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Delphine and Hyppolyte **(‘Femmes Damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte’)** **by Charles Baudelaire**

TRANSLATED BY JAN OWEN

Charles Baudelaire, born in Paris in 1821, was one of the greatest nineteenth-century French poets. He was a key figure in European literature, with a far-reaching influence—an example, in his life and in his poetry, of what it means to be modern. He was also a highly original writer of prose poems, a discerning art critic, and a pioneering translator of Edgar Allan Poe.

Les Fleurs du Mal, his major work, was influenced by the French romantic poets of the early nineteenth century; it is formally close to the contemporary Parnassians, but is psychologically and sexually complex. Baudelaire’s is a poetics of the imagination, blending irony and lyricism, intellect and feeling. He had an urban sensibility and was a *flâneur* and dandy, an admirer of the artificial as opposed to the natural; his fascination with horror, sexual perversity, death and decay is balanced by a sensitivity to beauty and suffering which invests many of his poems with a subversive spirituality.

Much of the literary world of the time was outraged by his work, and he and his publisher and printer were successfully prosecuted for obscenity, with six of the poems being suppressed in France until 1949. One of the condemned poems was ‘Femmes damnées: *Delphine et Hippolyte*’. This is one of two poems with the same main title and which has been variously translated as ‘Lesbians’, ‘Condemned Women’, ‘Women Accurst’, ‘Women Cast Out’, ‘Women Damned’, or in the case of the longer poem simply as ‘Delphine and Hippolyta’. The nineteenth-century negative moral attitude towards lesbianism now poses something of a problem for the translator, particularly with the title, and also with the last five stanzas which were a late addition to placate the censor – unsuccessfully, as it happened. I have side-stepped the issue a little with my translation of the title but have, of course, been as true as I could to the text of the final five stanzas, which are at least softened by the last line.

In translating Baudelaire, I have kept to traditional verse form because rhythm, musicality and pace are intrinsic to Baudelaire’s poetry, but I settled for iambic pentameter rather than alexandrines, which can seem laboured in English. Since rhymes are harder to come by in English than in French I have often opted for half-rhyme, and in fact I feel this somewhat muted effect can sometimes better serve a particular poem’s ambivalent tone.

Though persevering with traditional verse form is time-consuming and frustrating, translation does bring a sense of camaraderie—when I faced a difficult choice of words, was out on a limb for a rhyme or was struggling to keep the suppleness of the French syntax, it helped to imagine Baudelaire as a somewhat sardonic presence behind my left shoulder.

Femmes damnées

A la pâle clarté des lampes languissantes,
Sur de profonds coussins tout imprégnés d'odeur
Hippolyte rêvait aux caresses puissantes
Qui levaient le rideau de sa jeune candeur.

Elle cherchait, d'un oeil troublé par la tempête,
De sa naïveté le ciel déjà lointain,
Ainsi qu'un voyageur qui retourne la tête
Vers les horizons bleus dépassés le matin.

De ses yeux amortis les paresseuses larmes,
L'air brisé, la stupeur, la morne volupté,
Ses bras vaincus, jetés comme de vaines armes,
Tout servait, tout paraît sa fragile beauté.

Etendue à ses pieds, calme et pleine de joie,
Delphine la couvait avec des yeux ardents,
Comme un animal fort qui surveille une proie,
Après l'avoir d'abord marquée avec les dents.

Beauté forte à genoux devant la beauté frêle,
Superbe, elle humait voluptueusement
Le vin de son triomphe, et s'allongeait vers elle,
Comme pour recueillir un doux remerciement.

Elle cherchait dans l'oeil de sa pâle victime
Le cantique muet que chante le plaisir
Et cette gratitude infinie et sublime
qui sort de la paupière ainsi qu'un long soupir.

→Hippolyte, cher coeur, que dis-tu de ces choses?
Comprends-tu maintenant qu'il ne faut pas offrir
L'holocauste sacré de tes premières roses
Aux souffles violents qui pourraient les flétrir?

Mes baisers sont légers comme ces éphémères
Qui caressent le soir les grands lacs transparents,
Et ceux de ton amant creuseront leurs ornières
Comme des chariots ou des socs déchirants;

Ils passeront sur toi comme un lourd attelage
De chevaux et de boeufs aux sabots sans pitié...
Hippolyte, ô ma soeur! tourne donc ton visage,
Toi, mon âme et mon coeur, mon tout et ma moitié,

Delphine and Hippolyte

Softly bathed in the lamp's declining light,
Hippolyte lay on cushions thick with scent,
reliving all the pleasures of the night,
her candour vanished and her freshness spent,

and searching out with stormy troubled eyes
an innocent world already far away,
as a traveller casts a lingering last gaze
towards the blue horizon of yesterday.

Her heavy eyes, wet with tears of ease,
her broken look, her sad voluptuousness,
her vanquished arms flung out, of no more use,
all enhanced her fragile loveliness.

Spread out beside her feet, replete with joy,
Delphine watched over her with smouldering eyes
as a brooding lioness will guard her prey,
having first tooth-marked that helpless prize.

The strong beauty, kneeling before the frail,
proudly, sensuously, with each breath drank
the wine of triumph, then in mute appeal
stretched out close to Hippolyte for thanks.

Pleasure's a canticle that needs no word;
she searched her pallid victim's half-closed eyes
for the heavenly and infinite gratitude
that lifts from lowered eyelids like faint sighs.

'My Hippolyte, what do you say of this?
Tell me, do you understand at last
you need not waste the gift of your first flowers
on rough winds that would wither them to dust?

These kisses light on you as damselflies
skim over a shining lake at close of day;
those of a man would furrow you like ploughs
or carve deep ruts like carts in muddy clay.

They'd drive across you like an oxen team
churning their hooves, pitilessly cruel.
O Hippolyte, my sister, turn from them,
you, my heart and soul, my twin, my all.

Tourne vers moi tes yeux pleins d'azur et d'étoiles!
Pour un de ces regards charmants, baume divin,
Des plaisirs plus obscurs je lèverai les voiles,
Et je t'endormirai dans un rêve sans fin!»

Mais Hippolyte alors, levant sa jeune tête:
→«Je ne suis point ingrate et ne me repens pas,
Ma Delphine, je souffre et je suis inquiète,
Comme après un nocturne et terrible repas.

Je sens fondre sur moi de lourdes épouvantes
Et de noirs bataillons de fantômes épars,
Qui veulent me conduire en des routes mouvantes
Qu'un horizon sanglant ferme de toutes parts.

Avons-nous donc commis une action étrange?
Explique, si tu peux, mon trouble et mon effroi :
Je frissonne de peur quand tu me dis: «Mon ange!»
Et cependant je sens ma bouche aller vers toi.

Ne me regarde pas ainsi, toi, ma pensée!
Toi que j'aime à jamais, ma soeur d'élection,
Quand même tu serais une embûche dressée
Et le commencement de ma perdition!»

Delphine secouant sa crinière tragique,
Et comme trépigant sur le trépied de fer,
L'oeil fatal, répondit d'une voix despotique:
→«Qui donc devant l'amour ose parler d'enfer?

Maudit soit à jamais le rêveur inutile
Qui voulut le premier, dans sa stupidité,
S'éprenant d'un problème insoluble et stérile,
Aux choses de l'amour mêler l'honnêteté!

Celui qui veut unir dans un accord mystique
L'ombre avec la chaleur, la nuit avec le jour,
Ne chauffera jamais son corps paralytique
A ce rouge soleil que l'on nomme l'amour!

Va, si tu veux, chercher un fiancé stupide;
Cours offrir un coeur vierge à ses cruels baisers;
Et, pleine de remords et d'horreur, et livide,
Tu me rapporteras tes seins stigmatisés...

Fix on me, instead, those azure eyes
whose starry depths can bless me like a balm.
I'll lift the veil on darker joys than these
then cradle you in a sleep of endless dream.'

Hippolyte raised up her youthful head,
'I'm not ungrateful. No, not in the least,
but I feel sad, Delphine, and so afraid,
as if I've shared some sinister night feast.

Terror's cast on me its leaden weight
and scattered ghosts are gathering in black hordes
to lead me down a treacherous shifting route.
Blood-red horizons loom on either side.

Have we done wrong, does shame now share our bed?
Tell me, if you can, what are these fears?
You call me 'angel' and I shake with dread
yet straight away my mouth is drawn to yours.

Don't look at me like that, my dearest thought,
you whom I love more than a sister. Even
though you may be the snare in which I'm caught,
the means by which I'll fall away from heaven.'

With flashing eyes, Delphine threw back her hair,
shaking like the oracle on her stool,
and cried in a harsh despotical voice, 'How dare
anyone in love's presence speak of hell?

I curse forever the first fatuous fool
who got caught up, in his stupidity,
with an insoluble problem, sterile, null—
no one can square off love and honesty.

There is a mystical accord, some claim,
that marries night with day, shade with fire,
but those poor paralytics never warm
their limbs in the red sun we call desire.

Go give your virgin heart to some dull man,
see for yourself how cruel his touch will be,
then sick with shocked remorse, try, if you can,
to bring your branded bosom back to me.

On ne peut ici-bas contenter qu'un seul maître!»
Mais l'enfant, épanchant une immense douleur,
Cria soudain: – «Je sens s'élargir dans mon être
Un abîme béant ; cet abîme est mon cœur!

Brûlant comme un volcan, profond comme le vide!
Rien ne rassasiera ce monstre gémissant
Et ne rafraîchira la soif de l'Euménide
Qui, la torche à la main, le brûle jusqu'au sang.

Que nos rideaux fermés nous séparent du monde,
Et que la lassitude amène le repos!
Je veux m'anéantir dans ta gorge profonde,
Et trouver sur ton sein la fraîcheur des tombeaux!»

– Descendez, descendez, lamentables victimes,
Descendez le chemin de l'enfer éternel!
Plongez au plus profond du gouffre, où tous les crimes,
Flagellés par un vent qui ne vient pas du ciel,

Bouillonnent pêle-mêle avec un bruit d'orage.
Ombres folles, courez au but de vos désirs;
Jamais vous ne pourrez assouvir votre rage,
Et votre châtiment naîtra de vos plaisirs.

Jamais un rayon frais n'éclaira vos cavernes;
Par les fentes des murs des miasmes fiévreux
Filtrent en s'enflammant ainsi que des lanternes
Et pénètrent vos corps de leurs parfums affreux.

L'âpre stérilité de votre jouissance
Altère votre soif et roidit votre peau,
Et le vent furibond de la concupiscence
Fait claquer votre chair ainsi qu'un vieux drapeau.

Loin des peuples vivants, errantes, condamnées,
A travers les déserts courez comme les loups;
Faites votre destin, âmes désordonnées,
Et fuyez l'infini que vous portez en vous!

You serve one master here or none at all!
But the young girl, in her anguish, blurted out
'It feels as if a hungry, gaping hole
is opening up in me; that hole's my heart,

a fiery, seething crater deep as the void!
And it's insatiable, a moaning beast
that shall be torched to the last drop of blood,
for nothing will satisfy the Furies' thirst.

At least this weariness may bring us rest;
far from the world, here in our curtained room,
I long to lose myself against your breast
and sense against your skin the chilly tomb.'

—Go down and deeper down, my piteous ones,
towards eternal hell, here is the path.
Plunge to the very lowest depths where sins
whipped on by winds from neither heaven nor earth

howl like a raging gale, spin pell-mell.
Run the gamut of passion, grasp in vain
for final peace; even as you fulfil
each new desire, fresh punishment is born.

Clear rays of light will never reach your caverns;
filtering in through fissures in the walls,
sick miasmas flaring up like lanterns
will bathe you in a perfume that appalls.

Your bitter sterile joy will turn to dust,
will torture you with thirst, will seam and sag
your weary skin as the raging wind of lust
slaps your flesh about like a drooping flag.

Far from the tribes of men, condemned by all,
Run, like wolves, the desert of your sin.
Make your own destiny, disordered souls,
and flee the infinite you bear within.