

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Galit Hasan-Rokem, Tamar S. Hess, Shirley Kaufman, eds. *The Defiant Muse: Hebrew Feminist Poems from Antiquity to the Present A Bilingual Anthology*. New York and London: The Feminist Press of the City University of New York and London: Lokin Books in Association with the European Jewish Publication Society and the Arts Council of England, 1999. xvii + 270 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55861-223-5.



Reviewed by Lois Bar-yaacov (Lecturer, retired, Department of English Literature, Hebrew University, Jerusalem)

Published on H-Judaic (March, 2000)

This anthology is a contribution to both Hebrew and English scholarship. A collection which draws together poetry by women –written in Hebrew – from the period of the Bible, the Babylonian exile, the Spanish exile and the Mediterranean exile which followed it, the eastern-European exile, and the early Ottoman period in Palestine is a remarkable scholarly achievement. It had been generally assumed that no such body of work existed, neither poetry nor prose. Therefore, “women’s voices in Hebrew” seemed a contradiction in terms for those of use who had been familiar with the historical usurpation of the Hebrew language as an exclusively masculine domain.

Writing in the mid-eighteenth century, Sarah Rebecca Rachel Leah Horowitz (yes, she was given the names of all the matriarchs, and even worked them as an acrostic into her poem) daughter of a prominent central European rabbi, comments on this, apparently without irony or protest. Addressing God in perfect, prayer-book Aramaic, *Ya Ribbon Olam*, she acknowledges the fact that women were to be confined to “easy languages” – i.e. whatever daily language was in use in the place where they lived (in her case, Yiddish).

God, Lord of all the worlds, You created in six days Heaven and earth and all that is firmly planted By means of ten sayings. And on the seventh day, you rested from

all those sayings, And you commanded the holy people To rest from all words, Except as they occupy themselves With the business of heaven and the secret mysteries. And ignorant folk and women Should busy themselves in their homes, in the easy language, With what they are obligated to do according to the commandments.

[From “The Tkhine of the Matriarchs,” (tr. Chava Weissler)]

The poem ends with a perfervid supplication that God grant her “Male children from the Male World” (Kabbalistic terms).

This apparent capitulation raises one of the central points at issue concerning the anthology. In what way is the poetry in it “defiant” or, for that matter, “feminist”? The American press which issues the book is certainly feminist. This is the seventh in the series “The Defiant Muse” – which has already published feminist collections of poetry by women from the Middle Ages to the present in Dutch and Flemish, French, German, Spanish, and Italian. The editors of the Hebrew edition have resolved this problem of definition by simply declaring that “a woman in Andalusia, Tunisia, Morocco, Kurdistan, Italy, Russia or Palestine (before the State of Israel) who dared to study and master the Hebrew language well enough to write verse in Hebrew made these writers early femi-

nists.”

I have not seen the other collections, so I cannot say whether the poems in them are more or less defiant than those which appear here. Until the modern period, Hebrew poems by women have been remarkable historical documents, but on the evidence of what appears in this anthology I would hardly designate them unconventional expressions concerning the definition of the relationships between the sexes, or to quote the words of the introduction “characterized by a feminist inclination to rebel openly against patriarchal oppression of women.”

They are no less remarkable for that, nor are they any less a credit to the tenacity, originality and profound scholarship of the editors who have made them available to us in a beautifully designed book with Hebrew original and English translations on facing pages.

The poetry is organized under three general headings: (1) Women’s Voices in Biblical Texts (2) Women’s Voices in Rabbinic Texts of Late Antiquity; and (3) Women’s Poetry from the 10th Century C.E. to the Present. It comes as no surprise to any of us that out of the 239 pages given to the poetry itself (the book is rich with supplementary essays which are in and of themselves models of fascinating scholarship), only 44 pages (slightly less than a fifth) are devoted to poetry preceding the nineteenth century. And two-thirds of those pages are “women’s voices” rather than the voice of an individual woman. In short, the editors (consulting with prominent biblical and talmudic scholars) have isolated out of the traditional biblical and rabbinic texts voices which have always been attributed to women, but which, because of the conventions of Jewish scholarship, have usually been subsumed under male authorship.

“The Song of Miriam,” “The Song of Deborah,” Ruth’s entreaty to Naomi, the erotic lyrics of the Shulamite in the Song of Songs – all these words are familiar to Bible readers but they reverberate with a startling tone when their speakers are embodied forth as authors in the editorial spotlight.

Deborah’s song, for example, pays tribute to another woman, Yael, and describes with detailed savagery (worthy of Homer) the death of Sisera:

Most blessed of women is Yael, Wife of Heber the Kenite, Most blessed of women in the tents. He asked for water, she offered milk; In a princely bowl she brought him curds. Her (left) hand reached for the tent pin, Her right for the workmen’s hammer. She struck Sisera,

crushed his head, Smashed and skewered his temple. At her feet he sank, falling outstretched, At her feet he sank, lay still Where he sank; he lay there – slain.

[From *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*, JPS translation]

Even more disconcerting is the highlighting of women’s voices from rabbinic literature, few as they are. The following is from the Babylonian Talmud.

“The First Night” *Ketubot* 39b

Abaye said, mother told me: Like hot water On a bald man’s head.

Raba said, The daughter of Rab Hisda* told me: Like the prick of bloodletting.

Rav Papa said, the daughter of Aba of Sura** told me: Like hard bread for the gums.

* Raba’s wife. ** Rav Papa’s wife.

[tr. Shirley Kaufman with Galit Hasan-Rokem]

We have to wait ten centuries before we hear the voice of another woman in Hebrew – and she, though a recognized individual, still has no name. She is “the wife of Dunash Labrat,” whose poem, found in the Cairo Geniza, was until only recently, attributed to her well-known husband, although it speaks with great elegance and eloquence in unmistakably feminine tones:

Will her love remember his graceful doe, her only son in her arms as he parted? On her left hand he placed a ring from his right, on his wrist she placed her bracelet.

As a keepsake she took his mantle from him, and he in turn took hers from her. He won’t settle in the Land of Spain, though its prince gave him half his kingdom.

[tr. Peter Cole]

This and one other poem from the fifteenth century are what remain of poetry in Hebrew by women from the entire period of the renaissance of Hebrew poetry which took place in medieval Spain before the expulsion. Was there more written? If so, will it be found? These are questions the editors ask as well. The two poems, however, and single poems from Kurdistan and Morocco, are all the evidence we have of women’s culture in Hebrew before the beginning of modern times. The prodigious effort expended by the editors to find these precious documents (they were aided by research students in the Women’s Studies department of the Hebrew University) only makes the surrounding silence more poignant,

more deafening.

When we reach the late nineteenth century and the modern period, the poetry distinctly begins to take on a feminist cast, partly in and of itself, and partly because of editorial choice. Rachel Morpurgo, writing in Italy in 1847, sounds startlingly like Anne Bradstreet writing in America in 1650.

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue Who says my hand a needle better fits, A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong, For such despite they cast on female wits: If what I do prove well, it won't advance, They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance.

[from "The Prologue" by Anne Bradstreet]

Here is Morpurgo (who signs herself by the way, *nefel eshet yaacov murpurgo*, Wife of Jacob Morpurgo, Still-born; the irony is fully intended):

I've looked to the north, south, east, and west: a woman's word in each is lighter than dust. Years hence, will anyone really remember

her name in city or province, any more than a dead dog. Ask: the people are sure: a woman's wisdom is only in spinning wool.

[from "On Hearing She Had Been Praised in the Journals" (tr. Peter Cole)]

In the twentieth century, for the readers of Hebrew poetry, the names become more familiar: Rahel, Leah Goldberg, Dahlia Ravikovitch, Zelda, Yona Wallach and Maya Bejarano, among others. Nor do the editors stop with the great "classical" women writers, but continue their adventurous search for strong and original voices right into the last decade of the century. We hear more recent names: Sharon Hass, Leah Aini, Leah Ayalon, Agi Mishol, for example. Some might complain that as a consequence of the democratic nature of the editing, there is too little space to present more than one or two poems by each writer, but I believe that it specifically serves one of the purposes of this anthology, which is to display the great variety of writing by contemporary women writers in Hebrew.

It is impossible to quote one poet as representative of the others, even to single one poet out from among the others, since each of the many women speaking in our time is really speaking in her own individual voice, without any veil between us and her nuances of feeling, except, of course, the conventions of interpretation which govern the reading of every work of art. And here is

where the feminist grasp of the editors is so distinctively rewarding to readers of this singular collection. There has been a great deal of controversy over feminist scholarship, although today there is a more general recognition of the many contributions it has made to opening our eyes to alternative readings of even classical authors. For example, one of the great revolutions in modern literary scholarship has been the rescue of Emily Dickinson's poetry from the grasp of "the sweet little spinster" school of literary interpretation. Critics stopped speculating on the man or men she might have loved, and began discussing the awesome force and cruelty of her metaphysical struggles.

The historical essay which opens the anthology is a virtuoso survey of Hebrew literature from antiquity to modern times, presenting a clear account of the fortunes of women writers throughout this long narrative. What we discover as we read is that it is not only in the retrieval of long-lost documents and the exploration of historical silences that Hebrew women's studies scholars have done us all service. It is also in the retrieval of Hebrew women's poetry from the marginal place to which it was relegated in the canon, the reintroduction of the voice of women into the center of Jewish history.

For example, was Rahel's poetry "important"? Not if you consulted the critics who were her contemporaries (or those who inherited the mantle of authority after them). She wrote in a straightforward colloquial style, mostly about her own personal feelings, and not about the "great" subjects of Jewish history and politics. Most of her poetry was published in the last six years of her life, the late 1920's. The critics dismissed her work as "simple" and "naive" – in short, women's poetry. The editors, on the other hand, explain how her use of everyday spoken Hebrew had a liberating effect upon the levels of expression available to the then-developing modern Hebrew poetry, freeing it from the pompous and deadening rhetoric adopted by so many of her male contemporaries.

Even more dramatic is the story of Rahel's contemporary, Esther Raab, who was dropped from the canon altogether and almost forgotten. Here was a woman, born in Petah Tikvah in 1894, who continued writing into her seventies. She was drawn back into the center of Hebrew literature by feminist critics who recognized the fresh power of her writing.

Last Prayer

Don't make me so good, and poor, ruined, and empty. "And knowing before Whom you stand."* Don't darken

my last days, don't exalt me. And don't make me so modest, and don't give me as nourishment to every unfortunate, every outcast. Straighten my back and strengthen my guts. Let me uproot narcissus in the forbidden reserve of Your garden and throw them to the wind. And let the barn once again be filled to the brim, let me feel the almond sacks, leaking the fragrance of mignonette over the terrace and the odor of new wine from wagons full of grapes in the courtyard.

* Part of the Jewish burial service.

[tr. Kinereth Gensler]

As can be seen from the poems I have quoted, the quality of the translations in the anthology is superb. Most of the translators are distinguished poets in their own right, and I think it is also just to call attention to the unfailing ear and awareness of the subtleties of poetic language of the English editor, Shirley Kaufman, one of America's prominent contemporary poets.

"A Note on Translation," the second essay which opens the volume, gives evidence of the many problems in translating from Hebrew, a condensed Semitic language, with marked gender endings, into the more discursive and largely non-gendered English. The essay quotes the once notorious, now famous lines from the poem "Hebrew" by Yonah Wallach. Wallach, who died in 1985, is still among the most widely read poets in Israel. Her life and verse were marked by an outrageous outspokenness about feelings and sex which was a total innovation in the Hebrew poetry of her period, which was much influenced by the distancing modernism of Pound and Eliot.

About pronouns and sex English leaves its options open in practice each *I* has all the options *she* is *he* when it's *you I* doesn't have a sex there's no difference between *she-you* and *he-you* and all things are *it* - not man not woman no need to think before relating to sex Hebrew is a sex maniac.

[tr. Lisa Katz]

The essay illustrates the kind of problems confronting translators when women poets adopt transgending as an aesthetic means: "When Leah Ayalon switches to the masculine first-person verb form in 'Dark Thoughts and I'm Even the Opposite of What You Think' - 'I want to undress and remove the clothes from all those women' - the translator Rachel Tzvia Back has to specify, 'As a

man I want to undress ...'"

The tension between the beauty of the condensation in Hebrew and the natural discursiveness of English is beautifully illustrated in the essay in a discussion of the translation of Zelda's poem "Each Rose":

"... in Zelda's poem 'Each Rose,' we read, 'Inside the petals / of each rose dwells a sapphire bird called/ "And They Shall Beat Their Swords."' In Hebrew the fourth line of the stanza is one compact word of five letters *ve'khitetu* - which requires four words in English translation - *and they shall beat*. Since this did not fully connote the specific Biblical allusion to swords being beaten into ploughshares (Isaiah 2.4), Barbara Goldberg wisely decided to include the swords. Although the Biblical allusion is sustained in the English translation, the onomatopoeic value of the Hebrew, which sounds like a bird chirping, is lost."

In these few examples one can see the usefulness and exactness of the essay, which underlines the sensitivity and aesthetic standards by which many poetic riddles were solved. The book, by the way, has been awarded The Poetry Society of Great Britain's Translation Selection Award for Spring 2000.

It is perhaps churlish of me to point out some of the failures of judgment which went into the production of the anthology. Most noticeable is the stinginess of the page design, which does not provide a regular heading with the author's name at the top of each page, so that one is sometimes forced to leaf back several pages to find out whose poetry one is reading. The arbitrary decision to start the biographical notes with writers from the nineteenth century onwards is also unfortunate. Not every reader, and especially those who are interested in the poetry rather than the scholarly commentary, will be able to fish out the biographical details about the wife of Dunash Ben Labrat and Sarah Rebecca Rachel Leah Horowitz, for example, from the densely-packed opening essay.

But it would be misleading and unfair to end on this carping note. Here is a book which readers of Hebrew and readers of English can benefit from greatly.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net and JSN, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and H-JUDAIC. For other permission, please contact the H-Judaic Book Review Editor: <ditomml@mcmaster.ca>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Lois Bar-yaacov. Review of Hasan-Rokem, Galit; Hess, Tamar S.; Kaufman, Shirley, eds., *The Defiant Muse: Hebrew Feminist Poems from Antiquity to the Present A Bilingual Anthology*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3911>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.