Arabic Poetry and Stories
Translation Workshops

‘It was and it was not…’: Translation in Action
(from Arabic into English)

May 11, May 25, June 6, June 25 2017

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In conjunction with the Contemporary Poetics Research Centre,
Birkbeck. Directed by Steve Willey.
Workshop Topics and Dates

**Workshop 1:** May 11 The writer Hanan al-Shaykh will discuss her work.
Topic: **The Wiles of Women.** Poetry and Stories from *The 1001 Nights* (2:30 to 5:30 pm, SOAS, B104)
Public reading. 6.30-8.00 pm (SOAS B104)

**Workshop 2:** May 25 The writer Hoda Barakat will discuss her work.
Topic: **Mad Love.** Nizami, *The Seven Pavilions: The Tale of Leila and Majnun* (2:30 to 5:30 pm, SOAS, SWLT)

**Workshop 3:** June 6 Writer tbc. Islamic Sicily or Siculo-Arab Literature: poems of Ibn Hamdis and others, and fables from Ibn Zafer, *Solwan or the Waters of Comfort* (Birkbeck, Room 102, 30 Russell Square)

**Workshop 4:** June 27 Writer tbc, The poetry and stories of the Abbasid *qiyān* (Birkbeck, Room 102, 30 Russell Square)

**Final workshop in September/October** will showcase the work completed over the summer.

**Participants**
16 places for CHASE PhD students; 10 places reserved for independent translators and scholars, for a total of 20 for each workshop.

**Objectives**
A: The workshops proposed will adapt methods used for bringing Greek tragedy to an Anglophone reader and apply them to Arabic literature.
With the help of scholars of Arabic literature, who are interested in the wider transmission and enjoyment of their subject, students will work alongside poets, dramatists, translation theorists, and writers of fiction, in order to revision (*‘awaken’*) Arabic literary texts for contemporary readers/audiences.

It has become customary, for example, for a poet with no Greek or Anglo-Saxon to re-inhabit a myth or a legend and bring it to vigorous new life—famous examples include Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*, Simon Armitage’s *King Arthur*, and the inspired contemporary revoicings of Ovid by Timberlake Wertenbaker and Kate Tempest. By contrast, the riches of classical and traditional literature in Arabic have in some sense been kept from those who cannot read or understand the language. The complexities of Arabic prosody and the vast range of genres and expressions of the Arabic and Persian narrative and poetic corpus seem to preclude access to all but scholars. Workshop participants will explore means and ways to make this literature accessible beyond the specialist circle.

The joint workshops themselves will examine how stories, motifs, characters, images travel across borders and migrate into new host cultures, moving into different languages, different genres, and on to different registers.
The workshops also set out to investigate collaborative exploration and discussion for translation/literary recreation in itself. Can the workshop model be a stimulus to the making of fresh, vigorous reawakened material from unfamiliar contexts and languages the writer-translator does not always know? The group sessions will provide the scope to be innovative about participation and collaboration for literary creativity.

Translators of the writers taking part will be present to discuss their task. However the project differs from strict translation, as applies to the work of contemporary Arabic novelists. The workshops are focusing on canonical/ancient/medieval/traditional material and its varying expressions because in this era of hostility to cultures associated with Islam, it is more important than ever to explore the riches of their vast literature and to understand the mutual entanglement of literary traditions.

These workshops will continue the project *Stories in Transit*, which undertakes nourishing storytelling and creativity in refugee communities. The project began in Oxford in May 2016 and Palermo in September 2016 and May 2017, and is a collaboration between Birkbeck, the University of Palermo, and the NGO Bibliothèques sans Frontières.

The material will include songs and squibs by medieval women poets, romances from Persia, the lyric poetry in *Tales of the 1001 Nights*, animal and other fables from *Solwan,* or *The Waters of Comfort* by Ibn Zafer from Sicily, written in the 12th century, or materials participants themselves propose.

Participants will attend all four workshops at which the visiting speaker and translator will address a text or group of texts; a general discussion about them will follow, leading to a choice of subject to develop work on over the summer and a reunion in the autumn to review the fruits of the workshop. These will not aim to give faithful versions of the originals, but transpose them, sometimes even into a different form – eg poem to drama, story to song – the reawaken them and communicate them to readers and audiences today.