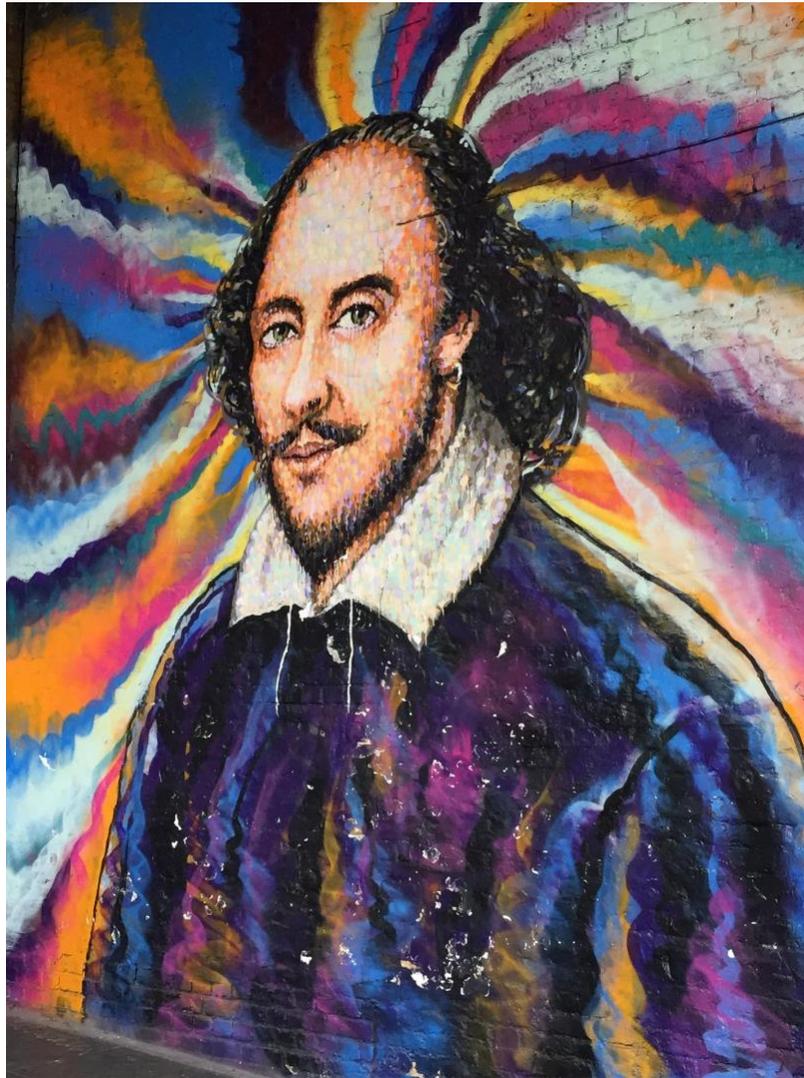


SHAKESPEARE: HOMECOMING

Hunter College Students Translating Shakespeare back into English



Today, we're delighted to showcase **an unusual translation project proposed to us by the poet, translator, and educator, Basil Lvoff, who challenged his graduate students at Hunter College** to translate back into English the famous Sonnet 87 by William Shakespeare. The result is an extremely interesting translation and linguistic experiment that we're proud to present as a premiere for NTM. The translated versions are included alongside an insightful essay that outlines the parameters of the project, as well as commentary on each student's translation. Many thanks to Basil Lvoff and his students for allowing us to publish their excellent work.

We'd love to hear what you think! Find us on twitter [@TranslateMonth](#), share using [#TranslationMonth](#), join our mailing list, submit a translation month event, or like our [Facebook](#) page. We hope you'll join us and celebrate your favorite translations in September and beyond.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

SHAKESPEARE: HOMECOMING

(FROM RUSSIAN WITH LOVE)

Hunter College Students Translating Shakespeare back into English

There is not a person however faintly familiar with the business of translation who does not know that something is unavoidably lost in it. “Lost” is a word that evokes Odyssean nostalgia—a dream of homecoming as a response to inevitable separation. Among the most archetypal examples are Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. In similar vein, Walter Benjamin writes in his scandalous and messianic “The Task of the Translator” that any expression in a national language, such as English or Russian, takes place after the original sin, the perfect babel, of “alien tongues” and that the only antidote is the return to “pure language”—an aspiration also reflected in Milton’s and Proust’s new testaments: *Paradise Regain’d* and *Time Regained*.

The biblical dialectic thus ordains that to regain something, we must lose it. Accordingly, Benjamin first pounces on translation as “the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content” only to extol it later as the first step on the path towards a pure, universal, language, and away from the shackles of the original: the prison-house of its language that is peculiar to a certain country and thereby corrupted by bloody and biased history. In the words of Benjamin, “ironically, translation transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm, since *it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering. The original can only be raised there anew* [emphasis mine].” When there is no source language to fetishize, the ideal looms out of it.

To test Benjamin’s theory, the graduate students of Russian-English Literary Translation course, subtitled “From Russian with Love” and taught by me at Hunter College in the fall of 2021, undertook the homecoming of Shakespeare back into English from the Russian of his

translators: Nikolai Gerbel, Modest Tchaikovsky, Samuil Marshak, Alexander Finkel, Igor Fradkin, and Vladimir Gandelsman. Some of them struggled with Shakespeare's Sonnet 87 in the nineteenth century, like Nikolai Gerbel and Modest Tchaikovsky (the brother of the great composer), others in the twentieth, while Gandelsman, one of the finest living Russian poets, in the twenty-first.

So suggestive and riveting is this sonnet that renowned literary critic Harold Bloom derived from it his famous theory of literary history: the anxiety of influence. Like Shakespeare's other sonnets but probably more than most, Sonnet 87 goes beyond the habitual theme of love, which, unless protected by the double-lock of convoluted metaphors, too easily falls prey to the inflation of sense and sensibility. The financial and legal metaphors of Sonnet 87 thus describe an economy and the patent laws that could equally apply to friendship, translation, cognition, the Christian doctrine of grace, etc. etc.

Metaphors of this degree may be notoriously difficult to translate, and that is precisely the case with Russian. However unusual and possibly jarring in Shakespeare's time, these metaphors hit home, being the product of the financially and legally dynamic life of Elizabethan England. In this regard, Russia was of course strikingly different from England even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Russian literary and poetic language matured. Aristocratic or democratic, classical Russian poetry did not really "talk money," unless it was done in a general fashion. Financial matters (closely tied with legal ones as in Shakespeare's sonnet) remained highly unpoetic during the Silver Age of Russian poetry as well and were tamed by later poets, many of them, like Joseph Brodsky, under a strong influence of Anglo-American poetry. Thus, Marshak, as one of the most renowned although increasingly disputed translators of Shakespeare's sonnets, hewed to the poetic tradition established in the nineteenth century, hence the loss of most of Shakespeare's metaphors in his rendition of Sonnet 87. From

the standpoint of this tradition, speaking about love as a value, punning on the lover or mistress as “dear” in both the spiritual and trophy-like sense, is all right as long as it does not get technical, but to speak about bonds, patents, stockholders, and so on and so forth is how bankers talk, not poets. It is not so much a matter of the prejudice of classical Russian poetry against the “despicable metal” (mind you, classical Russian poetry is not prudish, just different); rather, such metaphors sound irreparably strained, disingenuous—as would the terminology of a meteorological report in the poems of Robert Burns or John Keats. Even Gandelsman’s metaphors—I say “even” because his translation belongs to the twenty-first century and comes after the metaphoric breakthroughs of the Russian poets of the second half of the twentieth—even Gandelsman’s metaphors read archaic compared to the utmost contemporaneity of Shakespeare’s, in his time as well as nowadays.

Furthermore, the very idea of ownership opens up a fundamental gap between the two languages. Thus, the phrase that to a speaker of English would seem a neutral one (“you are too dear for me to possess”) sounds foreign to the point of clumsy when translated into Russian. In Russian, one almost never says: “I have a car” or “I own a car,” let alone “I have a wife” or “I have a husband”—that is what is implied, of course, but the way it is grammatically expressed in such phrases as «У меня есть машина», «У меня есть муж» roughly translates as “there is a car...” or “there is a husband at my disposal.”

This gap between the two languages was less formidable to the students translating back into English; besides, I asked them not to consult Shakespeare’s original, even though I did tell them what type of metaphors it employed (viz., financial and legal ones). And yet the students, prodded by rhyme, had to come up with their own metaphors, so for many of them the challenge consisted in having greater leeway than the Russian translators.

The problem of metaphors made me translate Sonnet 87 into Russian as well, though I knew it would be a sure failure. I tasked myself with using as many legal and financial metaphors as the original, while still writing something that would not fall out completely with the poetic tradition of classical Russian poetry. After all, I preserved the sonnet form—the only constant, the only inflation-proof thing not lost in the endless transaction of translations. (Hence my only requirement for students: that they hew to sonnet form in their translations.) It is noteworthy though, sadly, not so surprising that the financial and legal metaphors I dwelled on as they seemed to work within the confines of the Russian poetic tradition are related to serfdom—the Russian equivalent of slavery. I placed my translation of Sonnet 87 next to the other ones, under a pseudonym, and one of the students selected it. Translating culture-specific metaphors from Russian into English must have been as difficult for the student as would be translating Shakespeare’s original into Russian, which is why I write about it separately to acknowledge the effort.

Much, much more can be said of Sonnet 87, but I will let the students’ translations and commentary speak for themselves. I will only add that each of these translations is a result of multiple revisions and that some of the students wrote metrical and rhymed poetry for the first time in their lives. Some of my comments and corrections were accepted, while a good many were not, and I commend the students’ authorship and ownership of their translations.

As for the results of the experiment, they are, as always, for *NTM*’s readers to determine. On behalf of the students, I wish to thank *National Translation Month* for this opportunity, as well as my dear colleagues at the Russian and Slavic Studies Division of the Department of Classical and Oriental Studies; and, last but not least, my colleagues in MATI (the Master of Arts in Translation and Interpreting program).

Anna Geselbracht

Modest Tchaikovsky's Shakespeare (1850–1916)	Anna Geselbracht's Shakespeare
<p>Прощай! Ты слишком дорог для меня И самому себе ты знаешь цену. Тебе свобода мной возвращена, И моему предел положен плену.</p>	<p>Relinquish me to listless, pale desire! You've proved again you're far too good for me. The thralldom of our contract's thus expired And with these words, my love, I set you free.</p>
<p>Как удержать тебя мне против воли? Заслугами моими не богат, - Не стою я такой блаженной доли И все права мои даю назад.</p>	<p>How could I try to make you change your mind? I'm not a bard, nor sage, nor knight, nor shaman — And sometimes fate's as sly as love is blind And flowers lose their pistils and their stamens —</p>
<p>Ты дал их мне, еще меня не зная И зная мало о себе самом. Твои дары, в разладе возрастая, Из чуждого вернутся в отчий дом.</p>	<p>Your heart grew cold, your eyes got so much clearer; You'll gossip of my faults when you get home — Now stars sail by, the sky's an endless mirror As dawn creeps in, the first day I'm alone</p>
<p>Я обладал тобой, как в сновиденьи, И был царем - до мига пробужденья.</p>	<p>In dreams I kissed you, sang your phantom name A nighttime king — until the morning came</p>

Commentary

The rhythm and rhyme scheme of the sonnet form have forced me to introduce images and ideas that are not in the “original” Russian text. It was impossible to adhere strictly to the referential meaning of the text, but the emotional meaning is still there. It’s interesting that—in these poems, at any rate—the emotive function and the poetic function are closely welded together, whereas the referential function is secondary, and can shift and change.

Anna Geselbracht received a Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics from the University of Kansas, then lived and worked in Russia for several years. Her interests include music, visual art, wildlife, and history.

Maria Kovalevskaya

<p>Nikolai Gerbel's Shakespeare (1827–1883)</p> <p>Прощай — ты для меня уж слишком дорога; Да и сама себе ты, верно, знаешь цену. Нажив достоинств тьму, ты сделалась строга; Я ж, став твоим рабом, нейду на перемену,</p> <p>Чем, кроме просьб, тебя могу я удержать, И чем я заслужил такое совершенство? Нет, не по силам мне подобное блаженство, И прав я на него не вправе заявлять.</p> <p>Ты отдала себя, цены себе не зная, Иль — может — как во мне, ошиблась ты в себе. И вот, случайный дар мне милый возвращая, Я вновь его дарю, прекрасная, тебе.</p> <p>Да, ты была моей, но долго ль это было? Я спал — и был царем, проснулся — и все сплыло.</p>	<p>Maria Kovalevskaya's Shakespeare</p> <p>It's time to part; you are beyond my means. You know your worth is something you should save. Now that you're rich, your treatment's harsh and lean, But I can't leave because I am your slave.</p> <p>To keep you — how? By begging? By some ploy? What was my feat that conquered your perfection? And I'm afraid I can't endure such joy. I've got no right for claiming your affection.</p> <p>You gave yourself to me without a thought, It's likely you misjudged the two of us So giving back that gift, which now you've got, I reimbursed you, breaking even thus</p> <p>Yes, you were mine, but only for a glimpse - I sleep no more, the lonely dawn begins.</p>
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Commentary

For me, as a native Russian speaker, it was hard to use iambic pentameter in English. Honestly, I think that the problem with the meter was partially solved by adding syllables, but I liked my first draft written in iambic tetrameter more. The task was really challenging, but enjoyable.

I was born and raised in Russia. After finishing high school in a small town in the Ural, I enrolled in the Baltic Federal University in Kaliningrad (a Russian exclave sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania). I have always been interested in languages and different cultures. That is why I have traveled to some European and Asian countries during my student years. After getting my master's in linguistics, I started teaching English, showing my students that the world is beautiful and communication is essential in the 21st century. In 2019, I became a Fulbright teaching assistant of Russian at Hunter College, NYC, where I have an opportunity to audit courses.

Rebecca Kurk

<p>Igor Fradkin's Shakespeare (b. 1929)</p> <p>Прощай! Ты слишком драгоценный клад, Я впредь его хранить не обещаю: Все привилегии возьми назад, Долг отдаю и дело прекращаю.</p> <p>Я был твоею дружбою богат, В сравнении с тобой чего я стою? Ты предо мной ни в чем не виноват - К чему мне быть обузою пустою?</p> <p>Ты прежде не искал во мне заслуг, Дарил себя, цены себе не зная, Но дар ошибкой был – замкнулся круг: Возьми свой дар назад, не осуждая,</p> <p>Тобой, как королевством, я владел, Но минул сон, и вмиг я обеднел.</p>	<p>Rebecca Kurk's Shakespeare</p> <p>Farewell! You are too dear a possession, And I dare not hold you to where you stood: So, claim your privileges without question, My rights I've given all away for good.</p> <p>Endowed with your attention, thus supreme, Compared to you, what merit now I hold? I've done no wrong, my guilt is not extreme, So how am I to you a useless load?</p> <p>You didn't search for value in me prior, Yourself you gifted knowing not your rate, Mistaken then, but now broken free from mire: So, take your gift back now, with no debate,</p> <p>You were my kingdom's jewel in my dreams, But I woke up and all burst at the seams.</p>
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Commentary

Beginning the sonnet translation process with a literal translation of the text was most useful as I was able to gauge the meaning of the poem without placing specific focus on form. However, slowly extracting myself from the Russian text was tough but an important step as I found myself too reliant on the ST, rather than centering my TT. As I worked through this, folding and molding my translation to fit the sonnet form was difficult as well, but at the same time enjoyable as this helped extricate me from the ST. From then on, multiple revisions to sentence structures were made to maintain the rhythmic meter and rhyme scheme of the sonnet. As the sentence structures were modified, new meanings sprouted from the changes.



Rebecca Kurk was born and raised in New York City in a Russian-speaking household. She holds a bachelor's degree in English, with a concentration in Linguistics and Rhetoric from Hunter College. She will be graduating in Winter 2021 with a Master's degree in Russian Translation and Interpreting from Hunter College's MATI program.

Ksenia Voronova

Alexander Finkel's Shakespeare (1899–1968)	Ksenia Voronova's Shakespeare
Прощай! Меж нас я не хочу сближенья – Ведь для меня чрезмерно дорога ты. Вручаю сам тебе освобожденье, Ты предо мной ни в чем не виновата.	Farewell! I grant you a secession Because to me you are too lovable. I grant your long-awaited culmination, And for my life, in you there's nothing blamable.
Тебя держать, презрев твое желанье? Как мне принять такое подношенье? Не стою я столь щедрого даянья – Так отбери же запись на владенье.	To keep you, while ignoring your desire? But how would I accept such contribution? I don't deserve such riches to acquire, Sign them away and sign my destitution.
Меня ль, себя ль оцениваешь ложно, Но быть моей - ошибка и страданье. Твой дивный дар принять мне невозможно Возьми его назад без колебанья.	Yourself or me perhaps you have judged falsely, And to be mine is a mistake and suffering. For I cannot accept your love morosely, So take it back without unneeded dithering.
Тобой владел я в лестном сновиденье: Король во сне ничто по пробужденье.	I owned you in a dream so flattering: In dream a king, but waking no such thing.

Commentary

The translation process began with the preservation of the meter, followed by the experimentation with rhyme according to the rules of the Shakespearean sonnet. After revision and the combining of meter and rhyme, some lines changed from the original translation and improved, adding something new, such as new vocabulary and structuring of the lines.

Ksenia is from Brooklyn and grew up bilingual. One of her most favorite poets is Sergei Yesenin.

Christina Fedorov

Vladimir Gandel'sman's Shakespeare (b. 1948)	Christina Fedorov's Shakespeare
Прощай, твоих щедрот я недостоин, ты слишком знаешь цену сам себе, и потому один ты в поле воин, а твой ценитель сдан своей судьбе.	Farewell, I'm undeserving of your gifts, You over estimate your own self rate, And that is why you man your ship adrift, I forfeit your goodwill and meet my fate,
Как обойтись без твоего согласия, чтобы таким сокровищем владеть? Вернув его себе, ты в одночасье вернул всё то, о чём я смел радеть.	Now what am I to do with no consent? Without it, how could I possess the treasure? But if in the unlikeliest event, You brought it back, my joy with none would measure.
Не знал ли ты, насколько дар твой ярок, иль просто разуверился во мне, – вновь у тебя бесценный твой подарок. Распорядись умнее, он в цене.	Didn't you know how precious your gift was, Or did you simply lose faith in me? Once more you have your priceless gift yet pause, Make wiser choices, it's high in degree.
Чем был мой титул крёза? Лестью сна. Но сон исчез, а с ним моя казна.	What's my regency? Slumber's flattery. But now it's gone, and my days scatterry.

Commentary

Working on this piece was a painful pleasure from start to finish. Translating a text with the proper meaning is one task; however, performing the feat of attempting to tackle iambic pentameter in addition to correctly translating the message across proves to show that the choices become extremely limited and the work much more difficult. It took many attempts to find words that rhymed, fit the meter and still translated with the same intention as the ST. It was a very interesting challenge that I enjoyed greatly!

I'm from Brooklyn, NY, and grew up speaking Russian at home. In high school I discovered that Russian was being taught as a language option, and at that point I only knew how to speak Russian but not write or read, so I jumped at the opportunity to learn. I fell in love with the challenges of translation and have been studying Russian language, literature, and culture ever since! It is a pleasure to expose myself to opportunities to translate difficult works of writing from Russian to English and vice versa.

Charles Cuccinello

Samuil Marshak's Shakespeare (1887–1964)	Charles Cuccinello's Shakespeare
Прощай! Тебя удерживать не смею. Я дорого ценю любовь твою. Мне не по-средствам то, чем я владею, И я залог покорно отдаю.	Farewell! Restrain you? I've no audac'ty, I fear I value your love dearly so, It's now beyond all my capacity, And I return your gift, oh so sincer'ly.
Я, как подарком, пользуюсь любовью. Заслугами не куплена она. И значит, добровольное условие По прихоти нарушить ты вольна.	Love as a gift is how I shall bestow. Not as a bought and paid for service then. Thus by free will, not via a cheap low blow Disturbing freely any time, nervous so.
Дарила ты, цены не зная кладу Или не зная, может быть, меня. И не по праву взятую награду Я сохранял до нынешнего дня.	You gave out prices, disregarding worth By knowing me, at which you're not adept. To take reward not mine by via birth, Until the present day, which I have kept.
Был королем я только в сновиденье. Меня лишило трона пробужденье!	Thus only dreaming, solo I can rule. Upon my waking, powerless, so cruel.

Commentary

The process of translation goes through multiple steps: (1) read through the poem; (2) write a rough translation; (3) refine the rough draft into a cleaner working version; (4) set up an iambic verse template in order to help merge the poem with that structure; (5) finalize the translation by conforming the poem to the structure of a sonnet.



Charles Cuccinello is currently pursuing an MA in Russian Translation and Interpreting at Hunter College. His language direction is Russian to English. In addition to his current educational endeavors, he holds an MA in National Security from The Institute of World Politics in Washington, DC, as well as a BA in International Studies from Concordia College, New York. He currently resides in New York.

Nadia Ostreicher

Vasily Lvov's Shakespeare	Nadia Ostreicher's Shakespeare
<p>Ты дорог мне, фиктивно обладанье, Себе ты знаешь цену сам. Прощай! Ты сам свой откуп и долгам списанье, На долю мне ты выкупил свой пай.</p>	<p>You're dear to me, though faithlessly acquired, You know yourself, you own your price, goodbye; Your freedom is to buy_ what is desired, I've had my share restoring your supply.</p>
<p>Ведь как мне удержать тебя без ссуды, И чем сыскать себе вознагражденье? На благовидность притязанья дуты, За купчую оброк мне – отчужденье.</p>	<p>For who else could I keep you in my trust, And how am I to keep up my repayment? With false intention and inflated lust, And with the contract, I am in estrangement.</p>
<p>Ты душу вверил мне по недосмотру, Себе в ущерб, мне в прибыль сбившись в счете, Хоть тем взвинтил свой курс, превысив квоту, И изменил при новом обороте.</p>	<p>You gave your soul, not thinking an iota, You've lost it and forgot_ to make the count, You ratchet up the price, and up the quota, And changed again within the new rebound.</p>
<p>Что царь я, а ты раб, шептал мне сон, Но вдруг очнулся я всего лишен.</p>	<p>My dreams call you a slave and me a king And yet I wake alone to feel the sting.</p>

Commentary

I had a difficult time with this translation simply because, as a poet myself, I like to break the rules. I found myself wanting to add extra syllables and change the syntax. In the end, I found a way to keep the financial metaphors of the original and the form.

Nadia Ostreicher, 23, is from CT and is a graduate student of Russian and Physics.

William Shakespeare

Sonnet LXXXVII

Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing,
And like enough thou knowst thy estimate.
The Charter of thy worth gives thee releasing;
My bonds in thee are all determinate.
For how do I hold thee but by thy granting,
And for that riches where is my deserving?
The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting,
And so my patent back again is swerving.
Thy self thou gav'st, thy own worth then not knowing,
Or me, to whom thou gav'st it, else mistaking,
So thy great gift, upon misprision growing,
Comes home again, on better judgement making.
Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter:
In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.



Basil Lvoff (Василий Львов) combines creative writing with scholarship, his dissertations in literary theory defended at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York and at Moscow State University. His essays and poems have been published in *The New Review* (*Novy zhurnal*), *Novy mir*, *Zvezda*, *Interpoezia*, *Gastarbajter* (*Slavic Diaspora Magazine*), *Syndic Literary Journal*, and elsewhere. Basil Lvoff has taught Russian culture, history, and language courses at NYU, Columbia University, Barnard College, and Hunter College, as well as English composition courses at Baruch College. In 2017, together with his filmmaker wife Olga Lvoff, he launched *Moving Lyrics*—an international festival and workshop of poetry-based short films, organized between Columbia University, Hunter College, and Moscow State University.