

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* as a case study of consecration, annexation, and decontextualization in Arabic–English literary translation

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Abstract

Differences in culture, language, and context alter the reading experience, meaning, and textual relations of modern Arabic literature in translation, which raises questions about the relationship between the Arabic and translated canon. Drawing on Lawrence Venuti, Pascale Casanova, and Abdelfattah Kilito, I explore translation as *consecration*, *annexation*, and *decontextualization* in order to illustrate the issues involved in Arabic–English literary travel and to move the scholarly debate on Arabic–English translation beyond questions of strategy and domestication. Through textual and paratextual analysis of the English translation of Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013/2018), I show how even a highly translatable modern Arabic text undergoes multiple semantic and symbolic shifts as it transfers into English. Bringing these findings together with observations on the wider Arabic literary translation environment, I argue that modern Arabic literature in translation is its own canon, deserving of independent study, whose hybridity can teach us much about the dynamics of cultural encounter, effects of literary capital, and the discursive and semantic disjunctions between English and Arabic culture and literature.

Keywords

Arabic/English translation, Pascale Casanova, decontextualization, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, intertextuality, literary capital, Ahmed Saadawi

Modern Arabic literature meets world literature through translation. Translation is the means by which modern Arabic literary texts circulate beyond the Arabic-speaking world and is a highly valued event for Arab writers, seen as a stamp of critical approval which

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holds the promise of new readers. However, global visibility and access to new literary markets comes at a price. Arabic novels are often significantly rewritten and repackaged in English translation, which raises questions about translation ethics. Even without significant rewriting and repackaging, matters of equivalence, nuance, and intertextuality mean that literary translation never produces an identical reading experience. In this article I look at translation as *consecration*, *annexation*, and *decontextualization* in order to highlight some of the issues involved in Arabic–English literary travel. This three-step approach, which will combine theoretical insights of Pascale Casanova, Abdelfattah Kilito, and Lawrence Venuti with textual and paratextual analysis of the English translation of Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), is intended to give a broad view of Arabic–English literary translation and to extend scholarly discourse on Arabic–English translation beyond questions of strategy (fluent versus resistant) which have, albeit with good reason, dominated Arabic–English translation discourse to date. In terms of method, I have chosen as my case study a text which, on the face of it, lends itself well to translation, on the basis that it is the straightforward cases, more than the exceptions, which best represent the field. In what follows, I address consecration, annexation, and decontextualization separately, offering some theoretical and contextual background before exploring how each process operates in the specific context of Saadawi’s novel. I do not attempt a line by line analysis or evaluate translation quality and technique; rather I select items from the text and paratext to illustrate the semantic and symbolic changes that occur in the passage from Arabic to English. In the conclusion I review my findings against the wider Arabic–English literary translation environment and argue that asymmetry on the level of text and field means that translated Arabic literature is its own canon and worthy of independent analysis. I base my investigation on the OneWorld edition of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, published in the UK in February 2018.¹

Translation as consecration

Casanova (1999/2007) envisages the world literary field as intensely hierarchical on account of the unequal distribution of literary and linguistic capital between the national and regional literatures which constitute it. Languages with significant literary capital, like English and French, dominate languages with weak literary capital, like Arabic, which has a large number of speakers but an undervalued literary tradition. Translation of Arabic and other weak languages from this perspective is a form of consecration. Whereas translating texts from a dominant language bolsters literary capital, a kind of colonizing through art which helps perpetuate that field’s hegemony, translation from a dominated literary field is an act of consecration which affords dominated writers and texts visibility in the world republic of letters. Moroccan writer and thinker Abdelfattah Kilito (2001) arrives at a similar conclusion using metaphors of bestial combat. For Kilito, linguistic encounter is a contest for domination, which in the case of Arabic and European languages is less warring gladiators and more lion devouring rabbit (2001: 108). Consequently, contemporary Arab writers and poets write with translation in mind. Whereas in the Arab golden age foreign literature was marginal to the Arabs, the lion’s language and literature is today a critical point of reference and orientation. “Woe to the writers for whom we find no European counterparts”, writes Kilito. “[W]e simply turn away from them, leaving

them in a dark, abandoned isthmus, a passage without mirrors to reflect their shadow or save them from loss and deathlike abandon” (2008: 20). In this sense Arabic literature in European languages is doubly translated, for it is created in a context infused with European literary values and norms, and then returns to Europe via translation.

From a postcolonial perspective Casanova and Kilito’s theses are problematic. Consecration, and its related term *littérisation*, implies that value resides chiefly in international recognition. Meanwhile Kilito’s characterization of a West-oriented Arabic literary imagination suggests a pervasive and unsettling self-orientalism among Arab writers (2008: xxii, 19–20). Yet Casanova’s use of literary linguistic capital as a basis for understanding variations in the role and process of translation in different literary systems, and Kilito’s vision of linguistic encounter as combat, provide a framework with which to understand the peripheral place of Arabic in the world literary canon. Such a framework crucially shifts responsibility for the state of the field of Arabic literary translation away from individual texts and translators onto the socio-historical forces and agents that govern and shape it. The marginal status of Taha Hussein’s classic *Al-Ayyam* (1929; trans. E. H. Paxton, *An Egyptian Childhood*, 1932) in world literature as compared to Ernest Hemingway’s *Farewell to Arms* and Robert Graves’ *Goodbye to All That*, published the same year,² is more an effect of the cultural hegemony of English and the literary tastes that go with it than a comment on the quality of the texts themselves. The commercial success of Alaa al-Aswany’s *Imarat Yaqubiyyan* (2002; trans. Humphrey Davies, *The Yacoubian Building*, 2004) in English as compared to the translated novels of Gamal al-Ghitani is less about the literariness of the original or the quality of the translation than it is about the publishing house (commercial, London-based for the former versus specialist, Cairo-based for the latter). The familiar feel of al-Aswany’s contemporary urban novel packed with scintillating themes and storylines (the Muslim terrorist, Arab sexual repression, polygamy, homophobia) feeds British and American readers’ expectations and ambitions for Arabic fiction versus the heavy intertextuality and cultural and historical specificity of al-Ghitani’s writing.

Arabic novels, including the most popular and critically acclaimed among them, rely disproportionately on target-culture consecrating agents in order to enter and thrive in the global English market. Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a case in point.³ The book sold well in Arabic but it was the award of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF), and the translation funding that goes with it, which brought Saadawi’s work to the attention of American and British publishers.⁴ A comparison of the Arabic and English book covers confirms the critical role of target-culture consecrators in facilitating the novel’s passage onto the bookshelves of English readers. While the 2018 Arabic cover mentions the IPAF and includes a label announcing commercial success (stating that it is in its thirteenth printing), it markets itself equally on a symbolic photographic image encompassing many elements of the narrative, and on an extended plot summary. The English dispenses with these, preferring plain text, and is plastered with literary endorsements, all of them British or American, with a further 11 on the first two pages of the text, only one of which is from an Arab author writing in Arabic, namely Hassan Blasim, who is already known on the global literary circuit, having won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2010.⁵ The names of the endorsers are in bold while the name of the translator, whose creative input some translation theorists would argue is as significant as the

author's own, does not appear at all — a fine example of Lawrence Venuti's thesis on translator invisibility! The translation of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* thus markets itself less on its content, more on its target-culture champions and is heavily mediated; its passage into English involves a concerted effort of consecration.

Translation as annexation

As well as selling the book, the cover art of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in translation functions to annex Saadawi's novel to English literary tradition. Casanova argues that translation is "a form of annexation" whereby "works are diverted for the benefit of the central resources [of the new field]" (2010: 301). Similarly, Venuti (2008) writes at length about the hegemony of English literary values and a canonization of fluency in the English tradition. Weak in capital from a world literature perspective, Arabic fiction in translation must generally conform to English-language norms and ideals. While specialist publishers are more open to resistant or foreignizing translation, when a commercial publishing house is involved a domesticating strategy is almost always applied. This domesticating approach assists readers by producing accessible works, but it can result in significant shifts in meaning and the erasure of difference.⁶ Translators and scholars of Arabic literature have documented dramatic examples of this, such as changes to the texts, paratexts, and titles of Huda Sha'rawi's *Mudhakkirati* (1981; trans. Margot Badran, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist, 1879–1924*, 1987), Raja Alsanea's *Banat al-Riyadh* (2005; trans. Marilyn Booth, *Girls of Riyadh*, 2007), and Hanan al-Shaykh's *Hikayati Sharhun Yatul* (2005; trans. Roger Allen, *The Locust and the Bird*, 2010) so that the English translations reinforce rather than challenge stereotypes and perceptions of Arab and Muslim women (Kahf, 1998; Booth, 2008, 2010; Hartman, 2015). Not all Arabic novels are subjected to heavy editorial intervention, however. Texts like Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* arrive at the publishers seemingly ready for literary transfer.⁷ The novel's catchy title references the most famous literary monster in the Western canon. It has a contemporary narrative style — there is no overly lyrical or classical prose to complicate translation or worry editors here. Finally, the text taps into popular genres and areas of British and American interest. Thus, all three factors suggest translatability. Iraq War fiction is a thriving genre in the UK and US,⁸ mostly authored by American and British veterans, while magical realism, a critical strategy in Saadawi's novel, has significant currency in English thanks to the global success of Latin American writers and the Anglo-Indian novel. In the words of Oneworld founder Juliet Mabey: "*Frankenstein in Baghdad* is exactly the sort of translated fiction we are looking for" (qtd. in Oneworld, 2009: n.p.). But even texts ripe for linguistic transfer require some co-option and realignment, as is clear from the emphasis on the Frankenstein and horror theme in the cover art of the translation. This is not to deny a significant and conscious connection with Mary Shelley's monster in the Arabic, but to highlight how the connection is amplified as the work transitions into English.

The Arabic cover features a photograph of a war-torn alley at the end of which is the silhouette of a man against a shaft of sunlight. The use of photography plays on the meta-fictional frame, for the narrative is contained within a police report, and the journalistic theme that runs through the narrative. The dark foreground, the grey crumbling buildings,

and dark rocky alley, and bright background, where the buildings part and sunlight pours in, suggest hope alongside horror. This evokes the questions of morality and justice raised in the narrative by the corpse's evolving mission and messianic association: is he a force for good, avenging wrong, or evil, perpetuating violence? Frankenstein is mentioned in the title and once more in the back-cover blurb and is hinted at in the silhouette. However, this is not the all-defining feature of the cover; the dilapidated buildings, mess of wires, darkness, urban decay, and light shaft are equally powerful images. Much of this is lost in translation. The English text dispenses with the image and opts for lettering. The documentary theme and metafictional ambivalence disappear and instead we have the title in large gothic script embellished with stitching, foregrounding the monster theme. The Arabic cover photo, with its many shades of colour and mysterious figure, conveys a sense of mystery, complexity, and paradox. By contrast, the English version, presenting large text on a plain background and employing a limited palette of three primary colours, is clear and unambiguous.⁹ On the back cover the extended plot summary is replaced with a short racy blurb of 24 words, still in gothic font and heavy in the vocabulary of horror, beneath which an endorsement by *Booklist* casts the work as a Shelley adaptation, which the author himself has denied (Najjar 2014: n.p.). The overall effect is an amplification of the Frankenstein connection in English and a new emphasis on the gothic which was absent from the Arabic original. As the text transfers into English, so it is annexed to the Frankenstein and English gothic tradition.

Translation as decontextualization

Words have histories. They have past lives, cultural associations, and nuances which cannot be preserved or replicated simply by selecting and substituting items from the source text with ostensibly equivalent terms from the target language. Translation may appear to substitute like for like, but in reality substituting signifiers means activating new signifying chains, with the corollary that the effect and nuance will always change — sometimes significantly so. The problem is especially obvious in book titles, which can rely heavily on connotation to pack excess meaning into a tiny number of words and are therefore often changed as they travel from Arabic to English. “*My Story is Too Long [to Tell]*”, as a close translation of Hanan al-Shaykh’s *Hikayati Sharhun Yatul*, loses the allusion to Arabic oral tradition enfolded in the word *hikaya* and the loaded significance of using a colloquial phrase to designate a literary work, hence a new title was invented for the English (*The Locust and the Bird*, 2010), with its own set of connotations (Hartman, 2015). The sonorous word play of Naguib Mahfouz’s *Layali Alf Layla* (1982), which inverts the title of Shahrazad’s story cycle and carries traces of the Arabic tradition of verbal theatrics, is not reproduced by a close translation and becomes simply *Arabian Nights and Days* (1996) in Denys Johnson-Davies’s translation. Linked to word histories is the problem of intertextuality, which presupposes the existence of a linguistic, literary, or cultural tradition and is therefore highly dependent upon the reader to activate meaning (Venuti, 2009). When a text travels to a new linguistic, literary, and cultural setting its intertextual relations with source culture are broken and a new set evolve. Thus Venuti casts translation as simultaneous *decontextualization* and *recontextualization*. The foreign text undergoes formal and semantic loss but also significant gain as new relations and

effects come into play (2009: 162). The Arabic novel since the 1970s, when it began to take a more energetic interest in Arab cultural heritage and conduct self-conscious dialogues with pre-modern texts, includes some dramatic examples of the intertextuality problem. The critical pastiches in Naguib Mahfouz's *Hadith al-Sabah wa'l-Masa'* (1987; trans. Christina Phillips, *Morning and Evening Talk*, 2008]) and Gamal al-Ghitani's *Al-Zayni Barakat* (1971; trans. Farouk Abdel Wahab, *Zayni Barakat*, 1988) are all but lost as they move into English, and the mystical themes in Ibrahim al-Kuni's desert fictions are severely muted. The issue with Saadawi's *Frankenstein*, on the other hand, is not that intertextual dimensions disappear but that they are intensified and significantly altered by context. In this section, I explore how the sense and significance of the Frankenstein theme, the figure of the madwoman, and the person of Saint George change as they are de- or recontextualized, and as their signifying chains and intertextual relations shift. As before, what makes the discussion interesting is not the untranslatability of these items or linguistic violence enacted upon them but rather their superficial equivalence.

Frankenstein's Monster

In the novel's original reception environment Frankenstein and his monster are metaphors. The Arabic title, *Frankenstein fi Baghdad*, announces a relationship with Shelley's classic story, which carries over into details such as a human-monster obsessed with revenge as central character and a metafictional frame, but Frankenstein is mentioned only twice in the narrative itself.¹⁰ Saadawi's corpse is referred to as the Whatsitsname (*al-Shismu*), the One Who Has No Name (*Alladhi La Ism Lahu*), Criminal X (*Al-Mujrim X*) and similar phrases, depending on the speaker.¹¹ Moreover, the author himself insists that the novel is not an adaptation. "*Frankenstein in Baghdad* deals with a different theme from that of Shelley's *Frankenstein*", says Saadawi. "Frankenstein in this novel is a condensed symbol of Iraq's current problems" (Najjar, 2014: n.p.). It is only the creature that links him to Shelley. Aside from that *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is an Iraqi story and as such deals with a completely different context (al-'Atabi, 2013: n.p.). The relationship with Shelley's novel is thus primarily metaphorical and illustrative in its original reception environment, which is also reflected in the reviews. For example, Katya al-Tawil in *Al Hayat* argues that the novel takes no more from Shelley than a character whose body is constituted of severed limbs (al-Tawil, 2014: n.p.).

Haytham Bahooora's study, "Writing the Dismembered Nation: The Aesthetics of Horror in Iraqi Narratives of War" (2015), is a good example of a source-culture reading, for which, as a contemporary Iraqi narrative set in 2005 post-war Iraq and concerned with the problematics of nation-building and modern Iraqi identity, the significant reading contexts are (1) the Iraq War: insider perspective, (2) modern Arab and Iraqi literature, and (3) postcolonial literature. Like the young madman and author, Bahooora sees the corpse as "a metaphor for the fragmented and injured nation" (2015: 196). Constituted of body parts taken from members of Iraq's various sectarian, ethnic, and religious groups, sewn together by Hadi the junk dealer, al-Shismu reads the monster as a commentary on Iraqi pluralism. Combining multiple identities from the Iraqi nation in an abominable corpse, al-Shismu represents both the model Iraqi citizen and the failure of the Iraqi national project. From an artistic perspective, Bahooora groups Saadawi's novel

with other Iraqi works which depict dismemberment, decapitation, and mutilation. These include Sinan Antoon's *Wahdaha Shajarat al-Rumman*, 2010; trans. S Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*, 2013) and Hassan Blasim's short story "Al-Irshif wa'l-Waqi'" (2012; trans. Jonathon Wright, "The Record and the Reality", 2009). In making this comparison, Bahoora reads Saadawi's novel as an example of the aesthetics of horror characteristic of post-2003 Iraqi cultural production, whereby recourse to the metaphysical, in the form of nightmares, the uncanny, the monstrous and surreal, becomes a means of representing and even *producing* the experience of terror and brutality.¹² This Iraqi aesthetics is further understood as a variant of postcolonial gothic fiction, a literature of horror which repurposes features of the European gothic tradition to explore the violence and haunting legacy of colonialism and which is characterized by an historical sensibility focused on the return of the repressed and of silenced histories (2015: 190–193). Saadawi's blend of detective novel, superhero comic, supernatural thriller, and traditional gothic aligns well with the postcolonial gothic genre. Meanwhile his Baghdadian monster, whose form embodies the pluralistic ideal which postcolonial Iraq failed to live up to and whose quest for justice becomes a pattern of bloodshed, is a "monstrous incarnation of a colonial experiment gone awry" (2015: 196). In this perspective, the novel participates in a wider postcolonial endeavour, associated in particular with Caribbean writing, to interrogate colonial legacies through dark narratives.

As *Frankenstein in Baghdad* moves into English, the reception environment changes and new meanings and textual relations come to the fore. The Iraq War remains a critical frame but the perspective is outsider/internationalist and the foremost literary context is English literature. While an Iraqi or Middle East contextual reading of the kind Bahoora offers views the text as a reflection on violence and expression of the trauma of the 2003 invasion, an internationalist reading relates the contents of the novel to understandings of the war beyond Iraq and the Middle East. Annie Webster's article "Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*: A Tale of Biomedical Salvation?" (2018) indicates the direction this might take. Webster reads the novel as an intervention into biomedical salvation narratives constructed by the coalition forces around the 2003 US-led invasion. Such narratives framed military operations as medical procedures and a humanitarian effort, thus abstracting the violence by focusing on the body politic as opposed to individual bodies, and the destroy-and-rebuild logic which envisaged the removal of the Baathist regime and collateral damage in Iraq as a necessary evil in the name of democracy. In this context, the coalition army is a force for good and the rejuvenation of wounded soldiers' bodies through regenerative medicine and bionic prosthetics testifies to the medical advancement of the US and its allies in the Iraq War. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in translation brings a different story to the English-speaking international audience. Hadi the junk-dealer rejuvenates a body but he works in a filthy shed as opposed to a pristine laboratory, which speaks to the unequal distribution of health care between the coalition powers and Iraq, and the corpse he creates becomes a critical driver in an unending cycle of violence in Baghdad. Like the US-led coalition forces, the Whatsitsname believes himself to be on a benevolent mission. However, as innocent people are killed to replenish his disintegrating limbs his quest for justice is corrupted and he becomes ever more abhorrent to the reader. As Webster writes, "he takes the destroy-and-build logic to the point of absurdity" (2018: 458). *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in translation and in the hands

of the English reader thus destabilizes narratives of biomedical salvation, explodes the notion of creative destruction, and disrupts the ways in the Iraq War has been imagined in the international community (2018: 440).

At the same time, translating Saadawi's book into English constitutes a literary homecoming for Frankenstein's monster, leading to a more intensely intertextual reading. In line with Gérard Genette's (1997) argument that transposition inevitably has an axiological bearing on a narrative, in an English literary context the corpse more obviously becomes a correction and critique of Shelley's monster. Shelley's Frankenstein is put together by a vain scientist and privileged member of society with pretensions of making history and turns evil after his creator and everyone else rejects him. His mission of vengeance is thus individual. Though a mass murderer, the target is always Victor, his motivation always personal. The Whatsitsname, on the other hand, is created by a junk dealer who sets about his monstrous project as a consequence of tragedy and desperation. After his friend is killed in an explosion, he collects up his body parts, and those of others, and stitches them into a unified body to prevent them from being discarded as rubbish. The vain and arrogant scientist becomes a destitute victim of war attempting to preserve dignity for the dead. When the corpse comes to life, he sets out to avenge victims of injustice. He acts on behalf of others and with a social conscience, taking on the injustices of Baghdad to create a better society.

He is cast as a messiah by himself and his followers, who establish a semi-religious cult around him: "I'm a saviour, the one they were waiting for and hoped for in some sense" (Saadawi, 2013: 156; tr. 136). The Whatsitsname's mission is of course soon corrupted so that Hadi's creature becomes an agent of evil, not a saint or messiah but a fallen angel. This naturally recalls the moral descent of Frankenstein's monster and the close connection between Shelley's novel and *Paradise Lost*. The difference here is scale and ideology. Frankenstein's monster commits heinous crimes but they are limited as he acts for himself. The Whatsitsname, on the other hand, supported by his messianic self-image and a religious cult, unleashes an indiscriminate sequence of violence. Juxtaposition of the two texts makes Shelley's scientist and his monster look trivial and indulgent. Moreover, a comparative reading amplifies an association between religion and violence which was absent in the Victorian novel but is highly pertinent to post-war Iraq. There, as is well known, Islamist groups have sought to capitalize on the aftermath of war. Juxtaposition of the two texts also encourages reflection on racialized understandings of the monster. The European gothic tradition is intimately bound to colonial settings and imaginaries (Paravisini-Gebert, 2006; Kitson, 2016). Its mix of horror, romance, and fear is often expressive of anxieties related to the colonial project, threat of slave uprisings, and simultaneous threat and thrill of the colonial other. Frankenstein's monster, whose physical description aligns in places with nineteenth-century colonial descriptions of the "Oriental" (Lew, 1991; Hedrich Hirsch, 1996) and who hovers as a threatening presence on the fringes of "civilized society", is a classic example of this (Neff, 1997; Lloyd Smith 2004). The monster's transposition from colonial Europe to postcolonial Iraq, and repositioning from the outskirts of society to the centre, as leader of a religio-social movement and focal point of the Iraqi media and a Baghdad police investigation, represents a dramatic reclamation of the colonial subject in an English-language context, as well as a powerful assertion of postcolonial identity and agency.

The Madwoman

The first chapter of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is entitled “Al-Majnuna,” a highly evocative word in Arabic for which the English lexical equivalent is “madwoman”. Etymologically, *majnun* (masc.) is related to the verb *janna* (to cover), with the passive *junna* conveying the sense “to be possessed”. The passive participle *majnun* thus casts madness as external to the agent, something imposed which may be ejected. Historically, the meaning and usage of *majnun* has been closely associated with *djinn* (of the same root: *j-n-n*), or supernatural spirits. In pre-Islamic Arabia, poets and soothsayers were believed to receive messages from the djinn. They were therefore referred to as *majnun*, literally “possessed by djinn”. This is a sense which is present in the Qur’an and widespread in classical literature, and as such retains circulation in Arab and Islamic culture, even if belief in djinn is these days confined to popular practice. In a literary context, *majnun* evokes the Bedouin poet Qays ibn al-Mulawwah from the famous tale *Majnun Layla* whose excessive and unrequited love drives him insane. Beyond evil possession and love madness, *majnun* is associated with mystical ecstasy and the wise fool: intoxicated Sufis like Luqman al-Sarakhsi and outlandish figures like Bahlul in whose eccentric discourse lie profound truths (see Dols, 1992: 313–348).¹³ In modern Arabic literature, madness is associated with resistance, alienation, trauma, social protest, homosexuality, and patriarchal critique. Its “madwomen” include Zahra of Hanan al-Shaykh’s *Hikayat Zahra* (1980; trans. Peter Ford, *The Story of Zahra*, 1986), who goes mad after multiple sexual assaults; Aziza and her cohort in Salwa Bakr’s *Al-‘Araba la Ta’sad ila al-Sama’* (1991; trans. Dinah Manisty, *The Golden Chariot*, 2008), who are driven to extremes of behaviour by male exploitation and evil; and the female enemies of the state locked up in a mental asylum in Nawal Sa’dawi’s *Jannat wa Iblis* (1992; trans. Sherif Hetata, *The Innocence of the Devil*, 1994). They are women whose madness is either assigned or represents a last resort in a repressive environment.¹⁴

Elishva, the subject of the epithet, plays into these associations. She is *majnun* because she believes her son Daniel is still alive and continues to talk about him long after society requires her to move on, and because she converses with a picture of St George and believes he has a special plan for her. Like the rejected Bedouin poet, excessive love leads to madness. However, while Qays is a lover, Elishva is a mother; and while Qays retreats from civilization into the desert and his madness takes shape in wild and deranged behaviour, Elishva remains in the heart of the city and refuses to leave her house despite pressure from estate agents and family, except on her own terms at the end of the novel. Her madness is not madness at all but eccentricity and resistance, a refusal to conform to the roles which society prescribes for mothers and widows. A self-assured woman with control over her destiny and the courage to say what others will not, Elishva calls into question passive Middle Eastern maternal stereotypes. Like her Arabic literary sisters, she exposes insanity as an authoritarian label used by society to marginalize and undermine that which it finds awkward. In so doing she takes on the role of the wise fool, articulating uncomfortable social truths and keeping alive a memory which Iraq would like to bury, namely the story of its stolen sons. Elishva’s son Daniel disappeared twenty years ago. He was taken away by Abu Zaidoun, a Baathist who tracks down young men avoiding military service, and sent to the front line never to return. As such Daniel is one of thousands of young Iraqi men forcibly conscripted to fight in the Iran-Iraq War.

Elishva is not the only mother in the neighbourhood to have lost a son in war but she is the only one who refuses to be quiet and move on, thus she serves as an uncomfortable reminder of a lost generation and the Baathist regime's people theft. She is a reincarnation of Bahlul but she is a woman and, furthermore, a bereaved mother and widow, rendering her doubly marginalized and her assumption of the masculine role of social conscience doubly significant and subversive.¹⁵ Meanwhile the Arabo-Islamic link between madness and divinity is, to an extent, replicated in the character's communion with her patron saint and the spiritual power she is assumed by many to possess. She is described in the chapter by a phonologically identical word with the opposite meaning, *mabruka*, meaning "blessed". Rather than possessed by djinn, she is blessed by God, a beneficiary of the divine not a victim or agent of the diabolical.

As al-Majnuna becomes "The Madwoman" a different set of literary ancestors and connotations come into play. Although madness is similarly associated with possession in Judeo-Christian tradition and in English culture up to the eighteenth century, the link is not memorialized in the signifier and thus encroaches less on a contemporary reading. Madwoman is a compound word, made up of the adjective "mad", which derives from the Old English *gemæde*, meaning "out of one's mind" and implying violent excitement, and the subject noun "woman". Rage and uncontrollability replace demonic possession while the feminine subject, marked by a single syllable suffix in the Arabic (the *tarmabutah* "ah" sound), is given more visibility. Madwoman in an English-language context speaks to a long association between madness and women in Anglo-American culture. From premodern theories of insanity which locate the origins of madness in the ovaries and uterus to twentieth-century adverts for antidepressants, madness and mental illness have, until recently and with the exception of combat-related PTSD, tended to be seen as female maladies. Moreover, one of the most memorable characters of Victorian literature is the "madwoman in the attic", a symbol of female disobedience and narrative subversion. A minor character locked away in an upper room because of the risk and shame she poses to her kin and society, the madwoman in the attic figures in stark metaphorical terms the maltreatment of women and fear of female agency and creativity in Victorian society, as well as, through her violent rage, articulating the female author's repressed fantasies. As Gilbert and Gubar show in their famous study, she is the author's double, "an image of [the female author's] own anxiety and rage" (1979: 78). Elishva, on the other hand, is neither peripheral nor confined but mistress of a coveted house and central to the plot. Nor is she a signifier of repressed violent fantasy. While Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason is virtually savage and attacks Mr Rochester, Elishva is highly composed. Her interactions with other characters are benign, her threat to society being located in her conversation rather than in radical action. Whilst she is permitted to take on the traditionally masculine role of social conscience, she is denied the kind of dramatic agency and violent intervention assigned to the Whatsitsname. The murderous corpse not the madwoman enacts the author's rage and represents his psychological double. The shift, made visible by a contextual English literary reading, may be seen as an indicator of cultural difference — perhaps the reception environment would not tolerate a violent widow. Or it may be viewed biographically — it may be that the male author identifies more easily with male characters in the story. Either way, given the prevalence of psychoanalytical readings of Shelley's monster, a contextual English

literature reading redraws a link between author and character, connecting the corpse as much to the writer as to Iraq.

St George

Another item which translates easily and has a misleading semblance of semantic equivalence is St George. In the Arabic text he is referred to as Mar Kukees, which is the Iraqi dialect rendering of Mar Jirjis, or St George in Arabic. With a tradition stretching back to fourth-century Palestine, St George is venerated in the Near and Middle East by Christians, Muslims, and Druze alike. Several churches and shrines are dedicated to him, many of them sites of multi-faith pilgrimage. In Palestine, besides the usual mounted knight iconography, he is associated with healing power and miracles, with a shrine for the sick at Beit Jala near Bethlehem and a church at Lydda presumed to mark his burial place. In Lebanon he is celebrated as a symbol of fertility and rebirth, as well as a patron saint of sailors. The Copts and Assyrian Church of the East regard him as a friend and celebrate his martyrdom in particular, alongside the usual hero and fighter symbolism.¹⁶ There is, furthermore, significant crossover in the legends of St George, the Islamic saint al-Khidr, and Hebrew prophet Elijah so that many of their shrines overlap and so that their names are in some contexts interchangeable. Thus, St George in the Near and Middle East not only gathers to himself a variegated set of saintly identities but represents a symbol of interfaith fraternity and multiculturalism (see Riches, ch. 1; Massignon, 2008).

St George's role in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in the original Arabic aligns with popular practice and Assyrian understandings of the saint. For Elishva, a follower of the Assyrian Church of the East, St George is a friend. Although figured in her painting in combat with the dragon, he is important to her not as a warrior but as an intercessor and confidante, which is reflected in the fact that the dragon occupies only a fraction of the image, whilst the centre is taken with his angelic face, and by her discarding of all but the face in the painting when she departs for Australia. Elishva's relationship with St George recalls similar kinships in modern Arabic literature — Mushin and Sayyida Zainab in Tawfiq al-Hakim's *'Awdat al-Ruh* (1933; trans. William M. Hutchins, *Return of the Spirit*, 1990), the narrator and Archangel Michael in Edwar al-Kharrat's *Turabuha Za'faran* (1985; trans. Frances Liardet, *City of Saffron*, 1989), Wad Hamid and the villagers in Tayeb Salih's short story "Dumat Wad Hamid" (1960; trans. Denys Johnson-Davies, "The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid", 1985). Modern Arabic literature is rich in popular saints and religious practice, which functioned as signifiers of ignorance and superstition in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s but have come to serve as counterpoints to orthodox religion and unitary discourse in the post-*naksa* period. Elishva's exchanges with St George feed into this tradition and, in this literary context, she is the next in a long line of misfit characters searching for an alternative path to peace and freedom in a world in which modernity and science have failed to deliver.¹⁷

These meanings and associations are transformed as the text travels to England. The healer, intercessor, fertility, martyr, and seafarer significations of the saint are almost entirely subsumed under the dragon-slaying legend and the model of chivalry and national hero which St George engenders in an English context. The Arabic literary

discourse on saints and popular practice is ousted by the spectre of far-right politics linked to St George in Britain and the ambivalence which pervades his person. Veneration of St George traces back to the eleventh century in England, which is also the time when the dragon story is added to the legend, capturing the imagination of the English monarchy, who invoked St George in battles, and later the nation as a whole. Literary works and artistic representations, including Richard Johnson's *The Most Famous History of the Seven Champions of Christendom* (1576–1580), Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* (1590), and the work of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, nurtured the image of St George as a romantic knight and champion of just war, a quintessential Englishman and hero who was eventually declared patron saint of England by Benedict XIV in the eighteenth century (Riches, 2015: 28–32). While parliamentary union with Scotland subsumed England into the political idea of Britain for a time, during which St George was eclipsed by the allegorical figure of Britannia, devolution and sports-driven patriotism saw a revival of English nationalism and the co-option of St George by the far right (Good, 2009; Bengston, 1997). Flying the St George's flag is nowadays associated with xenophobia and many English people are uncomfortable with a national representative who represents only a narrow version of Britishness (Riches, 2015: 13, 120). While Mar Jirjis is a benign figure in the Middle East who functions to unite different faiths and communities, St George in the UK is a divisive symbol.

It is in this context of ambivalence that English readers approach St George in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. The encounter is acutely defamiliarizing. The grand English saint with nationwide significance becomes a Middle Eastern personal saint with limited reach and responsibility. The Arab connection, interrupted by centuries and by the legend of Albion, is restored. If Riches is correct that many English people are unaware of the web of patronages and positive connotations of St George in other parts of the world (Riches, 2015: 14), the saint becomes a mirror of cultural insularity for the English reader, a signifier of English ignorance about Arab culture and tradition.

Arabic literature in translation: Conclusions

What does all of this mean for Arabic literature in translation? It adds weight to the assumption, long accepted in translation theory but which has yet to take hold in Arabic literary studies, that the translated text is a new work with relative semantic autonomy from the original and that translated literature is an independent field (Even-Zohar, 1970/2012; Lefevere, 1982, 1992; Bassnett, 1980; Venuti, 2008), which in turn confirms the value of studying translated Arabic literature in its own right. Arabic–English translation is a niche activity, which means that only a portion of literature in Arabic finds its way into English, and it is unsystematic; texts are translated by specialists for specialist publishers or they are selected for translation by commercial publishers because of their marketability in an Anglophone context (Guthrie and Büchler, 2011).¹⁸ Meanwhile, the varying input of consecrating agents, and differences between English and Arabic literary tastes, mean that celebrated Arabic texts do not necessarily receive enthusiastic reception in English, and vice versa, which has implications for how long translations remain in print. The fiction of Nawal Saadawi (b. 1931) is an example of the latter, while the list of the former is fairly endless. The result is asymmetry between the Arabic and translated canon, which is only compounded when we consider the shifts in meaning and

nance a translatable text like *Frankenstein in Baghdad* goes through as it transitions into English. Most scholarly analyses of Arabic–English literary translation focus on editorial interventions and examples of textual violence — the excision of chapters, amending of titles, refocalization, insertion of new voices, erasure of local colour and political critique, and so on (Kahf, 1998; Booth, 2008, 2010; Hartman, 2012, 2015). But the real test of translatability and literary travel is the undramatic translation; what happens to translatable Arabic texts in translation? Analysis of Saadawi’s novel in English shows that they too are repackaged and produce a different reading experience, so that asymmetry between the Arabic and translated canon is mirrored by asymmetry on a text level. Recognition of this is the starting point for consideration of translated Arabic literature as a distinct field, whose formative processes include annexation, consecration, and de- or recontextualization and whose hybridity may teach us much about the dynamics of cultural encounter, effects of literary capital, and the discursive and semantic disjunctions between English and Arabic culture and literature. The question we ask of texts like *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in English should not be what they reveal about Arabic literature but what they reveal about literary travel and English tradition and values. Not what they tell us about Middle Eastern life and society but what they tell us about our perceptions of it. Stated differently, translated Arabic literature is not secondary, not a window onto Arabic literature proper for non-Arabic speakers, but a separate canon which may teach us as much about cultural encounter and ourselves as it does Arabic literature and society.

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Notes

1. The translation was commissioned by Penguin and published in the US a month before it appeared in the UK. I focus on the UK version because Frankenstein’s monster, the mad-woman, and St George, who play an important part in the novel and in this paper, are particularly associated with Britain, which makes their transfer into the British context all the more interesting. Note that in this essay I use recognized international spellings of authors’ names, e.g. Alaa al-Aswany not ‘Ala al-Aswani. Arabic book titles are transliterated using the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* system without diacritics.
2. *Al-Ayyam* was serialized in *Al-Hilal* newspaper (1926–1927) before it appeared in book form in Arabic (1929), and shortly afterwards in translation (1932 pub. G. Routledge and Sons).
3. Born in 1973, Ahmed Saadawi published two novels prior to *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (*Al-Balad al-Jamil*, 2004, *Innahi Yahlum aw Ya ‘lab aw Yamut*, 2008) as well as a volume of poetry (*Eid al-Aghniyat al-Sayyi’a*, 2001).
4. The IPAF, established in 2008 and supported by the Emirates Foundation, is part of the Booker Prize network and is the most prestigious literary prize in the Middle East. My thanks to the translator, Jonathan Wright, for confirming the order of events in the translation process of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*.

5. Hassan Blasim (b. 1973) is the author of two short story collections (*Majnun Sahat al-Hurriyya*, 2012; *Mar'id al-Juthath*, 2015). These were published in translation first by Comma Press (*The Madman of Freedom Square*, 2009; *The Iraqi Christ*, 2013), then in a single volume by Penguin, *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq* (2014). Blasim's work has received critical attention in mainstream English-language media outlets, including *The Guardian* and *New York Times*. See Bahooora, 2015; al-Masri, 2018; Atia, 2017.
6. Specialist publishers of translated Arabic fiction include the American University in Cairo Press, Garnet, Saqi, Interlink, and Anchor. Commercial publishers, who have published only a fraction of texts by comparison, include Bloomsbury, Penguin, Oneworld, and Doubleday. See note 18 on the state of the field.
7. The translation is edited for repetition and excess, with up to 10,000 words removed, but the plot and characters are unchanged. See Hankir, 2018, n.p.
8. On Iraq War fiction, see Gupta, 2011; Luckhurst, 2014, 2017.
9. The same is true of the US version, whose cover consists of newspaper fragments featuring the title and body parts, thus foregrounding the Frankenstein and media theme but losing the texture and depth of the photographic image in the Arabic.
10. On both occasions in relation to a news article about the killer (Saadawi, 2013: 153, 187; trans., 133, 163).
11. *Shismu* means "what's-its-name" in colloquial Iraq, a contraction of *shay'* (or *shu*), meaning "thing" and *ism*, meaning "name".
12. "Al-Irshif wa'l-Waqi'" is part of the *Majnun Sahat al-Hurriyya* collection (2012).
13. Bahlul: real name Wahab ibn 'Amr. Lived in the eighth century at the time of Harun al-Rashid and is the subject of many wise fool stories.
14. Readings on madness in modern Arabic literature include Ouyang, 2013: 77–108; Manisty, 1994: 152–74; Accad, 1990: 43–63; el-Ariss, 2013: 293–312; al-Masri, 2018: 271–95.
15. This is in contrast to other mad figures in the text, such as the three madmen, who are subversive insofar as they assist al-Shismu in his mission but who function more as mouthpieces and conduits of criticism of socio-religious and nationalist models of society.
16. My thanks to Professor Nicholas Al Jeloo of Khadir Has University for references and information on Assyrian St. George.
17. See Phillips, 2019, chapter 6.
18. Translation of Arabic literature into English increased after 9/11 but was still small compared to other literatures, averaging 15 works a year 1990–2010. The Arab Spring (2010–2012) and IPAF (est. 2008), as well as funding initiatives from the Gulf (e.g. the Sharjah Book Fair Translation Fund and Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation and International Understanding) and new publishers (e.g. Library of Arabic Literature at NYU Abu Dhabi founded 2011; Bloomsbury-Qatar Foundation 2010–2014, which became the Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press) has seen this number increase in the last decade to 25+ books most years, but this is still a tiny number. See Guthrie and Büchler, 2011.

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