

BOOK REVIEW

Ovid's Erotic Poems: Amores and Ars Amatoria. Translated by LEN KRISAK. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. Pp. 225. Hardcover, Price \$32.50. ISBN 978-0-8122-4625-4.

Love is always in the air, but its Ovidian aroma is particularly strong these days. Len Krisak's new translation of the *Amores* and *Ars amatoria* into rhymed iambic couplets arrives amid a welter of recent versions of the erotic elegiacs, by Tom Bishop (*Amores*), Tom Payne (*Ars, Remedia, Medicamina*), David Slavitt (*Amores, Heroides, Remedia*), and, newest of all, Julia Dyson Hejduk (*Ars, Remedia, Tristia 2*).¹ Krisak's list of "some translations of Ovid consulted" (22) omits Bishop, Payne, and Slavitt, even though Bishop and Payne also use iambic couplets, and Payne's, like Krisak's, also rhymes. None of these translations captures every element of Ovid's style, but Bishop's vivid and speedy verses, Payne's witty clarity, Hejduk's conversational charm, and Slavitt's beguiling inventiveness make for a crowded field of competitors. And though we may value youth in texts as well as in lovers, Ovid himself favors those who have reached thirty-five (*Ars* 2.693–94)—which Melville's shapely translation (into half-rhymed iambic couplets) has just done.² With his taut elegance, Melville continues to attract admirers; whether Krisak will do so remains to be seen.

Ovid's Erotic Poems stands out from its contemporaries through the same commitment to rhyme and iambic rhythm that shape Krisak's translations of Vergil's *Eclogues* and Catullus.³ This consistency of form leads to

¹ *Amores*, tr. Tom Bishop (Carcenet, 2003). *The Art of Love, with The Cures for Love and Treatments for the Feminine Face*, tr. Tom Payne (Vintage, 2011). *Love Poems, Letters, and Remedies of Ovid*, tr. David Slavitt (Harvard University Press, 2011). *The Offense of Love: Ars Amatoria, Remedia Amoris, and Tristia 2*, tr. Julia Dyson Hejduk (Wisconsin University Press, 2014).

² *The Love Poems*, tr. A.D. Melville (Oxford, 1990).

³ *Virgil's Eclogues*, tr. Len Krisak (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010). *Gaius Valerius Catullus: Carmina*, tr. Len Krisak (Carcenet, 2014).

many felicities, yet it also limits his ability to handle Ovid's content. He nimbly captures Ovid's amatory perplexity (*Am.* 2.10.5-8): "The both of them are gorgeous, elegant, and chic— / A pair at par, yet equally unique. / Well, maybe one is prettier, but which one is it? / They please the same and each one is exquisite." Similarly, the witty double entendre at *Ars* 2.166 (*cum dare non possem munera, verba dabam*) foxes most translators (though Hejduk at least offers an excellent footnote to explain the joke), but Krisak's solution is perfect: "When [Ovid] had designs, / He couldn't buy girls gifts; he fed them lines." Ovid's intertextual antics are aptly transmuted into echoes of earlier English poets; I caught references to Wyatt, Shakespeare, Blake, and Eliot, among others. On the other hand, while Ovid's phrasing habitually separates hexameter from pentameter and couplet from couplet, Krisak's reliance on enjambement, especially in the *Amores*, weakens the sense of aphoristic balance.

As Prince knows, there's joy in repetition.⁴ Ovid's devotion to polyp-ton, anaphora, and other mixtures of reiteration with variation is one of the great pleasures of his verse, yet most translators fall short in this area. Krisak occasionally succeeds: "What flees, I follow; what follows, I flee" (*Am.* 2.19.36, *quod sequitur, fugio; quod fugit, ipse sequor*). The triple repetition of Gallus (*Am.* 1.15.29-30) and of *me* and *ipse* (*Am.* 2.12.13-14) stay as well. Polyp-ton can be engagingly reframed: "Love thrives on reciprocity" (*Am.* 2.4.20, *cui placeo, protinus ipsa placet*). Ovid imagines Corinna's safe return from a sea voyage (*Am.* 2.11.44): *et dicam 'nostros advehit illa deos!'*; Krisak's "My love's come home! My gods have come about!" not only ups the repetitive ante but adds an apt nautical term to a poem about sailing. He even manages to turn an Ovidian double into an English triple (*Ars* 1.582, *huic, si sorte bibes, sortem concede priorem*): "Give him your turn by turning your turn down."

More often, however, Ovid's repetitions are simply omitted. Rhymes are part of the problem; if the sonic repetition at the end of the line is burdened with repetitive sound elsewhere, the result can be overwhelmingly heavy. The task is not impossible, as Melville's translation proves, but Krisak often gets the sense without the sound of Ovid's morphological mischief: *Am.* 1.6.24-25 *excute poste seram. / excute; 1.13.25-26 surgere*

⁴ Prince, "Joy in Repetition." *Graffiti Bridge* (Warner Bros., 1990).

mane puellas / quis, nisi cui non est ulla puella, ferat?; 2.2.43 *quaerit aquas in aquis*, 3.11.9-11 *ergo ego* (x2), 3.6.63-64 *centum aut plures* (x2), *Ars* 3.42 *defuit ars vobis: arte perennat amor*. Melville finds solutions for all of these repetitions. Ovid's love of the *versus serpentinus*, in which the end of the pentameter repeats the start of the hexameter, appears three times in the *Amores*; Melville and Bishop manage all three, Krisak only one.

Another challenge for any formalist translator is that of filler. English and Latin couplets of similar length cannot always handle the same amount of material. Sometimes certain details of the Latin must be left out; sometimes, just as problematically, a full Latin couplet can be translated in less than a full English couplet. The verbal tailoring required in such situations ought to disguise the added material, but the necessity of rhyme makes the job even more difficult, and Krisak's filler, which often performs the task of supplying that rhyme, often distracts from the narrative. As Io rides Jupiter across the sea (*Am.* 1.3.24, *virginea tenuit cornua vara manu*), "Her virgin hands held horns to *push and pull*"; is Jupiter an old-school video game? A cow's white hide (*Am.* 3.5.13-14) looks "like milk, still foaming in the pail / And fresh from ewes drained dry *that quake and quail*"; but they have no reason to be afraid. Other passages are simply misrepresented. Ovid's Corinna is nude, but Krisak allows her to keep her clothes on (*Am.* 1.5.17-18); youths somehow walk behind their own clothing (*Am.* 3.13.24); sex turns into an adult version of Mr. Potato Head ("Venus re-arranges breasts and hips," *Am.* 3.14.24).

Sarah Ruden's insightful and pithy introduction paints Ovid as a lover of words above all else: "Quip by quip, antithesis by mutually annihilating antithesis, he mows his way through sensation, sentiment, and sentimentality, leaving nothing behind but the magic show itself" (15). The end-notes are perfectly brief but too few, and much of the glossary is copied from them verbatim.

"All in all, then," Brunelle reminisces,
 "It's a medley of hits and of misses—
 And the latter, I find,
 Are more of the kind
 That one castigates rather than kisses."

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