

THOUGHTS ON SKOGEKÄR BERGBO

In a sense, it's reasonable to think of Swedish as the German of Northern Europe, for it still has considerably more inflexional forms to deal with compared with Danish and Norwegian – five plural endings of nouns: *-er, -ar, -or, -en, {zero}*, as well as two forms of the present tense of verbs; *-er* and *-ar*. A few centuries ago, all three languages were more inflexional, since the singular and plural of verbs differed, e.g. *var/voro* – *was/were*, and nouns also had case endings, e.g. *på gatu* (*on the street < gata*), with once again, Swedish differing more and for a longer period of time. Furthermore, Swedish retained subjunctive forms far longer than other Scandinavian languages – it is still possible (unless my son tells me otherwise) to say *Jag vore tacksam om... (I would be grateful if...)*.

As can be seen from the above, this will sometimes result in Swedish still having more syllables in a line than its Scandinavian neighbours. If you add to this the fact that English has practically always dropped extra syllables for nouns and verbs, except after sibilants, e.g. *catches* (3rd person singular or plural ending), this makes life difficult for anyone trying to translate Swedish Petrarchian sonnets into English, e.g. ABBA/ABBA/CDE/CDE.

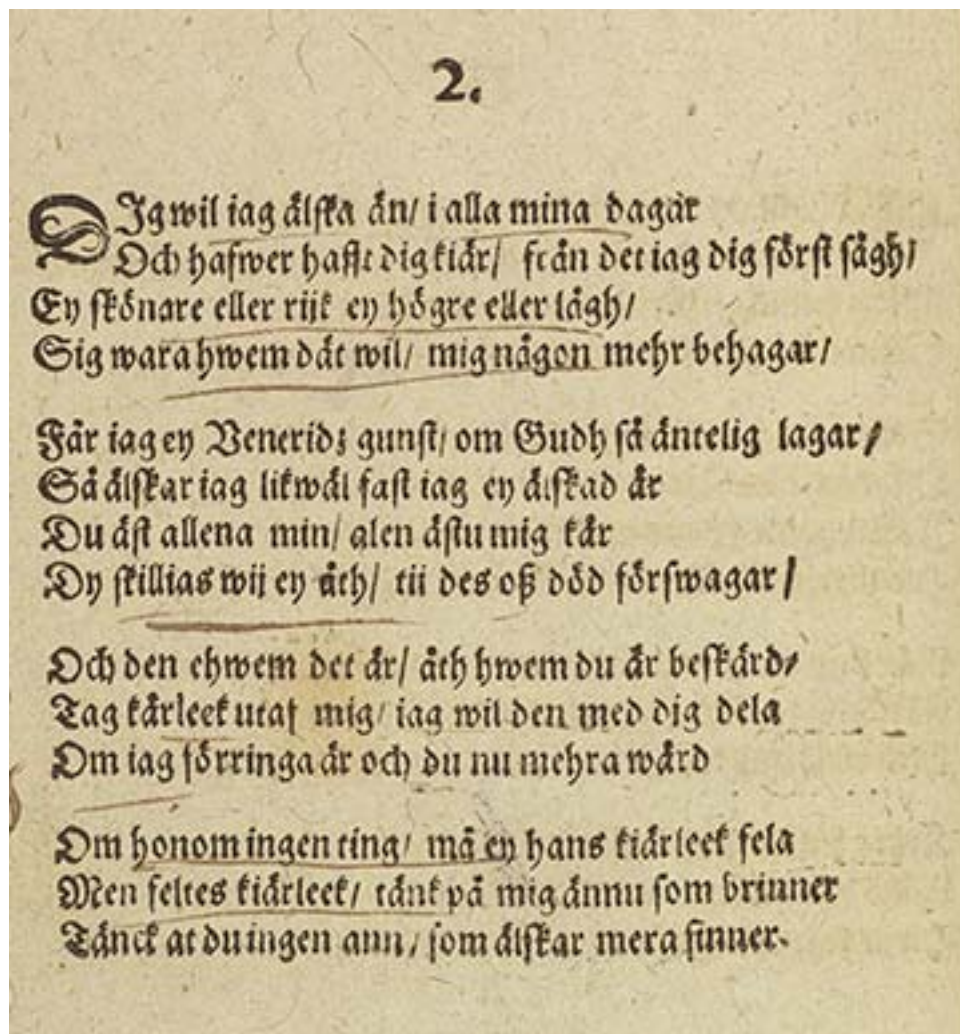
Ignoring the change in content and dramatic climax typical of the Shakespearean sonnet, with its ABAB/CDCD/EFEF/GG, it is clear that the use of female end-rhymes is, by Shakespeare's time, the exception rather than the rule in English poetry, so the question for the translator into English is often: should I retain lines ending with a female rhyme, or shorten them?

In the case of the following poem, the tone of the poem seems to change if you alter the length of the line. Another choice has to do with sticking strictly to the rhyme scheme, e.g. repeating the rhyme scheme of the first quatrain in the second quatrain. I don't think is necessary *per se*, since the repetition may well sound un-English, even though faithfully reproducing the original form.

If you add to these formal considerations a semantic one, then the burning issue is: Should this poem be completely understandable in terms of semantics to a reader of the period, or a present-day reader? There is no unequivocal answer to this when translating poetry from as far back. Fifty years more, and I would have been writing 'thou art' to keep 'in key', but also using words that no longer exist at all, or with changed meanings. I have come to the conclusion that you have to aim for a present-day reader, but suggest linguistically that it is an old text. I have seen some frightful 'hip' translations of Shakespeare, ones I am convinced would have made the man turn in his grave. Take one example: the use of colloquial language and slang is socially completely out of place in Shakespeare (as far as I know). To get the *social timbre* wrong seems a grave mistake to me. Or the *social conventions*. Or the mode of thought. To modernise the language does not justify modernising the thought or the conventions. This is surely a bad mistake to make.

Here's the poem. In facsimile and in modern Swedish. The original is taken from a collection of 100 sonnets called *Wenerid* by the Swedish writer who

called himself Skogekär Bergbo. The collection was first published in 1680 with the comment 'written over 30 years ago':



Dig vill jag älska än i alla mina dagar
och haver haft dig kär, från det jag dig först såg;
ej skönare eller rik, ej högre eller låg,
sig vara vem det vill, mig någon mer behagar.

Får jag ej *Venerids*gunst, om Gud så äntelig lagar,
så älskar jag likväl fast jag ej älskad är.
Du äst allena min, allen ästu mig kär.
Ty skiljas vi ej åt, till dess oss död försvagar.

Och den, evem det är, åt vem du är beskörd,
tag kärlek utav mig! Jag vill den med dig dela,
om jag för ringa är och du nu mera värd.

Om honom ingenting! Må ej hans kärlek fela!
Men feltes kärlek, tänk på mig ännu som brinner,
tänk att du ingen ann, som älskar mera, finner.

What did I start by doing? Precisely what I said you shouldn't. I argued that the more logical (read: easy) answer in English was to write a Shakespearean type of sonnet (the Swedish sonnet below uses six rhymes and has a final couplet), to do a 'hybrid', i.e. stick to 12 syllables throughout, introduce more rhymes. resulted in an ABBA, CDDC decasyllabic quatrain. I will spare you the details, but the rhymes were: *live/know/low/give; decree/return/burn/free*.

I often wondered, when counting syllables, whether words could be 'crunched' as easily in Bergbo as in, for example, Theobald Hock in German back in 1601 – or maybe this is a transition period in Swedish verse when words such as *hafwer* (have) can already be pronounced *har'* (as today). Sometimes the writer actually uses two variants of the same word, e.g. *allena/alen*. Either way, I wanted to get closer to the original Swedish, so I started by finding four A rhymes. After using BB and CC (*know/low; return/burn*), I eventually decided to go one stage further than Bergbo and take BB/BB (*know/low; forego/glow*). Here is my result:

You will I love until my life on earth quite ceases,
And are my heart's delight, as from the first I know;
Though lovelier or rich, of higher rank or low,
Whoever it might be, there's none me greater pleases.

Should *Wenerid* spurn my love, assuming God decrees this,
E'en so I still will love, though love I must forego;
Yet you alone are mine, for you alone I glow,
Hence may we never part till death from life releases.

To him who'er it be you are consigned by birth,
Let him take love from me. With you I wish to share it,
Should I too lowly be and you of greater worth.

Of him speak not a word! His love, may nought impair it!
But should love lack, then think of me who still am burning,
Recall, you'll find none else who loves you with such yearning.

I have now arrived at something that is formally acceptable. What I still lack is the ease of repetitions and echoes (first half of l. 2, second half of l. 8), the balanced lines (e.g. ll. 6–7 – retained in l. 6, but lost in l. 7) and the combination of compression and natural flow that I feel the Swedish has. But that could be *my* reaction as a non-contemporary (non-)Swedish reader. Taken out of context, this sonnet is perhaps not mind-boggling stuff, but it is clear that the poetic craftsmanship is definitely in order. Or is that a contradiction in terms?