing his own eyes (which have been shedding tears a thousandfold), says he is well repaid by this single tear from his mistress, if indeed it be a tear at all:

Mas una cosa mucho deseada,
aunque se vea cierta, no es creída,
cuanto más esta, que me es enviada.

Pero digo que aunque sea fingida,
que basta que por lágrima sea dada,
porque sea por lágrima tenida.

[*Pues lágrimas tratáis, mis ojos tristes*, 147 (190); CCXCIX]

It is the “digo que” here that astonishes: the pure force of the word undertakes to make uncertain things certain, feigned things real, real things virtual. And yet the desolation of the lover, in true Camõesian fashion, is felt behind his declaration: we are brought into contact with his sorrow in the sceptical axiom telling us that the much yearned-for thing, when it comes, cannot be credited. That scepticism is set off against the assertive, even aggressive, formal twinning of the last two lines: *que... por :: porque; lágrima :: lágrima; sea :: sea; dada :: tenida*. Like

Emily Dickinson's soul selecting her own society, Camões's lover here closes the valves of his attention like stone. Against all reason, *no creída* and *fingida* are firmly superseded, in their shared phonetic space, by the willed *tenida*.

I should pause for a moment just to remark on Camões's hunt among stylistic paths (familiar and unfamiliar) for inventions to vary the sonnet. Besides his already mentioned echo-sonnet [77 (155); LXX] with its anagram substituting "Natércia" for "Caterina," there is an acrostic sonnet divided down the middle by a vertical gutter, on either side of which Camões composes the 28-letter phrase "Voso como cativo, mui alta senhora": "Yours as captive, noblest lady" [*Vencido está de Amor meu pensamento*; 145 (189); CLIX].² We find as well two sonnets of epitome,³ *Pelos extremos raros que mostrou* [76 (154); XLIV], and *Diversos dões reparte o Céu benino* [56 (144); CXLII]; and an allegorical sonnet, *El vaso reluciente y cristalino* [146 (189); CCLXXXIII], in which a vial symbolizes the beloved's body, while the perfume it contains represents her soul. There are several dialogue-sonnets as well: among these are —*Como fizeste Pórcia, tal ferida?* [71(152); LXI]; the "Siste, viator" sonnet —*Não passes, caminhante!* [156 (194); XXXVII]; the elegiac sonnet —*Que levas, cruel Morte?* [158 (195); LXXXIII]; and the heroic sonnet in praise of Dom João III, —*Quem jaz no grão sepulcro* [160 (196); LIX]. Each of the dialogue-sonnets is motivated by a constant inwardly-renewed set of questions and answers. I do not count most of these exercises among Camões's best work, but they demonstrate that he interested himself in the play of alphabetical letters and the roster of speech-acts as well as in the more evident aspects of sonnet-style such as diction or imagery.

I want to stop for a moment on the formal proportions of the elegiac sonnet on a premature death, —*Que levas, cruel Morte?* Because the abrupt stichomythia of Camões's catechetical syntax mimics the shock and sudden questioning engendered by premature death, the stylistic rigidity seems more than an empty exercise:

—Que levas, cruel Morte? —Um claro dia.
 —A que horas o tomaste? —Amanhecendo.
 —Entendes o que levas? —Não o entendo.
 —Pois quem to faz levar? —Quem o entendia.

—Seu corpo, quem o goza? —A terra fria.
 —Como ficou sua luz? —Anoitecendo.

—Lusitânia que diz? —Fica dizendo:
Enfim, não mereci Dona Maria.

The eighth line, breaking the preceding question-answer half-line patterning, declares its sorrow to be too great to be contained in a half-line: “Lusitânia” needs a full line to declare its unworthiness. The sestet repeats this pattern of the full-line answer in its closing two lines:

—Que fica lá que ver? —Nenhua cousa;
mas fica que chorar sua beldade.
[*Que levas, cruel Morte?*; 158 (195); LXXXIII]

In a similar matching of style to matter, the question-and-answer sonnet addressed to Brutus’s Portia mimics the sustained incredulity that a spectator feels before a case of suicide. Portia, having first wounded herself with a sword to see if she indeed had the courage to do violence to herself, ends her life by swallowing live coals. “Why—having accustomed yourself to steel—would you consume fire?” asks the interlocutor, aghast, to whom Portia replies that “we feel not an accustomed blow,” and that she wants to show her love by feeling fresh pain when she dies:

—Pois porque comes, logo, fogo ardente,
se a ferro te costumás? —Porque ordena
Amor que morra e pene juntamente.

—E tens a dor do ferro por pequena?
—Si: que a dor costumada não se sente;
e eu não quero a morte sem a pena.
[*Como fizeste, Pórcia, tal ferida?*; 71 (152); LXI]

Camões demonstrates Portia’s resolve by altering her first sestet-reply in her second one. Whereas earlier she had related the command of Love in the third person (“ordena / Amor que morra e pene juntamente”) she bravely voices it in a decisive first-person form at the close: “eu não quero a morte sem a pena.” Camões is careful to find a phrasing that will match style to morality.

The sonnet on Portia belongs to another sub-category of Camões’s work: the heroic sonnet, a genre we are not surprised to find in the repertoire of the

author of the *Lusiads*. (He seems to have admired stoic heroism in women, devoting a sonnet to Lucrece as well as to Portia.) We have nothing quite like his heroic sonnets in English until Milton. The most interesting to me of these sonnets is the one addressed to the Viceroy Dom Luis de Ataíde on his return to Portugal, *Que vençais no Oriente tantos Reis* [164 (198); LXIV]. Its two long-breathed sentences, one for the octave, one for the sestet, draw the same comparison: that feats in material arms abroad are less great than the feats in moral virtue at home. The Viceroy's military triumphs over kings have occurred far and wide, in the Orient, in India; but at home, unarmed, he has conquered monsters and Chimeras:

Que vençais no Oriente tantos Reis,
que de novo nos deis da Índia o Estado,
que escureceis a fama que ganhado
tinham os que a ganharam a infêis;

que do tempo tendes vencido as leis,
que tudo, enfim, vençais co tempo armado,
mais é vencer na pátria, desarmado,
os monstros e as Quimeras que venceis.

It is not clear, at the close of the octave, what these monsters and Chimeras can be. What is certain is that they are governed by the same verb—*vencer*—as the kings, the laws of time, and everything else that the Viceroy has overcome. Their forces, if they are to be routed, require a power greater than that exerted by arms. The sestet then reveals the human names of the mythological monsters and Chimeras—massed ingratiitudes, massive envy—as the sonnet sardonically rhymes “imigo” with “amigo,” intimating that the native realm and an enemy kingdom are scarcely to be distinguished:

E assi, sobre vencerdes tanto imigo,
e por armas fazer que, sem segundo,
vosso nome no mundo ouvido seja,

o que vos dá mais nome inda no mundo,
é vencerdes, Senhor, no Reino amigo,
tantas ingratições, tão grande enveja!

If the weapons against kings and laws are the visible ones familiar to heroic exploit, the weapons by which the Viceroy will conquer the enemies at home are the moral virtues of self-possession and integrity. Like Milton after him, Camões urges the concept of a better fortitude, one exceeding the fortitude of the warrior: and he demonstrates stylistically the replacement of the one by the other by the chain of constructions in “vencer,” which demonstrate a hierarchy by which moral conquests outstrip material ones.

It is impossible to speak about the range of Camões without glancing at one of the heartfelt sonnets about the landscape of Portugal. There is not a single sonnet by Shakespeare, nostalgic or otherwise, on England, but we can recall, as we think of Camões on his “doces águas,” Du Bellay’s comparable tenderness towards his “petit Lyre” in *Heureux qui, comme Ulysse*. The public dimension of Camões as a sonneteer is evident not only in the heroic and elegiac sonnets, but also in those of Portuguese *pietas*. Leaving aside the beautiful *Doces águas e claras do Mondego* [6 (119); CXXIII], I choose as example *A formosura desta fresca serra* [136 (184); CCLXXI]. As we read its first quatrain, it appears to us a celebratory sonnet. By this I mean that nothing in the opening quatrain suggests that the poem will be a dismissal of the beauties of nature; on the contrary. In the first quatrain, Camões conceals his own desolate predicament in order that we may experience the full untroubled sweetness of the natural landscape, from which all sadness, he says, has been banished:

A formosura desta fresca serra,
e a sombra dos verdes castanheiros,
o manso caminhar destes ribeiros,
donde toda a tristeza se desterra;

The second quatrain, too, appears to be one of pure natural description, enlarging the scene, as it broadens out from brooks to the ocean and further land, from the chestnut grove to the horizon where the sun is setting and straying flocks are being gathered, ending in the sky where clouds are at their soft collisions:

o rouco som do mar, a estranha terra,
o esconder do sol pelos outeiros,
o recolher dos gados derradeiros,
das nuvens pelo ar a branda guerra;

Even the beginning of the sestet seems to offer us merely a summary of the previous natural delights:

enfim, tudo o que a rara natureza
com tanta variedade nos oferece—

But then the scene crashes into nothingness. Instead of saying, as Wordsworth might, that nature's variety brings us an exaltation offered by no other sight, Camões, in the person (hitherto undefined) who speaks the poem, reveals now that it is a lover who speaks, and that without the presence of the beloved, the more beautiful the setting, the greater the lover's sadness:

tudo...
me está (se não te vejo) magoando.

Sem ti, tudo m'enoja e m'avorrece;
sem ti, perpétuamente estou passando
nas mores alegrias, mor tristeza.

The “tristeza” that seemed so successfully banished in line 4 reappears in force in line 14. Everything wearies the lover's spirit, is abhorrent to him; and these destructive verbs, “enojar” and “avorrecer” destroy the pastoral calm of the preceding lines. And yet, as we look back over those earlier lines, we see that they have stealthily prepared us for the bitter close, in their own gradual darkening, from the shade of the chestnuts to the setting sun to the cloudy heavens with their unquiet commotion. The music, too, has darkened from the soft cadences of the brooks to the hoarse cry of the sea. By such subtle gradations Camões leads us to the revealed distress of the speaker. We remember from such a sonnet both the “alegrias” of the beautiful opening and the “tristeza” of the somber close; in his landscape poems Camões is true to both objective and subjective reality.

The genre of complaint, seen in this and many other sonnets, was one that Camões was to practice with great distinction, not least in his poems of Babylonian exile, of which two, both based, like “Sobre os rios,” on the psalmic laments of the exiled Jews, are sonnets: *Cá nesta Babilonia* [120 (176); CXCIV] and *Na ribeira do Eufrates* [129 (181); CCLXXXII]. The first of these is a bitter political outburst condemning a country “onde o mal se

afina, e o bem se dana”: the second can serve us as an instance of Camões’s genius for the unhappy ending.

Camões manages very often to end in a horrifying place, psychologically speaking, without either slighting or exaggerating the despair he depicts. Neither irony nor melodrama appeals to Camões at such moments: austerity of mind and discretion of discourse, together with an unsparing diction, are his habitual resources. Psalm 137, on which Camões draws for his sonnets of Babylonian exile, is voiced in a collective first-person plural:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered
Zion.

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that
wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?

But in *Na ribeira do Eufrates*, Camões transmutes the biblical collective voice into the first person singular, giving us an individual exiled Jew in Babylon, recalling his past happiness and glory in Zion:

Na ribeira do Eufrates assentado,
discorrendo me achei pela memória
aquele breve bem, aquela glória,
que em ti, doce Sião, tinha passado.

He is urged to sing by those who shallowly tell him that in singing one forgets one’s troubles, no matter how serious one’s hardship. As they urge him to give up his weeping, they ascribe to themselves a knowledge of remedy superior to his own. They make themselves appear to be comforters, echoing his “memória” and “glória” by their mention of his “história” and the “vitória” over sorrow by song; to his “passado” they add their callow reiteration of his “passado bem”:

Da causa de meus males perguntado
me foi: —Como não cantas a história
de teu passado bem, e da vitória
que sempre de teu mal hás alcançado?
Não sabes, que a quem canta se lhe esquece

o mal, inda que grave e rigoroso?
Canta, pois, e não chores dessa sorte.

To these interlocutors, who have never known a grief like his, the speaker sighs a reproof: the kindly surcease for great sorrow is not song but death:

Respondo com suspiros: —Quando crece
a muita saúde, o piadoso
remédio é não cantar senão a morte.

Not their mistaken “esquece,” says the speaker, but his “crece” (phonetically matching but semantically opposite) is the word for his present condition. And if their “rigoroso” is to be succeeded by his “piadoso,” that will happen not by singing but by dying. This sonnet is one of those paradoxical poems that, like Frost’s oven-bird, know in singing not to sing. There are many such impeccable unhappy endings in the 166 sonnets of Camões. They rarely disappoint, and one could cite scores of them, many as bare-boned as the one last quoted. I would recall, in the context of spare unhappy endings, the repeated “Não sei,” mentioned earlier, of *Busque Amor* [3 (118); XV].

I am tempted, in closing, to discuss the majestic sonnet in which Camões, like Job, curses the day he was born, *O dia em que eu nasci, moura e pereça* [131 (182); CCCXXXIX]; but darker to him than any grievous life-event is the confusion of the soul that closes *Correm turvas as águas deste rio* [104 (168); CXCV], a poem revealing, in its opening lines, that the waters of the Tagus have been polluted and the flowering fields have withered. To this natural disorder there succeeds metaphysical chaos, and the poet concludes that truth is nowhere to be found in this God-forgotten world:

Correm turvas as águas deste rio,
que as do Céu e as do monte as enturbaram;
os campos florecidos se secaram,
intratável se fez o vale, e frio.

Passou o verão, passou o ardente estio,
uas cousas por outras se trocaram;
os fermentidos Fados já deixaram
do mundo o regimento, ou desvario.

Tem o tempo sua ordem já sabida;
o mundo, não; mas anda tão confuso,
que parece que dele Deus se esquece.

Casos, opiniões, natura e uso
fazem que nos pareça desta vida
que não há nela mais que o que parece.

The opaque *o que parece* is the direct result of the God who *se esquece*. The rhymes are like a vise: if God would remember his creation, being would flare forth, dismissing seeming. *Uso* has been replaced by *confuso* in a false “etymology” by which *utor*, *uti* has slipped into *fundo*, *fundere*. Whirling around us in a maelstrom are all the useless appurtenances and adjuncts of thought: cases, opinions, nature, and habit welter in disorder. They create the paradox of the empty ending:

...nos pareça desta vida
que não há nela mais que o que parece.

One wants to think that life has an interior; but it turns out that exterior seeming is all there is. This chaotic psychic vacancy, this life that has nothing on the inside but what appears on the outside, is Camões’s hell. It takes a great poet to make the tiny word “nela” denote such an abyss. And it takes a great poet to subside from the mental hailstorm of “casos, opiniões, natura e uso” to the psychological black ice of “nos pareça . . . o que parece,” the bleakest of all tautologies.

There should be a new translation into English—even if into English prose—of Camões’s sonnets, to replace the fustian of the Burton version, which altogether fails to convey Camões’s lofty plainness and painful sobriety. The great thematic range of Camões’s sonnets could reveal, for English-speaking readers, the relative thematic narrowness of Shakespeare’s sonnets, which concern themselves chiefly with their quadrilateral erotics. Camões’s stylistic adventurousness makes his sonnets a veritable inventory of Renaissance sonnet-varieties, with his echo, his dialogues, his anagrams, his revisionary mythmaking, his heroic and elegiac and plaintive forms. Of course, like all significant poets, he is a master of intonation and cadence (matters I have not touched on here, because a native speaker of Portuguese

could both sense and describe them far better than I). The *Columbia Encyclopedia* says of Camões that even if he had never written the *Lusiads*, he would have won fame for his “flawless sonnets.” But these flawless sonnets are, for the English-speaking reader, a treasure unfindable in the florid artificiality of Burton. Should their flawlessness be hidden from us forever? Or will someone bring to life for us again, in the present century, Camões the sonneteer? Shakespeare, I suppose, must exist complete in Portuguese; so should Camões be granted his full presence in English.

Notes

¹ Luís de Camões, *Rimas*. Ed. Álvaro J. Da Costa Pimpão. (Coimbra: Atlântida, 1973). Citations will be drawn from this edition, and will be identified by sonnet number and page number. For the convenience of English-speaking readers, I have indicated, in Roman numerals, the number of the sonnet in the sole complete English translation: *Camoens: The Lyrics, Part I (Sonnets, Canzons, Odes, and Sextines)*, Englished by Richard F. Burton (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1884). Burton's diction is both archaic and over-elaborate, so much so as to be at times almost unintelligible.

² I transcribe this sonnet, since it is difficult to envisage it from a description:

Vencido está de Amor	meu pensamento
o mais que pode ser	vencida a vida,
sujeita a vos servir	instituída,
oferecendo tudo	a vosso intento.

Contente deste bem,	louva o momento,
ou hora em que se viu	não bem perdida;
mil vezes desejando	a tal ferida,
outra vez renovar	seu perdimento.

Com essa pretensão	está segura
a causa que me guia	nesta empresa,
não estranha, tão doce,	bonrosa e alta,

Jurando não seguir	outra ventura,
rotando só por vós	rara firmeza,
ou ser no vosso amor	achado em falta.

³ By “epitome” I mean a sonnet which instances several different objects, and then resumes them within the beloved at the close. In *Diversos dões*, the various gifts possessed severally by each goddess are at the end all bestowed on the beloved:

Mas junto agora o mesmo Céu derrama
Em ti o mais que tinha . . .

. . .te dão, fermosa Dama,
Diana, honestidade, a graça, Vénus,
Palas o aviso seu, Juno a nobreza.

Helen Vendler, A. Kingsley Porter University Professor at Harvard, received her Ph.D. in 1960 from Harvard in English and American Literature and Language. She has taught at Cornell, Smith, and Boston University before coming to Harvard in 1981. Among her most recent books are *Coming of Age as Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath, Seamus Heaney*, and *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, all published by the Harvard University Press. She is working on a book on Yeats's lyric forms. Email: aperalta@fas.harvard.edu