John Stubbs
University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

2023, Vol. 20 (2), 105-120(126)
journals.uni-lj.si/elope
https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.20.2.105-120
UDC: 821.111.09-193.3Shakespeare W.:81'255.4=163.6

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in the Slovene Translation of Janez Menart

ABSTRACT

The poet Janez Menart was a major figure in the postwar Slovene literary milieu. As such, his complete translation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* is of great interest in its own right. When placed in the broad framework of Skopos theory, the translation and the critical argument surrounding it also illuminate the irreconcilable nature of certain divergent approaches to literary translation. The chief point my remarks here will attempt to add to the discussion is that, notwithstanding the licence Menart occasionally permitted himself, his rendering of the work as a whole displays an uncanny sense of the logic and cohesion of the overall sequence the *Sonnets* comprise. His practical handling of the poems anticipated later trends in Anglo-American editorial scholarship; his translation manages to be both a classic in its own language and to offer a significant, if internationally overlooked reading of the original text.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *Sonnets*, Janez Menart, translation

Shakespearovi *Soneti* v slovenskem prevodu Janeza Menarta

IZVLEČEK

Pesnik Janez Menart je bil pomembna osebnost povojnega slovenskega literarnega okolja. Zato je njegov celoten prevod Shakespearovih Sonetov zelo zanimiv že sam po sebi. Če ga umestimo v širši okvir Skoposove teorije, prevod in kritična razprava, ki ga spremljata, osvetljujeta tudi nezdružljivost nekaterih pristopov k literarnemu prevajanju. Glavna poanta moje razprave o teh prevodih je, da kaže Menartova predelava dela kot celote izjemen občutek za logiko in kohezijo celotnega zaporedja, ki ga soneti sestavljajo, ne glede na prevajalsko svobodo, ki si jo je občasno dovolil. Njegov prevajalski pristop je napoved poznejših trendov v anglo-ameriški uredniški znanosti. Njegovemu prevodu je uspelo, da je postal klasika v svojem jeziku, ki hkrati ponuja pomembno, čeprav mednarodno spregledano branje izvirnega besedila.

Ključne besede: Shakespeare, *Soneti*, Janez Menart, prevod

Introduction

The poet Janez Menart was a major figure in the post-war Slovene literary milieu. As such, his complete verse translation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the first in Slovene, is of great interest in itself. When placed in the broad framework of Skopos theory, the translation and the critical argument surrounding it also illuminate the irreconcilable nature of certain divergent approaches to literary translation. The chief point my remarks here will attempt to add to the discussion is that, notwithstanding the licence Menart occasionally permitted himself, his rendering of the work as a whole displays an uncanny sense of the logic and cohesion of the overall sequence the *Sonnets* comprise. His practical handling of the poems anticipated later trends in Anglo-American editorial scholarship; his translation manages to be both a classic in its own language and to offer a significant, if internationally overlooked reading of the original text.[1]

I

I will take a certain amount of familiarity with the Shakespearean text for granted on the part of my reader, as the first task here is to stress the significance of the translator. The Slovene poet Janez Menart (1929–2004), a figure proverbially "born for success" (Glavan 2006), was and remains highly regarded in Slovenia for his own poetry as well as his verse translations.[2] Librarians in Ljubljana will quote from his works and offer you anecdotes about him based on first or second hand experience. Friends and colleagues I asked for help as I worked on his translation of the *Sonnets* often knew by heart the lines and phrases on which I consulted them. Menart came to prominence as a poet in his own right and, alongside Kajetan Kovič, Ciril Zlobec and Tone Pavček, as a contributor to probably the most influential and celebrated post-war book of Slovene poetry: *Pesmi Štirih* (1953) (*Poems of Four*, and implicitly, as years passed, Poems of *the* Four). A laudatory article of 1973, marking twenty years since that volume's first publication, described Menart as "of all the four, the most entire in himself [*iz enega kosa*], the most consistent and clear; his lyrical subject matter diverse and rich, and yet encompassed by a comprehensive poetic world" (Mejak 1973, 317). In the meantime, Menart remained a prolific translator of poetry, tackling an impressive range of medieval and early modern works.

As a final preliminary, I should mention that another full verse translation of the *Sonnets* exists in Slovene. The critical reception of Srečo Fišer's account of the poems, however, does not (to my knowledge) cast light on the conflicting traditions in translation theory and Anglo-American Shakespearean studies I consider below. The scope of this essay prevents an extensive comparison of the translations, despite the great interest that exercise would involve. For present purposes, my focus is on Menart.

---

[1] Many friends and colleagues in Ljubljana helped me as I worked on Menart's translation. Other debts go further back: my discussion of Sonnet 70, for example, draws on a conversation with Gavin Alexander, my doctoral supervisor at Cambridge, more than twenty years ago. The paper itself developed from a theatrical setting: and for this, above all, I thank Matjaž Berger, director of the Anton Podbevšek Teater in Novo Mesto, who invited me to speak on the *Sonnets* – accompanied by readings given by Barbara Ribnikar – in April 2023.

[2] For testimony to Menart's standing, see (for example) Mejak (1973, 317–19), Jenuš (1999), Zlobec (2004) and Žerdin (2004).

Menart's verse translation of the *Sonnets* mirrors Shakespeare's poetic form throughout, including the points at which Shakespeare himself diverged from a "Shakespearean" sonnet form. The translation was published in 1965; in a long and interesting article of the same year, Menart explained his approach to translating poetry. The crux of his argument, which he illustrated by means of classical, medieval and early modern examples, rests on the following statement.

> The translator is obliged to mediate between the poet and readers of the second language. In doing so he will wish by all means to ensure that the reader of the translation will experience to the greatest possible extent the 'same' feeling he would derive from the original, if he spoke the language in which the poem was first written. (Menart 1965, 666)

A general reader might observe that Menart sets about cracking that hardest of nuts with respect to his chosen field: Frost's dictum that poetry is what gets lost in translation. Menart does so by urging the poet to try creating a poetic *equivalent* to the original, rather than a literal attempt at replication.

Speaking loosely in this manner of "equivalence" between the "source" and "target" texts will attract the sceptical interest of a translation specialist, who will call for more detail. In translation theory, the definitions of equivalence are manifold. A reader of Katharina Reiß's seminal overview of the question will be inclined to accept that Menart aimed at equivalence of the kind reserved for "communicative" or "creative" translation. Reiß viewed creative translation as a response to "new concepts, ways of thinking, ideas and objects" that do not as yet exist in the "target culture" (Reiß and Vermeer 2014, 125). Shakespeare's *Sonnets* had of course been around for a long time, and many of Menart's readers will have known them in the original or in, for example, a German translation. Yet, insofar as the Slovene language itself was concerned, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* were indeed new in 1965, and Menart felt entitled to draw on his own creative powers as a poet in order to teach the source to readers with no knowledge of early modern English. Part of his aim, although he never explicitly said so, must have been to show that the thing could be done as well in Slovene as in any other language. The standard he set himself in his essay "On Translating Poetry" might seem a bit vague to some. For Menart, translators must preserve the "feeling" of the original – an emotion they will detect intuitively from profound scholarly acquaintance with the language of their source. At least one critic of Menart's translation, as we shall see in a moment, felt that he gave himself unwarranted licence with such ideas. Nevertheless, within the framework of late twentieth-century translation studies, he defined a clear purpose, a "*skopos*", against which its adequacy might be assessed.

No translator (no writer) has prerogative over the criteria readers and critics may apply: as Menart himself discovered. In 2002, very late in his career, he responded fastidiously – if a little testily – to objections Meta Grosman had levelled at his translation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in a paper of 1987. Professor Grosman was (and indeed, is) a pioneer of modern English and American studies in the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Arts. For her 1987 paper she had collected the views of 120 readers of two of Menart's translated sonnets (116 and 129), on the basis of which she concluded that "the interpretative possibilities of the original are thus

considerably reduced" (Grosman 1987, 303). She drew on critical authorities ranging from William Empson to George Steiner and Jonathan Culler to support her argument. Some fifteen years later, taking issue with some points and agreeing with others, Menart was willing to adapt details of his translation in the face of Grosman's commentary. He expressed broad agreement with many of her specific interpretations, but proved less flexible on the wider question of the "multi-layeredness" and ambiguity of meaning that Grosman, supported by post-structural theory and commentary, insisted is to be found in the Shakespearean text. Menart, adhering to an older school, declared that Shakespeare's meaning is always singular and clear – and that the historical circumstances of performance and publication made it so by necessity (Menart 2002, 77). That rather sweeping claim is harder to sustain than many of the arguments Menart supplied to support particular readings.

I intend to suggest here that the difference between the poet's and professor's conceptions of the Shakespearean text was much slighter than they realized, and that a subsequent shift in editorial and critical responses to the *Sonnets* largely bears out the intuitive grasp Menart displayed of the collection's overall composition. Reiß's synopsis of "equivalence" in translation theory nevertheless allows one to pinpoint a difference at the core of their disagreement that does seem irreconcilable. Whereas Menart claimed the freedoms of creative translation, Grosman insisted on applying the norms and requirements of what Reiß called "philological translation". Philological translation demands sacrifices on the part of translators concerned with the literary elegance of their own phrasing and prosody. Philological translation, as Reiß explained:

> aims at informing the target reader about how the source text author communicated with the readers of the source text. In order to achieve this aim, the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic dimensions of the source text linguistic signs are 'imitated' to such an extent that the target language may seem completely unnatural to the target audience. The resulting text will be adequate or appropriate with regard to the goal set, but it will definitely not be equivalent with regard to the source text, which sounds natural to the source culture readers and does not foreignize their language. During the long history of translating, this translation type has been regarded as the ideal of translation in general, especially for certain text types, such as philosophical texts or literary works of art. (Reiß and Vermeer 2014, 124)

A reader of Professor Grosman's essay on Menart will see that it is concerned more or less exactly with the goals spelt out here by Reiß. Grosman, it might be said, wanted a translation that would help her teach the complexities of Shakespeare's text to undergraduates, not one that substituted Shakespearean detail with its own literary sophistication, as it appeared Menart's did. Menart might contend that his goal, too, had been to inform "the target reader about how the source text author communicated with the readers of the source text". He refused, though, to "foreignize" his own language; indeed he insisted on doing the reverse.

Some critics of Menart's translations recognized virtues in both sides of the argument. As Vladimir Pogačnik put it, after discussing lapses of accuracy (as he saw them) in Menart's version of *La Chanson de Rolande*, "Notwithstanding the foregoing reservations, Menart's language regally and masterfully [*suvereno*] satisfies the melodic demands of the verse form" (Pogačnik, 2002, 103). Other commentaries, such as Grosman's, have been sharper. As Miha

Pintarič observed, concluding five pages of observations on lapses in Menart's translation of Villon's poetic *Testament*, Menart fares better in capturing the poet's colloquialisms than moments at which it would be necessary to preserve a higher register – moments on which a full sense of the irony that often accompanies Villon's colloquial expression frequently depends (Pintarič 2002, 133).

An early response to Menart's translation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* raised similar objections. In 1966, while largely extolling Menart's achievement, Božidar Pahor singled out a failure of translation in the opening of Sonnet 30 ("When to the sessions of sweet silent thought / I summon up remembrance of things past"):

> Ko skličem k seji blagih, tihih misli
> spomine na stvari minulih dni
> [When I summon to a hearing of sweet, silent thoughts
> Memories of the things of departed days…][3] (Shakespeare 2016, 30)

Pahor was unhappy with *seja*, the Slovene rendering of "sessions": "*Seja* is so dry and official. Thoughts of things past are not members of a working committee who have turned up to listen to a financial report" (Pahor 1966, 414). The bureaucratic ring that Pahor detects in Menart is nevertheless equally present in the original line. *Sessions* carries a strong, indeed predominant echo of the courtroom and its annexes. As so often elsewhere, Shakespeare draws on a legal paradigm that feels harsh in the delicate emotional context in which a given term from that paradigm occurs. The idea of the poetic speaker sitting in judgement on his own thoughts is active throughout the sequence. The harshness that Pahor disliked here, then, is not Menart's but Shakespeare's; *seja* is the standard Slovene term for a legal session or hearing. There is no anachronism. Menart's version preserves the (paradoxical) Shakespearean idea of a silent tribunal.

Such criticism addresses what Skopos theorists call "translation pairs", and the discrepancies that emerge can seem fatal. Where the target language seems to go too far astray from the source – or, in literary translation, to capture too few of its subtler resonances – the critic of translation feels entitled to grimace. A peculiarity of Grosman's quarrel with Menart was that she felt that his freedom in translation had curtailed the freedom of Shakespeare's verbal invention. Her criticism went beyond pointing out moments of individual infelicity (although she did that, too, on the basis of both her own reading and her students' comments). In truly philological fashion, she defended what she took as historic innovations in approaches to the text itself.

Grosman admired the respect for "multiplicity of meaning" [*mnogopomenskost*, in Slovene] demonstrated by "newer editions" than those Menart had used (Grosman 1987, 317, n.33). With respect to critical and editorial treatments of the *Sonnets*, her international precedent was Stephen Booth's *Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Booth 1969). Booth's striking essay brought a

[3] Paul de Man warned (somewhat exultantly) of the dangers of translating translation (de Man 1985, 35; commenting on Benjamin [1968] 2007, 81); I offer my back translations of Menart in a duly cautioned spirit of pragmatism, for readers unfamiliar with Slovene. Unless otherwise stated, references to Shakespeare follow the text in Evans (1997).

"poetics of indeterminacy", in Stephen Orgel's phrase, to bear on the sonnets, "arguing that the poems are essentially open, and that their interpretation is a function of the process of reading, a process that will, inevitably, vary from reader to reader and age to age". Yet, as Orgel noted, when Booth had "paid his dues to bibliography" and edited the *Sonnets* for himself (Booth 1977), he produced an exhaustive commentary that "almost invariably decides that the standard reading [inherited largely from a tradition of commentary established by the eighteenth-century editor, Edmund Malone] is the right one" (Orgel 2002). Grosman did not include Booth's work in her extensive array of sources, yet her commitment to semantic "multi-layeredness" in the *Sonnets* takes on qualifications that are implicitly similar to his. Menart's offence, for her, lay not in failing to produce a translation that tolerated a variety of interpretations. He had erred by cancelling complexities in the original that Grosman's readers failed to locate in his translation. The text itself, as Booth had found, was unitary, and her objection was that Menart had dealt with it selectively, simplifying in places, embellishing in others (Grosman 1987, 310–13 especially).

The work of the theorist Antoine Berman also indicates an insuperable difference of translational *skopoi*. Berman might well have seen Meta Grosman's 1987 paper as reflecting a school of thought he describes as "engagé". Such critics are loyal above all to the historical particularity of the original text as they perceive it, and Berman is less than polite towards them. "Engagé" analyses are all about denunciation, he argues; "denouncing", moreover, "with precision". They involve the "meticulous tracking of the incoherencies, poor systematicity, and biases of the translators" (Berman 2009, 32–33). They are, as Reiß would put it, "philologists".

In contradistinction if not outright opposition to such readers are translation critics of what Berman calls the "socio-critical" or "Tel Aviv School". Such critics stress instead the "norms" of translators and the cultural discourses in which they participate. A "socio-critical" analysis of Menart's translations would consider the Slovene milieu that shaped him and for which he provided his translations of Shakespeare, Villon and other authors. Such an analysis permits – indeed expects – liberties of the kind Reiß anticipates in "communicative" and still more so in "creative" translations (Berman 2009, 36-39). Berman was very sceptical of the independent validity of either approach. Progress for him lay with the synthetic mode of "translation criticism" he developed and applied, in his last book, to French translations of poems by John Donne (whom Menart also, incidentally, translated). In any case, with some qualifications, Berman's "engagé"/ "socio-critical" dichotomy mirrors and supports the division of translation schools and skopoi mapped out by Reiß.

One could go into much more detail on particular theoreticians; I have merely given an idea of the broad traditions to which Janez Menart and Meta Grosman conceivably belong. I will devote the rest of my essay to considering whether Menart's text does enough to answer the charges levelled against it, and endeavour to show some of the ways in which it in fact illuminates the Shakespearean original.

II

One response to Grosman's critique – a critical challenge to a great many other translations than Menart's alone – might be a shrug. Menart might simply have said, "There are different

sorts of faithfulness, let us leave the matter there." Yet, in answering Grosman he did not say this, and neither, I think, should we.

Let us take, to begin with, his treatment of the opening lines of sonnet 70:

> Naj ti ne bo nič mar, če kdo te bláti,
> lepota je star cilj obrekovanj,
> ki so ji v škodo in okrasje hkrati –
> saj krokar kraka v najbolj sončen dan.
>
> [Never you mind, if someone slanders you;
> Beauty was always a target for rumours,
> Which both soils it and add to its lustre -
> Indeed, the raven croaks on the sunniest of days.] (Shakespeare 2016, 74)

We shall turn to the original in a moment; for now, the back translation in parentheses above will suggest to the non-reader of Slovene that we fall a long way short of Sonnet 70. In literal, lexical terms, we arguably do, yet in terms of cadence and register, *verzna melodija*, we come much closer to the original. The limitations of my literal back translation are indicators of literary sophistication in the language of translation. The grammatical compression allowed by the dative feminine pronoun *ji* in the third line of the translation is quite simply untranslatable. Indeed, English cannot reproduce anything of the minimalist economy of Menart's line, which combines a vernacular directness with conceptual clarity, and is on top of that miraculously euphonious.

Professor Grosman would surely insist that it is not enough that a scholarly translation of poetry merely "sounds good". Her approach would single out the presence of the raven in l.4 of the translation, and the way Menart has summarily discarded what is arguably one of the key lines of the entire sonnet sequence. Here is the opening of the original:

> That thou art blam'd shall not be thy defect,
> For slander's mark was ever yet the fair;
> The ornament of beauty is suspect,
> A crow that flies in heaven's sweetest air. (70.1–4)

Shakespeare's sonnet is torn between an urge to reassure the Friend that slander will not lessen him (or harm his reputation), and a lurking sense that "the ornament of beauty", which might be understood as a surfeit or enhancement of beauty, really is a defect. The crow that flies in the original is both a flaw in the seamless vault of heaven and, as it were, the finishing touch on its blueness; the speck in the clear sky that makes one wonder at it. The crow is by strong implication "suspect" – yet even an upstart crow is innocent until proven guilty.

Menart's raven (*krokar*) brings no such ambiguity. Its croaking is there to indicate that scavengers are active even on the best of days. There is little doubt that the line introducing the raven is splendid. Even an ear unfamiliar with Slovene will surely respond to the

onomatopoeic phrase *krokar kraka* ("the raven croaks"). The real question is whether we can possibly accept this line as a *translation* of the original; and if we can, how on earth has Menart got away with it?

The line can by no means stand as a literal rendering of its Shakespearean counterpart. Nevertheless, in the passage, and the translated sonnet as a whole, an overall balance of rhetorical forces restores parity between the translation and translated text. Menart, as we have seen, drops the phrase "the ornament of beauty" altogether – for the much barer diction of his own third line. Then, while Shakespeare's idea of ornament being suspect carries a profound ambivalence, Menart's opening reassurance to the Friend carries almost total conviction ("Naj ti ne bo nič mar" / "Never you mind…"). It is the sudden transition to the raven that jars, as the shriek of such a bird directly overhead would make you start; indeed, the underlying angst in the original is transferred entirely onto this bird. Menart's raven is the mirror image in negative of Shakespeare's crow in the serenity of heaven's sweetest air. Accordingly, even though Menart has entirely altered the distribution of emotional factors that colour the original, they are all present – and as such, one would surely have to admit that, while the two poems are manifestly not "the same", the sum of feeling in both *is* the same.

There is a further, allusive element to Menart's translation. The appearance of the raven, the *krokar*, is surely not an accident. Shakespeare knew his corvids, and indeed is most particular about all species of bird. When he writes *crow* he means *crow*, and there is no mistake when he mentions a *raven*. Menart's line seems conscious, then, of another distinct seam of Shakespearean symbolism. Othello compares the recollection of the fatal handkerchief to the flight of a raven over an infected house, "boding to all" (IV.1.21). Still more relevantly to our present context, "the raven himself is hoarse", declares Lady Macbeth, in croaking the "fatal entrance" of King Duncan (I.5.38–39). Macbeth speaks of "the crow" that "makes wing to the rooky wood" at a moment when "light thickens" and he imagines "night's black agents" gathering (III.2.51–53). The latter passage in *Macbeth* paradoxically associates the crow flying to its roost with the retiring "good things of day" – an indeterminate augury, much like the crow sighted in Sonnet 70.[4] In any case, Menart clearly seems to have decided to colour the line of the sonnet with the ominous energies carried by the ravens of *Macbeth* and *Othello*. In so doing, he was able to preserve the note of deep misgiving in Shakespeare's sonnet; he also performed the real feat of completely changing the literal meaning and rhetorical tenor of the fourth line while making his own version sound richly Shakespearean. The American critic John Hollander would read the translated line as an allusive transumption (Hollander 1981); Menart's raven transumes Shakespeare's crow yet carries an echo – albeit a croaky one – of another Shakespearean symbol.[5]

---

[4] Or, indeed, like "the crows and choughs that wing the midway air" beyond the (entirely imaginary) precipice Edgar describes to Gloucester in *King Lear* IV.6.12; although those birds, too, while entirely unreal, are floating ominously near the scene of a soon to be attempted suicide.

[5] At a purely theoretical level one might speculate as to whether *transumptio* (metalepsis), the "over-taking" or "superimposition" of one word by another, is a better tropological model than *translatio* (metaphor, involving a transfer or "carrying across" of meaning) for translation of the kind Menart practised.

III

All well and good, one might say, from the perspective of "creative" and "communicative" translation. An adherent of philological translation would still shake her head, however, as the raven is not a crow. I wonder, though, how the philologist might view the suggestion that, in making such a change, Menart had in fact heeded a direction from the sonnets themselves. Readers will remember the anxiety Shakespeare's Poet expresses at several points in the sequence about his stock of invention dwindling or running dry. In 76 he is troubled at his verse's lack of "variation or quick change" (l.2); in 105 he is (or *says* that he is) reconciled to the fact that he is only expressing "one thing" (how "fair, kind and true" his Friend is), and that his poetry consists almost entirely of "varying to other words" that single point (ll.9–10). "Variation" carries Erasmian overtones, of course, and scholarship suggests there is no reason to think that Shakespeare was ignorant of them.[6] One might not even be amiss in considering variation as an active ordering function of the *Sonnets*. Through terms that recur in new situations, through the new phrasing found for abiding worries, one sonnet will be found to transform elements of another or indeed many others. The variation they manifest in this sense lightly meshes the texts of individual sonnets into the text of the *Sonnets*; a feat of cohesion that is all the more remarkable because the rough and ready format of the 1609 quarto makes it seem extemporary.

That might be placing more weight on variation than the concept is able to bear. In any case, major scholarly editions of the last thirty years or so have encouraged students to see themes and preoccupations evolving by means of combination and development within pairs, trios, groups, or what one might even call whole chapters of sonnets, along with counterparts stranded from one another by "longer intervals" (Burrow 2002, 108).[7] The view taken by W.H. Auden that "they are not in any planned sequence" and indeed evince "no semblance of order" (Auden 1964, xxi) has lost ground. The poetics of indeterminacy does have its champions, in Slovenia as elsewhere: such readers see inferences about the gender of poet and addressee in the majority of poems as entirely suppositious, and treat those poems in consequence as a more or less random gathering of reflections "about abstract concepts" (Zavrl 2023, 193). Yet it is hard to ignore or suppress altogether the echoes and structural parallels within and between the poems, close neighbours or distant relatives, and the sense of situational continuity they generate. The clashes and coincidences of image and viewpoint, "the waves of consonant moods, of sounds and rhythms of thought" (Burrow 2002, 108) function as ligatures, by means of analogy in some places and contrast in others.

---

6 "Variation" was a concept with manifold forms that Erasmus encouraged the students of *De Copia Verborum ac Rerum* (*On the Copiousness of Words and Things*) (1512), his manual of rhetorical style, to apply for themselves. For a compelling recent attempt to catch the presence of Erasmus in the *Sonnets*, see "Moving between sources: Ovid and Erasmus in Shakespeare's Sonnets" in Lyne (2016, 76–112).

7 John Kerrigan outlines the thematic and dramatic architecture of the cycle on the first page of the introduction to his revelatory edition. "Inevitably", he goes on, 'the question arises: would the diversity of Shakespeare's volume have baffled its early readers? The central claim of this edition is no, it would not – though modern critics have failed to register the point of the collection as a collection" (Kerrigan 1986, 7–8). Burrow (2002) and Shrank and Lyne (2017) accept and develop this view of coherence within the sequence. For a crisp summary of the editorial tradition from Booth (1977) on, see Orgel (2002) (mentioned earlier). Meta Grosman approved of Kerrigan's view of, as she put it, "complex internal connection between individual descriptions" (Grosman 1987, 317, note 33).

For the sake of argument, if it is reasonable to suggest that since one given sonnet within the collection offers a "variation" of another (consider the parallels between 105 and 76, for example; or the "looking-glass" sonnets, 22 and 62), it might be helpful to consider Menart's *Soneti* as containing not only translations of but, at moments, variations *on* the original text. They provide an invaluable aid to reading the original, from which they manifestly emanate and to which, for much of the time, they closely adhere; yet they do not seek to reproduce it. But this is only another way of saying that Menart's translation is a creative and communicative, not a philological one.

Menart's treatment of the opening of Sonnet 130 is one of the most audacious moments in his translation, precisely because the original lines are so well known, in Slovenia as beyond.[8] Menart declines to say "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun", and instead he has his sonneteer declare, "Ne, ona nima žametnih oči" ("No, she does not have eyes of velvet"). Here he ensures equilibrium between the original line and his variation on it by confronting an equivalent cliché: that is, "velvety" eyes (recorded as proverbial by entry (2) on "žameten" in the *Fran* database), replace "sun-like" eyes. More importantly still, in terms of the dramatic progression of the sonnet sequence, he reminds us that the Mistress is not at all soft in her glances – at least not to him. Readers accustomed to encountering 130 in isolation are likely to understand it as a sustained rejection of the idea that beauty comes in any fixed or definitive form, and that unconventional attractions may be equally captivating. Readers familiar with Sonnet 129, and its anguished meditation on sexual obsession – the carnal trap in which the Poet claims the Mistress has him – will always understand Sonnet 130 as a reflective, attenuating pause, an interlude, in which sources of affection briefly off-set causes of pain and humiliation. Menart attunes his translation to the latter, wider-viewed sense of the poem; acknowledging in practice, as he refused to in theory, the multiple "layers" that context brings to its meaning. His variation is subtle enough, nevertheless, not to compromise the sonnet's independent power; and that subtlety stems from what must to some seem the unwarranted, even banal substitution of velvet for the sun as a key term of comparison. On philological grounds, when a more expansive view of context is taken, Menart has surely achieved an equivalence between his text and Shakespeare's.

Two Elizabethan usages of the word "context" are helpful and relevant here. In his attempt to preserve the "feeling" stirred by the original, Menart was prepared, as we have seen, to suppress certain aspects of phrasing and diction for the sake of what contemporaries of Shakespeare would have recognized as "the connected structure of a writing or composition; a continuous text or composition with parts duly connected" (*OED* †2) or "the connection or coherence between the parts of a discourse" (*OED* †3). Both senses of "context" have been obsolete for centuries, though it is worth noting that Milton is cited as using the former as late as 1641, and both evidently stem from the still earlier and possibly original English usage of the word to mean "the weaving together of words and sentences".[9] An appreciation of context in these more phenomenological, more textually oriented senses allows us to appreciate, and support, Menart's handling of Sonnet 130.

---

[8] The sonnet was for many years a set text on the Slovene secondary school English *matura* or baccalaureate examination.

[9] In passing one should note Diarmaid MacCulloch's claim, as yet ignored by *OED*, that the writing of Thomas Cranmer decisively affected English usage of the word (MacCulloch 2018, 189).

In her 1987 paper, Meta Grosman reserved particular criticism for Menart's translation of Sonnet 116 – "Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediment". Menart went to great pains to answer her remarks in his 2002 response, to the point of rewriting his version of the sonnet (Grosman 1987, 310–13; Menart 2002, 82–84). One of Menart's key transgressions (in Grosman's eyes) may, however, be defended on the contextual grounds advanced above. "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds", reads the Shakespearean text – for which Menart supplies: "Ne, ljubezen ni ljubezen, / če varanje jo v varanje peha" ("No, love is not love if betrayal drives it to [commit] betrayal"). Menart claimed he had good reasons for rendering *alteration* as *betrayal*: but was willing to change it. We should pause before accepting the amendment. *Betrayal* (*varanje*) makes good sense as a variation on *alteration* in the context of the phase of the *Sonnets* in which the line reaches us. These last poems directly addressing the Friend are deeply moved by the younger man's ability to forgive the older Poet his infidelities, and the Poet warmly accepts redemption. Menart raises the standard of acceptance real love requires: it must be willing to overlook unfaithfulness, not just change, on the part of the beloved. He indubitably radicalized the meaning of the individual lines in Sonnet 116, yet his situational reading of the last twenty-five or so sonnets to the Friend is more than justified. Indeed, it abides by the very principle of "multi-layered" or multiple meaning that Grosman sought to teach Menart.

IV

In the introduction to the first edition of his translation, Menart offered a cautious but detailed paraphrase of the elusive story, as he saw it, that the *Sonnets* seem to tell, but with his closing words, acutely, urged readers to look instead for elements or "ingredients" (*sestavine*) of a story, scattered and re-gathered throughout the collection. He rejected the notion that those elements reflected a predetermined plan. He supported a view instead of Shakespeare writing the poems in cycles, which accordingly generated lyrical groups and correspondences between those groups (Shakespeare1965, x–xv). These remarks, along with many in his endnotes (mystifyingly, never fully reprinted in more recent editions) testify to deep involvement with the *Sonnets*' collective ephemerality. As with some of his more contestable declarations (notably his rejection of meaning having more than one "layer"), these remarks are nevertheless overshadowed by Menart's dexterity in the act of translation. In working with the texts, in reading and, in translating them, in a sense *performing* them, he shows a still greater, if less conscious grasp of the "context" of the poems – their context, that is, in the sense an Elizabethan or Jacobean might have understood, as "the connected structure of a writing or composition" or "the connection or coherence between the parts of a discourse".

The dynamic, seemingly impromptu sequencing of the *Sonnets* relies on discontinuity and reversal as much as "narrative" progression; the formal principle of the *volta* writ large, as it were. Nowhere is that sudden twisting action more present than in another of the perennial favourites, Sonnet 18. The editors of the online Folger Shakespeare Library edition stress that the question "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" marks a "radical departure" from the preceding series.[10] The poem manifestly continues to explore the intellectual and personal

[10] Mowatt and Werstner (2006), commenting on Sonnet 18. In notes to the preceding series, helpful synopses point out, for instance, how Sonnets 5 and 6 are "linked" and how 10 "expands on" the couplet that closes 9, among other

problem voiced in Sonnet 1: how to preserve the beauty and virtue of the Friend if he resists the premise that "From fairest creatures we desire increase" – and refuses to have children? Yet Sonnet 18 proceeds to offer unprecedented assertions about the capacity of poetry to compensate for the Friend's wilful barrenness; assertions that fade somewhat, in subsequent poems, as the Poet voices doubts about the nature of language and his own nerve and talent. What Sonnet 18 gives us, then, is a moment in a poetic context defined both by measured gradations and a sharp transition into a new vein of thought and expression.

The sense of progression is probably easier to detect, if not translate, because one of the linguistic markers of discontinuity is now more or less invisible. A very abrupt shift of register occurs merely with the proposal, "Shall I compare thee..?" The idea of the Poet involving his Friend and social superior (addressed throughout via the intimate pronoun *thou*, but still the "Lord of my Love" (26.1)) in a comparison was deeply suspect to a rhetorically literate Elizabethan.[11] Comparisons were proverbially "odious". In *Much Ado about Nothing* (III.5.17), Dogberry inadvertently describes them as "odorous", which is indication in itself that inexpert speakers should leave them well alone. Hal goads Falstaff for tiring himself with "base comparisons" (*Henry* part 1, II.4.250). Anthony attempts, in defeat and disgrace, to rile Octavius for making "gay comparisons" and not being willing to fight him in person (*Anthony and Cleopatra*, III.13.26). In combat, Macbeth presents the traitor Cawdor with "self-comparisons" that prove grimly ironic (I.2.55). Berowne in *Love's Labour's Lost* (V.2.844) is "full of comparisons and wounding flouts". In all, the word carried questionable associations for Shakespeare almost throughout his career. It connoted verbal if not outright moral trickery – except, just possibly, in the speech of an accomplished (and ultimately virtuous) wit such as Berowne, who comes to see the wisdom of "honest plain words" (V.2.753). The opening line of Sonnet 18, set against the tender but still formal concern expressed by the preceding sonnets, thus comprises a startling and possibly dangerous change of key.

Menart's response to the poem's audacity, its "radical departure", was an audacious one in its own right. He largely avoids the Poet's baroque figurative register, and pursues the initial comparison in much plainer, yet more strident terms. As such, he clearly recognized the tonal rupture that the offer, "Shall I compare thee…" leaves in the tissue of the sequence. Shakespeare's Friend is more "temperate" (l.2: the Slovene cognate would probably be "zmeren") than a summer's day; Menart's equivalent is "manj minljiv" – "less transient". Shakespeare declares, incontrovertibly yet figuratively, that "summer's lease hath all too short a date" (l.4). Menart avoids the legal metaphor entirely, and says, with equal but rather more colloquial truthfulness, "Before you know it, summer passes" ("in preden se zaveš, poletje mine"). Almost anticipating an objection, he then produces an all but word-for-word rendering of line 5, "Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines" ("oko neba prevroče včasih sveti"). Instead of the sun's "gold complexion" being "dimm'd" (l.6), however, in the Slovene we read of a simpler solar "face" (*obraz*) disappearing

comments that stress an over-reaching sense of argumentative cohesion. The influence of Kerrigan's commentary on the overall organization of the collection, and the opening group in particular (Kerrigan 1986, 196) can be detected here.

[11] For an overview of the proximity of certain classes of analogy to *catachresis* and other "vices" of style from a sixteenth-century perspective, see Ettenhuber (2011). On the status of comparison in Sonnet 18 specifically, see Kerrigan (1986, 30–31 and 196). The famous sally against "false compare" in Sonnet 130 (l.14) is concerned with a related but separate problem: that poem decries cliché and banal artificiality in similitudes, rather than the possibly "odious" lapse of decorum and judgement that endangers Sonnet 18.

in the mist. From moment to moment, the translation differs from its original in slight, yet significant points of detail, usually in accentuating the more qualified assertion in Shakespeare's text while simplifying diction.

The speaker of the translated poem is in fact more like one of Shakespeare's honest and forthright observers of nature than one of his great wits. At the decisive moment of the argument, Menart pushes that direct, declaratory voice into a naïve denial of reality. In Shakespeare's poem, Death will not be able to brag that the Friend wanders "in his shade" (l.11). That "shade" is of course a trope that can cover any number of realities, and which as such defies rebuttal: one can always speculate that a soul may reside beyond the demesne of death, or whatever the image of Death's "shade" represents on a metaphysical plane. Menart's Poet, by contrast, remains on earth, and simply asserts:

> Ne bo se Smrt bahála, da trohniš,
> saj v mojih pesmih raseš v večnih čase.
>
> [Death will not boast that you are rotting,
> Indeed you will grow for eternity in my lines.]

The Menartian claim is patently untenable. Death, we know, will be perfectly able to brag about the Friend's eventual state of putrefaction, especially since the translation has just conceded that "lepotam vsem je sojeno umreti" ("Every beauty is destined to die"; a much more direct admission than the original's antanaclasis, "every fair from fair sometime declines" (l.7)). The claim on eternity in Sonnet 18 is only valid insofar as its ultimate assertion that Death shall not "brag" is not logically *un*true on its own terms. Menart's Poet avoids that sophistry, preferring straightforward error to the ornamentation by means of which the original text sustains its comparison. He is still thinking here of the discrepant place the sonnet occupies in the opening set of sonnets, and the reference point its flamboyant gambit constitutes within the larger sequence. Paradoxically, he leaves us with a greater sense of the foolhardiness of the comparison, and of doubts that the sequence will go on to express. As such he is remarkably faithful to the wiser and sadder Shakespearean voice that re-emerges after Sonnet 18's virtuosity fades away. The voice that cries, a couple of poems later, "O, let me true in love but truly write" (21.9).

Still, the overall path of the translation never deviates drastically from the one laid down by the original text. Both equally beg the question, how can anything embedded in eternity grow with regard "to time" (l.12)? The movement into the challenge to Time issued by the next sonnet, 19, will ensue with equal bravado in both. Menart's rendering of Sonnet 18's final claim about its "lines" is striking both for its closeness to Shakespeare's couplet and its own memorable economy.

> Dokler vid videl bo in dihal dih,
> Živele bodo, ti živél boš v njih.
>
> [As long as vision sees and breath breathes,
> They [my poems] will live, and you in them.] (Shakespeare 2016, 22)

The conclusion to the original nevertheless reveals telling differences in emphasis.

> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

A moment earlier, Shakespeare's Poet spoke of "eternal lines", of which *this* (this poem) is the sum. The deictic gesture of Shakespeare's language is thus stronger than in Menart's version. Menart's Poet continues to speak of "my poems", non-eternal ones, in the plural, and his assertion of their longevity is palpably milder. He says that they will live ("živele bodo") and the Friend will live in them ("v njih"), not that they will "give life to thee" – the final note of the original. With the last breath of his translation, Menart introduces the logical care with propositions that has characterized the original up to now, precisely at the moment that the original dispenses with it. For a loved one might *live*, figuratively, in a poem, as people might live on a Grecian urn; that a poem might *give life to thee* is a figurative claim of another order. Just as Shakespeare's text arguably launches into overstatement, Menart's pulls back from it. The outcome, overall, is the equivalence or parity of feeling or impression that Menart defined as his goal. Up to this point, he has prioritized a dramatic sense of the sonnet's position within the sequence, the new movement it seems to announce, and the defiant excitement that accompanies it, over the baroque particularity of Shakespeare's phrasing. In the final lines, he restores the greater figurative logic of Sonnet 18 itself – but in a manner more in keeping with the deeper psychological honesty that haunts and binds the *Sonnets* as an elusive unity.

V

Janez Menart certainly strayed at moments from the letter of the text in translating Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. When he did so, however, the effect is usually illuminating. Notwithstanding his own scepticism about open or indeterminate meaning in Shakespeare, his adaptations or "variations" are very often responses to the way individual phrases and cadences are complicated by contextual pressures from elsewhere within a given poem, or at a further remove within the sequence. Paradoxically, Menart's "creative" treatment of individual lines or passages is frequently a function of his highly "philological" respect for those pressures. I have tried to show that his translation anticipates a later editorial trend that recognized both fluid openness of meaning *and* subtle schematization in the collection. In a late essay, Menart mused that "sonnets write themselves" (Menart 2003); yet his translation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* indicates deep prior meditation, design and discernment, and reflects the original work's ineffable yet tenacious architecture.

Katharina Reiß rejected J.C. Catford's claim that translation may only achieve true equivalence when the source and target language texts "are interchangeable in a given situation" (Catford 1965, 49). Catford's idea of a "situation" that determines both the meaning and success of translation anticipated the concept of "purpose", that is, *skopos*, which would be so central to Reiß and Vermeer and their followers. Reiß found Catford's assertion unrealistic, especially if applied to a literary translation (Reiß and Vermeer 2014, 118). It strikes me that, in Menart's case, Catford's theorem is sustainable. That, at least, is what I could only conclude from the widespread knowledge of and affection for the translation I encountered while I studied it, in order to give a talk about the *Sonnets* in Slovene. My colleague for that evening was an actor

who recited a handful of the Slovene poems. She left me – and our audience – in no doubt as to the independent excellence of Menart's translation. It was indeed perfectly "interchangeable" with the original in that theatrical situation. As such, to expand on Catford's maxim, this particular translation seems to answer all but a very few of the cultural purposes and needs that Shakespeare's text supplies.

Yet the chief beneficiary of such a translation is, paradoxically, the reader for whom it is technically redundant; that is to say, someone like me, a reader familiar with the source and target languages. Some, I fear, would say that Menart's relative international obscurity disqualifies his translation from wider consideration, for "no one has heard of him", and "who speaks Slovene, anyway?" The hierarchy of "high" and "low" impact cultures – subtly discussed in the sphere of Slovene studies by Martina Ožbot (Ožbot 2021, 7–18 and 19–36) – will have its unopposable say. Indeed, it might even incline both advocates of "philological" and "communicative" translation, "socio-critical" and "engagé" specialists alike, to dismiss a "low impact" voice, however distinguished that voice might be in its own tradition. For all that, and however quixotic it might seem to say so, any British or American student of Shakespeare would gain much by reading this translation of the *Sonnets* in the original Slovene.

References

Benjamin, Walter. (1968) 2007. "The Task of the Translator." In *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, 69–82. New York: Schocken.

Berman, Antoine, 2009. *Toward a Translation Criticism: John Donne*. Translated by Françoise Massardier-Kenney. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press.

Booth, Stephen. 1969. *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

—. 1977. *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Edited with Analytic Commentary*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Burrow, Colin, ed. 2002. [*Shakespeare*] *The Sonnets and Poems.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Catford, J.C., 1965. *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

De Man, Paul. 1985. "'Conclusions' Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator' Messenger Lecture, Cornell University, March 4, 1983." *Yale French Studies, The Lesson of Paul de Man* 69: 25–46. https://doi.org/10.2307/2929923.

Ettenhuber, Katrin. 2011. "'Comparisons are Odious?' Revisiting the Metaphysical Conceit in Donne." *The Review of English Studies* 62 (255): 393–413. https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgq103.

Evans, G. Blakemore, et al., eds. 1997. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd Ed. New York: Houghton.

Glavan, Mihael, ed. 2009 *Pesnik se predstavi : rojen za uspeh: dokumentarna razstava ob 80. obletnici rojstva Janeza Menarta, razstavna dvorana NUK, Ljubljana, 3. september 2009 – 4. oktober 2009* [catalogue from an exhibition celebrating Menart's work]. Ljubljana: Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica.

Grosman, Meta. 1987. "Shakespearjevi Soneti v slovenščini." *Slavistična Revija* 35 (3): 303–20.

Hollander, John. 1981. *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jenuš, Nataša. 1999. "Dobra poezija je zelo osebna stvar: pogovor z Janezom Menartom – ob avtorjevi sedemdesetletnici." *Večer* 253 (55): 42, October 30, 1999.

Kerrigan, John, ed. 1986. [*Shakespeare*] *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint.* London: Penguin Books.

Lyne, Raphael. 2016. *Memory and Intertextuality in Renaissance Literature.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacCulloch, Diarmaid. 2018. *Thomas Cromwell: A Life.* London: Allen Lane.

Mejak, Mitja. 1973. "Marginalije ob liričnem jubileju." *Sodobnost* 21 (4): 313–27.

Menart, Janez. 1965. "O prevajanju poezije." *Sodobnost* 13 (8/9): 665–80.

—. 2002. “O prevajalskem ptičem mleku.” In *Prevajanje srednjeveških in renesančnih besedil/The Translation of Medieval and Renaissance Texts*, edited by Martina Ožbot, 61–91. Ljubljana: Društvo slovenskih prevajalcev.
—. 2003. “Sonet se zapiše sam.” *Sobotna Priloga, Delo* 45 (91): 20–21, April 19, 2003.
Mowatt, Barbara A., and Paul Werstine, eds. 2006. *Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Poems*. New York: Simon and Schuster. https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/shakespeares-sonnets/.
Orgel, Stephen. 2002. “Mr Who He?” *London Review of Books* 24 (15), August 8, 2002. https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v24/n15/stephen-orgel/mr-who-he.
Ožbot, Martina. 2021. *Translation and Multilingualism: A Dynamic Interaction.* Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani.
Pahor, Božidor. 1966. “Shakespearovi soneti v Menartovem prevodu.” *Sodobnost* 14 (4): 412–17.
Pintarič, Miha, 2002. “Villon: prevod ironije in ironija prevoda.” In *Prevajanje srednjeveških in renesančnih besedil/Translation of Medieval and Renaissance Texts,* edited by Martina Ožbot, 131–35. Ljubljana: Društvo slovenskih prevajalcev.
Pogačnik, Vladimir. 2002. “Pesem o Rolandu v dveh slovenskih prevodih.” In *Prevajanje srednjeveških in renesančnih besedil/Translation of Medieval and Renaissance Texts*, edited by Martina Ožbot, 99–117. Ljubljana: Društvo slovenskih prevajalcev.
Reiß, Katharina, and Hans Vermeer. 2014. *Towards a General Theory of Translational Action: Skopos Theory Explained*. Translated by Christine Nord. London: Routledge.
Shakespeare, William. 2005. *Soneti* [*The Sonnets*]. Translated by Srečo Fišer. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva Založba.
—. 1965. *Soneti* [*The Sonnets*]. Translated by Janez Menart. Ljubljana: Slovenska Matica. Reprinted 2016. Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga.
Shrank, Cathy, and Raphael Lyne, eds. 2017. *The Complete Poems of Shakespeare.* London: Routledge.
Zavrl, Andrej. 2023. “Koga nagovarjajo Shakespearovi soneti (v slovenščini)?” *Primerjalna književnost* 46 (1): 169–93.
Zlobec, Ciril. 2004. “V našem času in svetu je videl hkrati svetlobo in sence: Janez Menart 1929–2004.” *Delo* 46 (18): 11, January 23, 2004.
Žerdin, Ali. 2004. “Janez Menart: 1929–2004.” *Mladina* 4: 55, January 26, 2.