Ha-im ata dome le-yom av?: Anna Herman Translates the Sonnets

Abstract

In this article, I address contemporary Hebrew translations of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, specifically those by the Israeli poet Anna Herman. My reading of Herman’s translation of Sonnet 18 contextualizes this translation in the translation history of the Sonnets, from Isaac Yaakov Schwartz to Shimon Sandbank. I discuss how these retranslations illuminate and complicate our understanding of shifts in the development of modern Hebrew writing and translation from the nineteenth to twenty first centuries. How do Herman’s translations ‘compare’, as it were, with the translations that have come before, particularly those by male translators? As part of a neoformalist turn in contemporary Hebrew poetry, I call attention to the ways in which Herman’s translations, which were published in 2006, revitalize both the original Shakespearean English and its later Hebrew translations, thereby constituting an all-together contemporary text.


Key words: Hebrew, poetry, translation, sonnets, neoformalism, retranslation

Dedicated to the memory of Gideon Toury z”l
Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 opens with one of the most famous queries in English literature: ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer day?’ In this poem, Shakespeare is wrestling with the problem of literary representation and the capacity of literature to approximate the truth of human experiences. In this article, I will extend this question to the translated text: How does a translation compare with its original? In the case of Shakespeare, how do retranslations of his work (of which there are many and in many languages) complicate and enrich this relation? This article opens with a consideration of the rich legacy of Hebrew translations of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, highlighting how Hebrew translation practices have aligned closely with developments in the language and its literature. From there, I offer a close reading of a contemporary Hebrew translation of Sonnet 18 by the Israeli poet Anna Herman, whose translation goes even further than previous translations in affirming the primary status of the translation. In so doing, I argue that Herman makes a case for the vitality of (her) translation, claiming for it the long textual afterlife that Shakespeare’s speaker desires for the beloved.

To begin, it is important to note that Hebrew literary translation caught up relatively late to the importance of Shakespeare’s sonnets, a sharp contrast with the status that they held in the English literary tradition, where the sonnets were considered a major part of Shakespeare’s oeuvre, and circulated widely, at times exceeding his plays in prominence.¹ The eminent Israeli translation scholar Gideon Toury, to whom this essay is dedicated, refers to the sonnets’ neglect in the Hebrew literary system as a ‘meaningful void’ and surmises that one reason that it took until the twentieth century for the sonnets to achieve the sort of canonical status that they held in English and other languages, is that Hebrew had its own vibrant and active sonnet tradition and therefore did not need to translate the English one.² In Hebrew, the term for sonnet—shir zahav (golden poem)—
invokes the fourteen lines of the traditional sonnet in the word *zahav*, gold, which carries the gematric value of fourteen.³ Although this expression applies primarily to sonnets, it has also been ascribed to odes and other poems, a possible indication of how the Hebrew sonnet became a model for excellence in Hebrew poetry. For scholars like Dvora Bregman, Immanuel of Rome’s early fourteenth-century sonnets mark the beginning of the Hebrew sonnet tradition.⁴ From that moment, the Hebrew sonnet developed more or less uninterruptedly, drawing its primary influences from the Italian tradition, and later from French and German.

Arguably, the earliest translation of a Shakespearean sonnet appears in Isaac Salkinson’s 1878 translation of Romeo and Juliet, *Ram ve-Ya ’el*. Salkinson (1820-1883) does not translate the sonnet that appears in the play’s prologue (Act 1, Prologue, ll. 1-14) but does translate the one that appears in Act 1, Scene 5, when Romeo first addresses Juliet. The dialogue that unfolds in lines 84 through 99 follows the prosodic conventions of the sonnet, which Salkinson reproduces in his translation.⁵ According to Toury, however, the first Hebrew translation of a stand-alone Shakespearean sonnet did not appear until 1916 when Sonnets 18 and 60 were published in the American Hebrew journal *Ha-toren* in Israel Jacob Schwartz’s translation. In 1923, additional translations by Shwartz appeared in the Hebrew periodical *Ha-tekufa*, at that time based in Warsaw. Schwartz, who was born in 1885 near Kovno, immigrated to the United States in 1906 and was primarily known as a Yiddish writer, but these translations are evidence of his attempt to work in both the Hebrew and Yiddish systems. Although *Ha-toren* and *Ha-tekufa* were respected publications in their time, Schwartz’s residence in the United States removed him from developments in Palestine, which had rapidly become the centre of modern Hebrew literary production in the twentieth century. For this reason, among others, these early translations received very little attention from the Hebrew reading public, and it would be some time before
Shakespeare’s sonnets would take their place alongside his plays in the space of modern Hebrew translation and literature.

The appearance of S. Shalom’s (1904-1990) full translation of the Sonnets in 1943 marked a critical moment in the popular reception of the sonnets. Although translations of the sonnets had appeared in various journals in the first few decades of the twentieth century, Shalom’s translation became the standard edition for many decades to follow. The availability and convenience of having a full volume from which to draw poems for anthologies and other uses accounted in part for its canonicity in the Hebrew literary system. Additionally, while translators like Schwartz reflected the conventions of the late Haskala (Enlightenment) and Tehiya (Revival) periods in their use of heavy biblical intertextuality, Shalom’s translation reflected a more proficient understanding of the English language and English-language literature. According to Toury, ‘as the quantity of Hebrew translations from English began to increase, a gradual ‘realignment’ of the target language and literature vis-à-vis their English counterparts occurred as well, as a result of continual contact between them.’ And yet, despite the authority conferred on Shalom’s translations, Hebrew poets and translators continued to translate and publish translations of the sonnets in the years that followed. In 1977 another full translation of the sonnets appeared, this time translated by Ephraim Broide, followed by Shimon Sandbank’s highly acclaimed 1992 translation. More recently, in 2011, the author Gail Hareven teamed up with the doctor Avi Hasner to translate a volume of the sonnets, a collaboration that was enthusiastically covered by the Israeli press.

This translation and retranslation activity provides scholars of Hebrew literature and translation with a range of material for assessing the distinct ways in which modern Hebrew poetry has developed from the nineteenth century to the present day. In the mid- to late twentieth century,
for example, modern Hebrew poets like Avraham Shlonsky, Leah Goldberg, and Meir Wieseltier were drawn to Shakespeare’s poetry for a variety of reasons: in part, to assert their own views of Hebrew poetry on a classic work, but also for the pleasure of translating Shakespeare’s verse and in order to wrestle, in productive ways, with the challenges that this translation poses. But as Harai Golomb has explored, aesthetic and political considerations were present, and even overlapped, in the earliest Hebrew translations of Shakespeare.\(^\text{10}\) In Schwartz’s translation, as well as Salkinson’s, a desire to position Hebrew secular literature on an equal plane as sacred, liturgical texts in part motivated a reliance on *shibbuẓ*, heavy biblical intertextuality and quotation. While this was the linguistic material most readily available in a period when a rich Hebrew vernacular was still lacking, the history of translation also tells us that translation can serve as a workshop or laboratory for a writer, creating the conditions for future innovations in poetic language and form.\(^\text{11}\) Many poets have turned to translation as a way of learning from another great writer or as a way of breaking away from the literary conventions in one’s source language. But it is worth noting that in addition to their aesthetic appeal, the material value of Shakespeare translations to the Hebrew literary economy also encourages the continued translation of his work.

Herman’s translations were initially published in 2006 in the *sefer matana* or gift book *Sheikspir ‘al ahava*.\(^\text{12}\) This volume is a translation of Helen Exley’s 1999 volume *Shakespeare on Love* which gathers Shakespeare’s texts on love, with an emphasis on his poetry.\(^\text{13}\) The back jacket copy, faithfully translated in the Hebrew version, declares that ‘bound in antiqued gold, with fine paintings, this collection makes a very special gift.’\(^\text{14}\) Herman was commissioned to translate this volume, which required producing new translations of the sonnets that appear in the original publication. She translated a total of thirteen poems, and they appear in the book according to the order prescribed by the Exley version and without any additional commentary. *Shakespeare on*
Love is not invested in making a mark in the literary economy but rather in capitalizing on the continued marketability of Shakespeare, and this is the case for the Hebrew translation as well. Nevertheless, since Herman is an accomplished poet and translator from the English, her translations stand out for their aesthetic virtuosity and for the ways in which they mark a distinct approach to translating Shakespeare’s sonnets, one that is consistent, in language, style and form, with Herman’s own poetry.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, a group of Hebrew poets, including Herman, began to assert a neoformalist mode as the future of Hebrew poetry. Their commitment to classical forms and prosody crystallized in the founding, in 2005, of the journal Ho!, which situated neoformalism at the centre of its project. While some notable literary critics decried this turn to form as regressive and anachronistic, the Ho! poets remained determined to resist what Ho! editor Dory Manor termed as haruzfoby, rhymephobia. It is in this context that Ho! republished ten Shakespeare translations by Herman in its fourth issue and reinstated their numerical order. This issue also included three original poems from Herman’s second poetry collection The Book of Simple Remedies, also published that year. The inclusion of Herman’s original poems highlighted the close relation between translation and original writing, showcasing the flexible and virtuosic reworking of classical poetic forms and prosody that characterized her own writing and translations.

While form and prosody can work as constraints, they can also encourage invention and play, and thereby prove to be a very productive and creative mode for poetry. In this regard, Shakespeare’s sonnets have been the subject of—and subjected to—a wide range of retranslations. Take for example Ulrike Draesner’s ‘radical translations’ of Shakespeare’s sonnets, which have been back translated from her German into a no less radical English by Tom Cheesman.
Draesner’s translations, the sonnet’s rhyme and metre ‘dislocate’, though the translation nevertheless retains the 14 lines that are the formal foundation of the sonnet.¹⁸ Herman’s translation follows Shakespeare’s rhyme, including the final rhyming couplet, and is written in iambic pentameter, but even recognizably rhymed and metred translations are no less radical, no more faithful to the original poem. If anything, the decision to retain rhyme and metre almost demands lexical compromises and transformations, which can result in a radically different poem in translation.

Herman’s translation of Sonnet 18, which concerns comparison, proves to be an apt case study for the translation strategies that Herman applies, and for examining how the translation reflects a particular poetics of translation in what it keeps in and takes out, including where she recasts Shakespeare’s words and images entirely. Herman’s translation, with my interlinear (non-rhyming) English translation, follows the original English (for clarity, I have switched the order of lines seven and eight in my translation):

**Sonnet 18**

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st;
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.
Where Herman’s translations of the sonnets depart from previous efforts is in her decision to translate the sonnets in a more modern, colloquial register. This results in choices that favour a more straightforward syntax, as in the opening line of Sonnet 18, ‘ha-im ata dome le-yom aviv?’, ‘are you like, or do you resemble, a spring day?’. Here, Herman eschews higher register lexical choices, like Sandbank’s ‘ha-im ashve otkha le-yom shel kaẓ’ (May I compare you to a summer day) or Broide’s ‘Ha-le-yom shel kaẓ adamkha?’ (To a summer day may I liken you?). In general, previous Hebrew translations have employed a more elevated, poetic diction, whereas Herman, in keeping with her own poetry, is comfortable moving between high and low linguistic registers and
often does so within the same text, as is the case for this translation. Where most translations opt for some version of the Hebrew future tense, to approximate Shakespeare’s ‘shall’, Herman translates in the modern present tense, thereby situating the poem and its address in a contemporary mode. Israeli summers are far from temperate, so the decision to translate Shakespeare’s summer as the spring month of ‘Iyyar,’ which falls between April and June on the Hebrew calendar, also calls attention to the place of the translator. Furthermore, the speaker in Herman’s translation is not engaged in the act of comparison (‘shall I’), thereby placing the emphasis on text over authorship, yet another way in which her text gestures throughout to its status as translation.

To the extent that Shakespeare’s sonnet is a love poem, it is also a poem about mortality. While the speaker promises the beloved a textual afterlife, the inevitability of death is underscored in every image—nature harms, stains, burns, and darkens—even this afterlife is contingent on a living reader: ‘so long as men can breathe, and eyes can see/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.’ In fact, Herman takes the idea of sight even further, incorporating the idea of ‘foresight’ and ‘perception’ into the poem. Not only must there be a living reader, but also a reader who continues to look ahead, who can imagine a future through which these poems will continue to circulate, be read and reread, remembered and translated. Indeed, Herman’s translation ends with the words ba-shir ha-ze, ‘in this poem’, in other words, not only the poem itself, but this poem, that is, this translation.

Criticism on the Hebrew translations of the sonnets, by Toury, Golomb and others, has focused on the politics of canonicity, the ways in which one translation seizes authority over another and replaces it. But retranslation is not necessarily motivated by a desire to correct or repair a translation that is perceived to be deficient, incomplete, or imprecise. Rather, it can be a testament, in Françoise Massardier-Kenney’s words, to a text’s ‘living presence in a culture’;
indeed, it can be the mode through which a text is reanimated in the present. I thereby propose that we read and contextualize Shakespeare’s Hebrew sonnets as texts that preserve a bit of the history of modern Hebrew literature, its language, conventions, and concerns, and even its vision for its own future. It is in this respect that the question of comparison that opens Shakespeare’s poem may be projected onto the translation itself. In the space of the translated poem, ways of reading Shakespeare are preserved in time and over time, and it is to this afterlife that Herman gestures in her translation of the poem, which imagines a long life for the poem and its continued translation.

2 Toury, ‘Between’, 115.
3 Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet carries a numeric value.
5 Eran Tzelgov one of the founding editors of the press Ra‘av, which reissued Salkinson’s translation of Romeo and Juliet, suggested to me that Salkinson’s translation of this sonnet most likely reflected his faithful translation practice and not a particular theory of poetry translation.
6 S. Shalom, trans., Sheikspir sonetot (Tel Aviv: Achdut, 1943).
7 Toury, ‘Between’, 127.
9 Avi Hasner and Gail Hareven, trans. Vili’am Sheikspir: Ha-sonetot (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 2011). For an account of this collaboration, see Aviva Lori, ‘Sheikspir me’ohav’ [Shakespeare in Love], Haaretz (October 7, 2011): http://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/1.1517155 (accessed 22 May 2017)


