

*Migrating texts. Circulating translations around the Ottoman Mediterranean*,  
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In recent years, the number of studies focusing on the multi- and inter-linguistic dimension of the Ottoman Mediterranean in the early modern and modern periods has progressively increased. In line with this trend, and also drawing from the most recent developments in translation studies, the book *Migrating texts: Circulating translations around the Ottoman Mediterranean* represents a pioneering attempt to break the traditional disciplinary barriers in the field of Arabic and Ottoman studies.

Drawing inspiration from the complex and multifaceted linguistic panorama of the Ottoman Empire in the modern period, the book, edited by Marilyn Booth, collects and puts in conversation the contributions of scholars working on different linguistic traditions (such as Arabic, Turkish, Greek). This approach shows, once again, the benefit – and the increasing need – of a multidisciplinary approach to the current study of the Ottoman Empire. The book opens with a rich and thoughtful introduction, entitled “Translation as Lateral Cosmopolitanism in the Ottoman Universe”, where the editor Marilyn Booth underlines that the aim of this collective work is to bring together “scholars of translation, literature and intellectual history to investigate how circulations of key texts through linguistically differentiated rewritings facilitated – and possibly deterred, deflected or shifted – conversations around key issues for readers at that time.” (p. 5) An acute observation by the editor sheds light on the value of a shared and dialogic practice: “the fact that many of us have lesser ability to move across languages than did those we study in the Ottoman Empire is a sad irony, but we can create scholarly conversations and shared projects that are as multilingual as our predecessors’ work was.” (p. 8)

The attention to the plurality of voices and spaces, along with the twin concepts of “travel” and “migration” that appear in the title of the book, bring to mind a long line of theories that focus on the transformation of ideas and concepts across time, languages and space, from the “travelling theory” of Edward Said to the most recent work of Omnia El Shakry on the reception of Freud into Arabic. Following the path traced by these works, and by the vast scholarship that rethinks the centrality of Western Europe, the book decentralizes the traditional perspective according to which the West is the source of knowledge and the origin of all translations in the modern period. To challenge the center-periphery model of the diffusion of knowledge, the contributors explore new trajectories of circulation of texts, which include more regional or local forms of circulation and “adjacent” lines of transmission. Europe is unequivocally

present in the landscape traced by these essays, but it is not necessary the center; it is rather one of the multiple regional peripheries that compose the tiles of an intricate mosaic. Translations were, in fact, the medium through which knowledge was 'received' but also creatively transformed, transferred, enriched and eventually created *ex novo*.

In her introduction, Marilyn Booth touches upon the aforementioned thematic issues and also offers a comprehensive historical outline of the movement of texts and their actors during the *Nahḍa*. Her overview of the use of languages and of literary genres across different communities, and of the role of periodicals, theater, and novels in spreading translations, offers a depiction of the symbolic and actual value that these translations brought to an emerging public of readers and listeners during the long nineteenth century (p. 43).

In line with the most recent developments in the field of translation studies, the book focuses not on scrutinizing the original source of translations but on exploring the target public, looking at how the recipient society transformed and creatively re-worked a discourse or a text. The editor also brings the reader's attention to the principles that guide the reading of a 'migrating text': the act of "historicizing" a translation and of looking at "what" is translated and "how" a text becomes a translation (p. 7). If the 'what' suggests an act of selection that implies a legitimization of a work in a different cultural and social set, the 'how' hints at a transformation that reveals what can and should be included in the translation, and what must be transformed, removed, added, or re-invented.

The introduction is followed by the first part of the volume entitled "Translation, Territory, Community." This chapter guides the readers through material translated in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire and raises crucial methodological questions about how to analyze the corpora of translated texts. The article by Johann Strauss "What was (Really) Translated in the Ottoman Empire? Sleuthing Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Translated Literature" looks closely at misnamed and misidentified translations or those translations that were subsumed in projects of compilation. Strauss investigates these cases as a means to rethink the established canons of translated literature. The article by Peter Hill "Translation and the Globalization of the Novel" offers a different but complementary approach to that of Strauss. Hill applies the diffusionist model of 'distant reading' proposed by Franco Moretti to the dissemination of translations in the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond. He proposes to look at the circulation of translations through the prism of a "lateral transmission," namely a hybrid practice that takes into account secondary translations and patterns of diffusion from centers that differ from those proposed in Moretti's geography of texts. In line with the projects of the book,

he proposes a new cartography of the translations, one that challenges the center-periphery model of diffusion. The chapter by Orit Bashkin “On Eastern Cultures: Transregionalism and Multilingualism in Iraq” shows how the study of translation practices might defy nationalist and stereotyped narratives about Iraqi culture in the early twentieth-century. By analyzing the multilingual translations in a newspaper in the milieu of 1910s Najaf and the translations of fiction produced at the crossroad of transregional networks, Bashkin’s work injects into the monochromatic and standardized representation of Iraqi cultural panorama new shadows and a new depth of analysis.

The second section, “Translation and/as Fiction”, includes contributions that focus on translations of fiction by specific authors and in particular contexts. In “Gender and Diaspora in Late Ottoman Egypt: The Case of Greek Women Translators” Titika Dimitroulia and Alexander Kazamias present the very interesting case of feminine diasporic Greek writers and translators in Egypt in the second half of the nineteenth century. In investigating the role of women translators, the authors also shed light on their connections with various coeval feminist movements in the Ottoman Empire and in Europe. Holly Shissler’s “Haunting Ottoman Middle-class Sensibility: Ahmet Midhat Efendi’s Gothic” focuses on a specific work of fiction, *Cinli Han* (Haunted Inn), among the vast literary production of the Turkish journalist and writer Ahmet Midhat Efendi. According to Shissler, in this work Ahmet Midhat Efendi does not translate a specific novel from a European language; the text rather reveals a case of ‘cultural adaptation’ in the broader sense. It is, in fact, an attempt to convey the style and atmosphere of the entire genre of the European Romantic Gothic novel to an Ottoman public.

The third part “Classical’ Interventions, ‘European’ Inflections: Translation as/and Adaptation” includes three chapters on the act of recovery and reshaping of the ancient past through translations. The chapter by Raphael Cormack “Lords or idols? Translating the Greek gods into Arabic in nineteenth-century Egypt” presents the case of the translation of *La Belle Hélène* by Offenbach, the first playscript to be translated into Arabic and published in 1869. Cormack discusses the use of this libretto in translation that, interestingly, adds the local dimension of Arabic to foreign language plays performed in Egypt. Moreover, Cormack discusses in detail the translators’ techniques of rendering the names of Greek mythological figures, comparing them with the more famous translation of François Fénelon’s *Les aventures de Télémaque* by al-Ṭaḥṭāwī. In “Translating world literature into Arabic and Arabic into world literature: Sulayman al-Bustani’s al-Ilyâdha and Ruhi al-Khalidi’s Arabic rendition of Victor Hugo,” Yaseen Noorani analyzes two major translations of ancient Greek and European works into Arabic, both published in 1904. By analyzing the

translators' introductions and the way they situate the works in the canon of universal literary history, Noorani argues that these translations had an important role "in recasting Arabic literary heritage in simultaneously national and universal terms" (p. 236). Noorani discusses the relationship of the translations with the European model and argues that this was simultaneously "displaced and internalized in a proliferation of frameworks of world literature that are parallel, yet distinct, and universal, yet in a manner that produces the national" (p. 238). The chapter by Marilyn Booth "Girlhood Translated? Fénelon's *Traité de l'éducation des filles* (1687) as a Text of Egyptian Modernity (1901, 1909)" analyzes two renderings of a seventeenth-century treatise on women's education. The distance between the two readings of the text and the two strategies adopted by the translators to convey their interpretations of it to different reading publics shed light on the "translational plurality" of Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century (p. 212). The chapter invites the readers to question how translations of the same text might become vectors of different, sometimes even opposite, social and moral values and, eventually, reminds us that every translation "is a contingent act, politically modulated" (p. 258). Kamran Rastegar's last chapter, "Gulistan: Sublimity and the Colonial Credo of Translatability", analyzes the vast circulation of the renown thirteenth-century prose work *Gulistān* by Sa'dī. The author underlines the fact that the *Gulistān* was seldomly translated across the Islamicate world but rather canonized in Persian across diverse social and linguistic settings. He then compares this phenomenon with the numerous translations of the *Gulistān* into European languages. The contrast between the enormous but untranslated dissemination of the *Gulistān* in the Islamicate world versus its transfer into European languages brings the author to reflect on what guides and sustains the 'credo of translatability'. Rastegar argues that a switch from the principle of untranslatability to the belief in universal translatability occurred over the course of the twentieth century, as Arabic literature was institutionalized.

This vast and fluid universe of translations, which might seem at first glance fluctuant like the sea, is in fact very well historically and textually situated by the contributors to the book. As many of the essays show, however, there is an aspect that is central to the study of translations and often remains blurred and undefined: the line between translator and author. Marilyn Booth brings attention to this crucial issue when she reminds us that, along with some more well-known figures, there was a number of "unremembered (often anonymous) individuals who translated, adapted and rewrote" (p. 10). These men and women, whose names are often submerged by waves of historical oblivion, also contributed to a massive process of production and dissemination of knowledge. This happened in contexts in which concepts like 'fidelity' to the

textual original or 'official authorship' or 'plagiarism' were absent, or simply very different from our contemporary notions. One of the reasons that makes the study of translations in the early modern and modern Mediterranean an extremely inspiring and rich field of study lies exactly in this space of difference and variability from our pre-conceived norms of literary creation, a space that welcomed and endorsed the circulation of texts which were, at the same time, unique creations and unfaithful copies. They were unfaithful originals, as are all work of literary creativity.

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