



HAL
open science

Robert Graves's Mythopoetic Hospitality: Translating The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayaam

Sara Greaves

► **To cite this version:**

Sara Greaves. Robert Graves's Mythopoetic Hospitality: Translating The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayaam. The Robert Graves Review, 2022, Michael Joseph (ed.), 1 (2). hal-03954988

HAL Id: hal-03954988

<https://hal.science/hal-03954988>

Submitted on 1 Apr 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - ShareAlike 4.0 International License

Robert Graves's Mythopoetic Hospitality: Translating *The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayaam*

Sara Greaves

Abstract: This article draws on poetry criticism, translation studies and, briefly, hospitality studies to revisit the controversial translation of *The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam* by Robert Graves and Omar Ali-Shah. Graves took an interest in Sufism, especially as a 'force of mental power which could be created by telepathic communication' and worked together with the Shah brothers to dislodge Fitzgerald's nineteenth-century best-selling version and replace it with what was intended to be a founding text of twentieth-century Western Sufism, a 'secondary original'. Nevertheless, the poet polymath had his own agenda, an act of mythopoetic hospitality that the controversy should not be allowed to overshadow.

Keywords: translation studies, hospitality, mythopoetics, secondary original, Omar Khayyam, the Goddess

This paper started out as a curious reaction to a literary hoax: the strange case of a translation based on an inauthentic original, published and defended by a distinguished English writer. When I first read about it, I thought of two things: Borges's short story 'Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*',¹ in which the protagonist, a scholar, passes off as a translation what is in fact an exact copy in the original seventeenth-century Spanish of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*; and Boris Vian's pitching certain of his novels, as translations of American works of fiction – further complicated by his assuming the *nom de plume* of Vernon Sullivan. This literary hoax (*The Rubaiyyat*) had the added complexity of being unintentional on the part of one of the authors, and of involving a third party, the would-be owners of a non-existent text, the brothers Idries and Omar Ali-Shah. The translation of *The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayaam*,

published in 1967 and jointly credited to Robert Graves and Omar Ali-Shah, was the result of the self-misrepresentation of these two Sufi proselytes as descendants of the Prophet and the custodians of an 800-year-old manuscript of the great Persian astronomer-poet, Omar Khayyam. Graves, then in his seventies, took the brothers at their word, agreed to help (re)claim Khayyam as a Sufi poet, and worked from the English crib he was given, never seeing the original text. When controversy arose, Graves asked for the manuscript to be produced; he met with excuses and put-offs; the Shahs even refused their father's request to produce the manuscript. No manuscript was ever produced for in all likelihood no manuscript ever existed.²

This intriguing tale raises all kinds of questions, and in particular: how could Graves have been so easily fooled? What kind of East-West intercultural exchange was at play between the British mythologizer-poet and the (British-raised) Afghan brothers, and the early twelfth-century poet Omar Khayyam? Or between the North and the South, with relation to Graves's interest in the Mediterranean influence on Northern, Celtic mythology?³ What can it tell us about hospitality, about hospitality in the Mediterranean, about, perhaps, a 're-membering' hospitality appropriate to Robert Graves's mythopoetic approach? To attempt to answer these questions, I will elucidate some of the circumstances surrounding the translation, and add a few comments on the translated text, with reference to the manuscript drafts curated by St John's College, Oxford. Finally I will discuss the notion of mythopoetic hospitality in connection with Robert Graves's poetic stance.

The Rubaiyyat in Context

Graves was a prolific writer: in addition to poetry, he wrote novels and essays, an influential memoir, *Good-Bye to All That* (1929), prose nonfiction on a range of subjects, most famously *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948), and numerous classical translations. His historical novels, *I Claudius* (1934), and *Claudius The God* (1934), reached a wide audience

through the television adaptation by the BBC (1976). He seemed prone to attract if not actually seek controversy, with for example his rewriting of Dickens in *The Real David Copperfield* (1933), his attack on the poet John Milton in *Wife to Mr Milton* (1943), rewriting the Nazarene Gospel in *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (1953), and of course his attacks on contemporary poets in *The Crowning Privilege* (1955). When *The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam* was published, in 1967, its controversial reception must have seemed to follow a familiar pattern; however, the tone of his detractors was more severe; Graves and his collaborator Omar Ali-Shah were accused of fraud. Possibly it cost him the poet laureateship.⁴

Idries Shah (1924-1996) was clearly a very charming, convincing man. He had already persuaded John Bennett, a disciple of the mystical teacher Gurdjieff, to hand over the seven-acre property at Coombe Springs, in Surrey, where Bennett had founded his 'Institute for the Comparative Study of History, Philosophy and the Sciences', and before long Graves was recommending his friends and family to defer to Shah as guide and healer. Agreeing to further his self-promotion as a Sufi leader in the West, Graves helped with the publication of Shah's book *The Sufis*, in 1964,⁵ to which he wrote the preface. James Moore, in an article that thoroughly debunks the self-made myth of Idries Ali-Shah as a great Sufi leader from the East, quoting enthusiasts such as Graves and Doris Lessing, inventories his methods, including that of 'creative genealogy',⁶ recklessly adopted by Graves as follows: 'Idries Shah Sayed happens to be in the senior male line of descent from the prophet Mohammed, and to have inherited the secret mysteries from the Caliphs, his ancestors. He is, in fact, a Grand Sheikh of the Sufi Tariqa'.⁷

When Idries's brother Omar appeared in Mallorca, with his offer to collaborate on a translation of Khayyam, Graves was thus already primed for the encounter, ready to trust him, and he understandably gave Omar a warm welcome. However, Miranda Seymour notes that Graves's interest in Sufism pre-dated his connection with Idries, and that the latter would not have had much to teach him. Sufism to Graves was the acknowledgement of a 'force of mental power

which could be created by telepathic communication’, meaning that the Sufis shared his view of the powerful force for good that could be created when poet and muse were harnessed together (Seymour, p. 400). As with Laura Riding and Goddess-worship, Seymour contends, Graves was not under the influence of these personalities; rather his hospitable, mythopoetic embrace welcomed their talent as actors to play the parts he needed them to play, in much the same way as he wrote *The White Goddess*.⁸ ‘The mythology of *The White Goddess*, though its elements are drawn from a vast field of ancient story and legends, is in its assemblage Graves’s own creation, and conforms to the requirements of his own poetic mind.’⁹

Graves, we can thus infer, had his own agenda. But, before we turn to the translated quatrains, a little more must be said about Shah’s offer and its reception and outcome. It should be pointed out that as well as the work on the translation, the intermediary of Graves would also open up to Omar an English publisher for it, first Cassell in 1967 and then Penguin from 1972. Also, although Omar Shah was Graves’s guest in Mallorca, as his brother had been before him, Graves behaved rather as if he was the receiver and declared himself honoured to be asked to collaborate on what he believed to be an important realisation, at last correcting for the English reading public the biased view of Khayyam that had been propagated since Victorian times by translator Edward Fitzgerald: ‘To be entrusted with this task was the greatest poetic compliment that I had ever been paid’.¹⁰ Fitzgerald’s *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, published in 1858, had long become ‘a classic of English literature’.¹¹ By his own account Fitzgerald took liberties with the source text, famously defending his translation method as follows: ‘Better a live sparrow than a stuffed eagle’.¹² By contrast with Fitzgerald’s portrayal of Omar Khayyam as a free-thinking hedonist, inciting his readers to ‘eat drink and be merry’, and his poem as ‘a drunkard’s rambling profession of the hedonistic creed’ (Fitz-Omar Cult, p. 8), henceforth the Persian poet would be portrayed faithfully, through this new translation based on an authentic manuscript, as a Sufi mystic. But, more importantly, translating (or rather making poetry from a translation of) Omar Khayyam would also give Graves

the means to embody and promote a theme of his own: one of his potent historico-mythological intuitions concerning the mythological genealogy of Gaelic folklore in the Mediterranean:

My intuitions of [Khayyam's] hidden meanings were prompted less by contrastive studies of Hebrew and Gnostic mysticism than by a sense of kinship which I felt with medieval Irish poets who, as scholars now recognize, had come under Sufic influence as early as the 8th and 9th centuries.¹³

The prospect of translating Khayyam as a Sufi mystic may have felt like finding the missing piece of a puzzle, and Ali-Shah's request for his help was thus a powerful object of seduction. Back in British academic circles, however, when the translation was published, the authenticity – the existence even – of the source text was contested, described as a 'clumsy forgery' by Orientalist T. L. Elwell-Sutton, former emeritus Professor in Persian at Edinburgh University,¹⁴ and decried by Major J. C. E. Bowen, who even travelled to Afghanistan to track down the elusive manuscript.¹⁵ Not only was Graves's reputation as a serious writer in jeopardy, there were also threats of legal action as he had denigrated Elwell-Sutton's Persian credentials and risked being sued for libel by *Life*.¹⁶ For the ensuing three years Omar Shah took pains to shore up Graves's confidence in the existence of the manuscript, and for a while Graves relished the fun of mocking the establishment. Referring to the academics as 'baying or whining mongrels', Shah wrote to Graves:

They will undoubtedly keep up their attacks, put them on record and fall all the harder when the full situation and documentation is published. The timing of this blockbuster is now in my father's hands but as and when it does come it will be diverting!¹⁷

However, this day never came and neither the manuscript nor any copy or reference or location was ever found; tension mounted until 1970, when Idries seems finally to have confessed to the

hoax,¹⁸ and it was rapidly recognised that Shah's crib was based on the manuscripts used by Fitzgerald.¹⁹ Yet Graves did not withdraw his friendship from the Shahs, as if there had been no betrayal, any more than he had turned against Laura Riding.

Graves, from what I have learnt of him, was quite capable of acts of pure generosity such as taking on this translation; it would seem nonetheless that the poet welcomed the request with a mind to furthering his own interest in Sufism, and, more broadly, to endorsing 'his new, muse-ridden way of life', meaning a life devoted to poetry that is dependent on love for and shared by a female muse.²⁰ What then can be learned from the study of the translated text and the draft manuscripts with relation to Graves's mythopoetics?

A Delicate, Didactic, Feminised Version of *The Rubaiyyat*

The first thing to be said about Graves's approach to this translation project is that he went about it very seriously, repeatedly revising his manuscripts, and several drafts of the quatrains can be consulted in the Robert Graves archive at St John's College Oxford. Unlike Fitzgerald's quatrains with their exacting rhyme scheme based on that of the Persian rubaiyat (a-a-b-a), Graves's quatrains are unrhymed, relying for their musicality on internal sound patterning and occasional half rhymes, and while Fitzgerald's pentameters are invariably regular, Graves's fall less neatly on the ear and instil tension between the speaking voice and the prosodic frame. Similarly, Fitzgerald's archaic capitalisation has been abandoned, although certain common nouns remain capitalised, words such as 'Rose', 'Fate', 'Way' and 'Guide', suggestive perhaps of an esoteric symbolism. Here is a comparison of their translations of the opening quatrain, Fitzgerald's first:

Awake! For Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:
And Lo! The Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultân's Turret in a Noose of Light.²¹

While Dawn, Day's herald straddling the whole sky,
Offers the drowsy world a toast 'To Wine',
The Sun spills early gold on city roofs –
Day's regal Host, replenishing his jug. (p. 45)

The manuscripts show Graves reaching for delicacy of diction, gradually divesting his language of his more sumptuous or ostentatious early versions, often opting for a gentler, less semantically rich word or image than he had at first chosen and avoiding percussive alliteration in favour of soft discreet consonantal echoes. The following is quatrain no. 3 in Graves and Ali-Shah's version, extracted from one of the typescripts,²² in which the cumbersome 'dawn draught' has been replaced by the lighter, simpler 'dawn drink'.

" Loud crows the cock for his dawn ~~draught~~^{drink}, my Saki! "
" Here stand we in the vintners' Row; my Saki! " 3
" Is this an hour for prayer? Silence, my Saki! "
Defy old custom, Saki; drink your fill! "

The Rubaiyyat typescript, St. John's University.

Similarly, in quatrain no. 17 the first line reads: 'This ruined caravanserai called Earth', with earlier versions showing a hesitation between a general characteristic, 'ruinous', and the transitive, ostentatious 'battered' (which was Fitzgerald's choice: 'Think, in this batter'd Caravanserai', no. 16).²³ Graves's 'ruined' has a familiar ring, with both religious and financial connotations, unobtrusively attenuating the orientalist cliché ('caravanserai') and creating a new poetic image of the ephemeral nature of political power (reminiscent of Shelley's 'Ozymandias'); an effect that is subtly heightened by the echo of 'n' in 'ruined' and 'caravanserai'. It is noteworthy also that Graves brings in the tenor of the metaphor in *praesentia* ('Earth'), guiding the reader, in keeping with his didactic intent, to apprehend the image within the unit of the line.

The drafts reveal the poet gradually breathing a quieter, more sensory intimacy into the quatrains by softening the brassiness of his early versions. Thus, we observe an evolution from ‘the lion slumbers’ to ‘the lion snores’, and finally to ‘the lion nods’ in the printed version (no. 18), which is less rich and sonorous, more gentle; or from ‘Leaping all obstacles but Fate’s decree’ to ‘Leaping all obstacles but Fate’s design’ (no. 34), in which the formal, administrative term is dropped in favour of the more allusive, aesthetic and intimate ‘design’, which hovers between ‘intention’ and ‘visual shape or pattern’. The attention to sound and prosody can be observed in quatrain no. 9: ‘Rest in the rose’s shade, though winds have burst | A world of blossom’, which in earlier versions read as follows: ‘Sit in the rose’s shade, for winds have burst | A world of blossom’. The auditory quality of ‘rest’ invites the reader to linger under the rosebush, that of ‘though’ is a fuller sound than ‘for’, and the alliterative and assonantal effects of ‘rest | rose’ and ‘rose | though’ give a delicate substance to the lines. A similar search for bodily sensations can be observed in the following example, quatrain no. 6:²⁴

A glorious morning, neither hot nor ~~chill~~ Jank Jank
 with cheeks of roses newly bathed in dew; 6
 The nightingale, in Pahlevi, prescribes
 For every sallower cheek: "wine, wine and wine!"

The Rubaiyyat typescript, St. John’s University.

To a certain extent, this is the work of a translator writing in the biblical tradition of Saint Jerome or Martin Luther, transposing the source text into the vernacular and seeking not so much a heightened poeticism as to serve the ideas of the text through clear, delicate, and unostentatious language.²⁵ This aim can be seen as deriving from the same didactic urge as Graves and Alan Hodge’s book on good English, *The Reader Over Your Shoulder: A Handbook for*

Writers of English Prose.²⁶ Miranda Seymour writes that ‘as a handbook to style, it has never been bettered. But it was more than a grammar book in Graves’s mind. In the opening chapters, he suggests that lack of clarity in communication was a threat to the security of the country’,²⁷ a concern he shared with Laura Riding. There was no contradiction to Graves between intuitive mythology and the practice of muse-poetry, and clear thoughts in clear speech.

Similarly, he announced in ‘The Fitz-Omar Cult’, the Sufic interpretation is brought to the fore in the translation – ‘a corrective presentation of the true Khayaam’ – (p. 29), as can be seen in quatrains such as nos. 25, 47 or 55. Here, for instance, is Graves’s no. 25, followed by Fitzgerald’s:

Some ponder long on doctrine and belief,
Some teeter between certitude and doubt.
Suddenly out of hiding leaps the Guide
With: ‘Fools, the Way is neither that nor this’. (p. 49)

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument
About it and about; but evermore
Came out by the same Door as in I went. (p. 86)

Whereas Fitzgerald’s speaker seems unimpressed by theological and philosophical speculation, Graves presents us with a hidden ‘Guide’ and a ‘Way’ to be followed. Nevertheless, the free-thinking quatrains expressing scepticism – those seemingly written by Khayyam, who was obsessed with death and despaired of his vast knowledge ever solving the mystery of human life – are neither suppressed nor embellished or euphemised by Graves, but are starkly blunt in their matter-of-factness, as in the final line of quatrain no. 42:

Raise the bowl high, like tulip-cups at Nauroz,
And if the moon-faced one has time to spare
Drink gloriously deep, for brutal Time

Will strike you down with never a warning yell. (p. 53)

It should be recalled here that much uncertainty still surrounds the paternity of the rubaiyat. Of the 1500 quatrains that exist, only about a hundred seem to stand together as a coherent work of a single author, according to Persian scholar Leili Avnar.²⁸ She places these poems on the diachronic spectrum of Persian poetry between the earlier Bacchic verse in praise of wine, with its strong Zoroastrian influence, and the later Sufi poetry such as that of the poet Rumi, for whom wine was no longer a reality to be indulged in but purely symbolic. Yet throughout Persian poetry, Avnar maintains, the wine that is such a prevalent protean element in Khayaam's *Rubaiyat*, with the tavern toper being repeatedly called upon to pour it into clay bowls, whether to drown one's sorrows or as a metaphor for the divine word, at the same time stands for poetic inspiration. It takes the poet through the trials and tribulations of the body and the soul, through the elemental matters of life and death, origin and destination, enabling the poet in a state of wine-induced intoxication or ecstasy to receive and relay downwards the divine word.

This approach to Persian poetry and the view of Khayaam as a transitional voice, part Sufi, part materialist freethinker (and as such exceedingly rare in the Muslim world; and comparable, it is sometimes observed, with François Rabelais), may lead us to wonder whether in this translation Graves appropriates the cult of wine as a substitute for the cult of the Goddess, while surreptitiously paying tribute to her wherever possible. The prototypical White Goddess, his version of one of the Celtic goddesses, was for Graves the principal source of mythopoetic inspiration:

My thesis is that the language of poetic myth anciently current in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess, or Muse, some of them dating from the Old Stone Age, and that this remains the language of true poetry. (*White Goddess*, p. 10)

Indeed, whereas Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* presents a male fraternity of fellow wine drinkers, Graves introduces feminine elements. He thus replaces Fitzgerald's 'That every Hyacinth the Garden wears | Dropt in its Lap from some once lovely Head' (no. 18)²⁹ with 'While scented violets, rising from black soil, | Record the burial of some lovely girl' (no. 19)³⁰; uses feminine possessive pronouns for the moon (nos. 8 and 55) or for Fate (no. 15); and we recall that one possible etymological derivation of 'Sufi' is the Greek *sophia*, meaning wisdom but also a woman's name.

Similarly, while sensuality is largely absent from Khayaam's quatrains,³¹ which are emphatically not love poems,³² Graves emphasizes the threefold nature of the goddess as maiden, mother and crone, or layer-out (or: ecstasy, origin, and destination), through poetic effects such as paronomasia, or through a sensual suggestiveness in the nature imagery. Quatrain 23, for instance, with 'womb' and 'tomb' and 'live and love', seems to encapsulate this feminine trinity that Graves maintains provided the basis of the matriarchal order that preceded the patriarchal religions in the proto-Mediterranean world, and beyond:

Rise up, why mourn this transient world of men?
 Pass your whole life in gratitude and joy.
 Had humankind been freed from womb and tomb,
 When would your turn have come to live and love? (p. 49)

Instead of epicureanism, the stanza seems a discreet, unobtrusive apology for muse worship.

It seems sad that the beauty of some of these quatrains should have been so overshadowed by the controversy of the non-existent manuscript. However, this controversy may have seemed to Graves almost a petty irrelevance, while to the mythopoetic poet hospitality is primordial. Unlike the *poète maudit*, the paradigmatic outsider, the mythopoetic poet is everywhere at home, and everywhere potentially both host and guest. So, it comes about that, while hosting what was to become an authorized Sufi text for the West, at a time (the late sixties) of great interest in Eastern philosophies

and esoteric communities, Graves was at the same time a guest, who had, as it were, entered a new space. What then does this reciprocal mythopoetic hospitality consist in?

Mythopoetic Hospitality

This new hospitable space entered by Graves perhaps owes something to its Mediterranean setting. From a historical or anthropological point of view, the Mediterranean, as Fernand Braudel famously pointed out, refers not to a sea but to the inhabitants of its shores, where ‘everything centred on trade, which was omnipresent, primordial and organisational’.³³ Fifty years later, in an article on the subject of trading networks in the Mediterranean space, the historian Francesca Trivellato raises the question of trust, of how and why merchants of different languages and cultures, perceived as radically other and therefore as untrustworthy, were able to overcome their prejudices and respect their commercial commitments.³⁴ Could it be then that trust is a fundamental value in the Mediterranean, on which not only commerce but also hospitality is founded? In his article ‘Reinventing Hospitality’, Claude Raffestin distinguishes between inside and outside spaces, between the sedentary home, city or nation, with its rules and codified customs, and the nomadic, fluid, non-semiotised exterior, and emphasises the notion of reciprocity, blurring the distinction between host and guest:

Hospitality can be conceived as knowledge of a mode of practice with the Other that a person has through themselves. The host – the person in a sedentary position, therefore – is in fact a migrant, a latent stranger, whereas the guest, who is thus in a nomadic position, is in fact potentially sedentary.³⁵

These two functions, or spaces, which are brought to interconnect through the ritualised mechanism of hospitality, form a semiosphere, Raffestin claims, in which meaning can be revitalised or renewed, and in Graves’s case perhaps, appropriated.³⁶ Hospitality is also an

abiding metaphor for translation. Before being the language of Europe, as Umberto Eco claims,³⁷ translation was surely the language of the Mediterranean, which he describes as a form of negotiation,³⁸ involving not the counting but the weighing out of words (Cicero).³⁹ Antoine Berman (among others) theorizes rather that translation amounts to a form of hospitality.⁴⁰ As we endeavour to glimpse the text behind the controversy, these notions of trust, hospitality, commercial transactions as well as those of the ‘secondary original’ and mythopoetic translation, all jostle together on the island of Mallorca in a multifaceted exemplum of Mediterranean hospitality.

In hospitality, as Raffestin suggests and as the French word ‘*hôte*’, used for both senses, irresistibly recalls, host and guest are notoriously interchangeable. Through Ali-Shah and his would-be distinguished lineage, it can also be said that the Sufic tradition was extending hospitality to Graves, enabling the English poet (before postcolonial studies emerged in academia) to collaborate on a sort of Orientalist reversal or postcolonial ‘writing-back’.⁴¹ Fitzgerald is often cited as an example of Victorian Orientalist translation, and the Shah brothers’ purpose was to oust his freely-translated best-selling poems and their materialist, atheistic hedonism, and establish a new ‘secondary original’, to borrow a very interesting concept from Henri Meschonnic,⁴² that is, an authoritative version of what to them was not so much poetry as a sacred text, which would quell doubts about Khayyam’s authorship, and provide a text upon which to found the Sufic way in the West. What is interesting is that despite the scandal of the non-existent original, which would seem to annul and discredit the entire project, the Shahs cannot be said to have failed since Sufism continues to thrive in the West,⁴³ and Sufi followers such as Doris Lessing unshaken by the controversy. Nor did Graves play an entirely losing hand.

Graves’s most striking display of hospitality to the influence of others was his relationship with the American poet Laura Riding, with whom he and his wife first formed a *ménage à trois* and around whom, first in England and later in Mallorca, he created a sort of cult to the female deity of primitive matriarchies, with Riding in

the role of the Goddess. Such was his subservient attitude that, when the couple first arrived at Deyá, the Spanish villagers assumed him to be the butler of a demanding aristocrat. Her own idea of herself as an exceptional woman poet with supernatural powers was fully accepted by Graves, and he was determined that other people should worship her too. This poetic ‘hospitality’ helps to explain how Graves came to be ‘stung’, as James Moore put it, by the Shah brothers and also why, ultimately, on a certain level at least, he remained untroubled. For more important than being the object of deceit, no doubt, was the principle of mythopoetic hospitality, of bringing texts and people under his own capacious roof in the mountain-surrounded valley of Deyá, plying them with the gifts of hospitality while submitting them in differing degrees to the violence of his own self-sacrifice to his muse; before releasing them, enriched with strange new knowledge and certain talismanic curios, back into the world.

Graves’s mythopoetic world would thus seem to have formed a ‘semiosphere’ in Raffestin’s sense of the word, in which material frontiers, whether in terms of sexual transgression, commercial transactions or textual authenticity were subjected to an immaterial spatial organisation, or mechanism, constantly engaged in translating the Other by means of its own code. Certain women, for instance, were translated into muses or wives; modestly talented people were magnified into geniuses; only a handful of poets were held as true muse-poets. Translation is the central action of the semiosphere, and its nature, as far as Graves is concerned, was to domesticate, to appropriate, to gather diverse strands into his own coherent system, whose sole function was to nurture poetic practice. Thus, it went with the Khayyam translation: (mis)appropriated by Sufi proselytism on the one hand, by bardic muse-poetry on the other, its importance to Graves was more probably elsewhere: in the poetic practice it called forth and of which the drafts are the written or printed trace.

I would like to thank the library at St. John’s Oxford for permission to consult The Robert Graves Collection, and The Robert Graves Trust for permission to quote from Graves’s work.

Sara Greaves is Professor of Translation studies and English literature at Aix-Marseille University. She leads a team within the LERMA, an interdisciplinary research centre devoted to Anglophone studies. She has published a book on James Fenton, containing French translations of a selection of his poems and a critical study, entitled *Côté guerre côté Jardin: excursions dans la poésie de James Fenton* (2016) and a volume of essays: *Language Learning and the Mother Tongue: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, co-edited with Monique De Mattia-Viviès and with her translations (2022). She is currently preparing a selection of research-based and creative pieces for an issue of the academic review *E-rea*, co-edited with Helen E. Mundler, entitled ‘There is a time for building...’: Creative Writing in English Studies in French Universities. Affiliation: Aix Marseille Univ. LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France. ORCID: 0000-0002-8181-4393.

NOTES

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*’, in *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sur, 1944).

² Michel Pharand, “‘In the Irish-Sufic Tradition’: Robert Graves and Idries Shah’, *Gravesiana: The Journal of the Robert Graves Society*, 1 (June 1997), 305-17 (pp. 314-315).

³ ‘Graves also found in Sufism a striking parallel with Celtic mythology: “The Irish Muse-goddess Bridget was threefold like the Muse celebrated by Ibn El Arrabi [the Sufi master poet, 1165-1240]”’, Pharand, p. 307.

⁴ ‘In January 1968, rallying from the disappointing discovery that Cecil Day-Lewis was, after all, to be the new Poet Laureate, he retreated into academic speculation.’ Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), p. 445.

⁵ A renowned work on the subject, with a recent French translation: Idries Shah, *Les soufis*, trans. Jean Néaumet (Paris: Le courrier du livre, 2014).

⁶ James Moore, ‘Neo-Sufism: The Case of Idries Shah’, *Religion Today* 3 (1986), 4-8 <<https://stottilien.com/literaturverzeichnis/neo-sufism-the-case-of-idries-shah-reprint/>> [accessed 7 July 2022]

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948).

⁹ J. M. Cohen, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1960) quoted in ‘Robert Graves, 1895-1985’, Poetry Foundation <www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-graves> [accessed 7 July 2022]

¹⁰ Robert Graves, ‘The Fitz-Omar Cult’, in *The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam: A New Translation with Critical Commentaries by Robert Graves and Omar Ali-Shah*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 7.

¹¹ Douglas Robinson, *Western Translation Theory: from Herodotus to Nietzsche*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 249.

¹² Fitzgerald to E. B. Cowell. Cited in Robinson, p. 249.

¹³ Robert Graves, ‘My Version of the Rubaiyyat’, *Commentary*, 46 (July 1968) <<https://www.commentary.org/articles/robert-graves/translating-the-rubaiyyat/>> [accessed 8 July 2022]

¹⁴ Quoted in ‘Stuffed Eagle’, *Time*, 31 May 1968 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20090403053006/http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,844564-1,00.html>> [accessed 8 July 2022]

¹⁵ John Charles Edward Bowen, *Translation or Travesty: Enquiry into Robert Graves’ Version of Some Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (Reading, England: Abbey Press, 1973).

¹⁶ Omar Ali-Shah to Robert Graves, undated, St John’s College, Oxford.

¹⁷ Omar Ali-Shah to Robert Graves, undated, St John’s College, Oxford.

¹⁸ James Moore, ‘As for poor Graves, his book was exposed by academics as a nullity cubed; a *translation* (which was not a translation but a copy of a Victorian commentary); of the twelfth century “Jan Fishan Khan MS” (which did not exist); of a composite stanzaic poem by Khayyam (which he did not write). As Graves laboured hopelessly to defend himself, Idries twice promised to produce the elusive MS ‘from Afghanistan’, only to renege finally on 30 October 1970. No MS, no photocopy, no detail of format or location, no substantive text, no colophon ever transpired – and Graves like Bennett reaped the harvest of his credulity’. James Moore, ‘Neo-Sufism: The Case of Idries Shah’, *Religion Today*, 3 (1986), 4-8 <<https://stottilien.com/literaturverzeichnis/neo-sufism-the-case-of-idries-shah-reprint/>> [accessed 8 July 2022]

¹⁹ Bahram Meghdadi, *A Comparative Analysis of Edward Fitzgerald’s and Robert Graves’s Translation of ‘The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam’* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).

²⁰ Seymour, p. 399.

-
- ²¹ ‘The Rubàiyât of Omar Khayyam’, translated by Edward Fitzgerald, ed. by Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, included as an Appendix to *The Rubaiyyat*, p. 81.
- ²² Robert Graves Collection, St John’s College, Oxford.
- ²³ The quatrains are not numbered in the same way in the two translations.
- ²⁴ Robert Graves Collection, St John’s College, Oxford.
- ²⁵ Martin Seymour-Smith writes: ‘he sacrificed technical fluency to a sense he was persuaded was sacred’, quoted in Pharand, p. 556.
- ²⁶ Robert Graves and Allan Hodge, *The Reader Over Your Shoulder: A Handbook for Writers of English Prose* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1943).
- ²⁷ Seymour, p. 299.
- ²⁸ Leila Avnar, *Omar Khayyam et la tradition bachique persane*, a conference given at the Institut des Cultures d’Islam, online video recording YouTube, 12 October 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2vcLQHacJc>> [accessed 8 July 2022]
- ²⁹ Rubaiyyat, p. 84.
- ³⁰ Ibid, p. 48.
- ³¹ Nasser Pakdaman and others so assert. *Notes du Montroyal* <<https://www.notesdumontroyal.com/note/79>> [accessed 7 July 2022]
- ³² Pharand quotes a letter from Graves to Shah: ‘But that the divine love he felt for his friend from Shiraz was comrade love [...] without the least hint of bodily love, disappoints me. I had hoped it was love for a woman and would give a precedent for my impossible love for Aemilia and hers for me, which cannot be divorced from bodily love’. Pharand, p. 314.
- ³³ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*, 3 vols (Paris: Armand Colin, 1966), i, 253, 292, cited by Anthony Molho and Diogo Ramada Curto, ‘Les réseaux marchands à l’époque moderne’. *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 58 (2003), 569-579 <<https://www.cairn.info/revue-Annales-2003-3-page-569.htm#no7>> [accessed 8 July 2022]
- ³⁴ Francesca Trivellato, ‘Juifs de Livourne, Italiens de Lisbonne, hindous de Goa. Réseaux marchands et échanges interculturels à l’époque moderne’, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 58 (2003), 581-603.
- ³⁵ Claude Raffestin, ‘Réinventer l’hospitalité’, *Communications*, 65, (1997), 167 <https://www.persee.fr/doc/comm_0588-8018_1997_num_65_1_1997> [accessed 8 July 2022]. My translation.
- ³⁶ A notion borrowed from Yuri Lotman (1984) and developed by Raffestin.

³⁷ Umberto Eco, 'La Langue de L'Europe, c'est la traduction', *Montray Kréyol: depuis 2007*, <<http://www.montraykreyol.org/article/umbero-eco-la-langue-de-leurope-cest-la-traduction>> [accessed 8 July 2022]

³⁸ Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat: Translation as Negotiation* (London: Phoenix, 2004).

³⁹ 'I did not hold it necessary to render word for word, but I preserved the general style and force of the language. For I did not think I ought to count them out to the reader like coins, but to pay them by weight, as it were'. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *The Best Kind of Orator (De optimo genere oratorum)*, 46 BCE). Translated by H. M. Hubbell, in Douglas Robinson, *Western Translation Theory: From Herodotus to Nietzsche* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 9.

⁴⁰ Antoine Berman, *La Traduction et la Lettre, ou l'Auberge du Lointain* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).

⁴¹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁴² Western religious history reveals that the founding religious texts are frequently translations, which come to replace their source texts as what Henri Meschonnic calls 'secondary originals'. Henri Meschonnic, *Poétique du traduire* (Lagrasse, France: Verdier), 1999.

⁴³ Cf. The Idries Shah Foundation, a registered charity set up in 2013 by his family.