

Tales from 1,001 Nights: translating *The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad*

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Abstract: This article discusses the translation of the poetry collection *El llibru póstumu de Sherezade* by Raquel Menéndez, published by Skein Press in a bilingual English-Asturian version as *The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad*. Taking its cue from the collection's title, the article borrows the structure of the work *The One Thousand and One Nights* in order to tell three 'tales', each of which analyses a different point in the translation process, and a different aspect of the translation. 'The Tale of a Poem's Absence' describes the process of finding an English-language publisher for the translation, with the aim of demonstrating some of the difficulties literary translators may face when navigating the often-opaque anglophone publishing industry. It is hoped that the description of this process may be useful both to writers in Asturian curious about how Asturian writing finds a home in other languages, and to translators from Asturian, or indeed other minoritised languages. 'The Tale of Two Sherezades' discusses, in detail, two specific decisions made during the translation process, and how these were influenced by the translator's own subjectivity. The aim is to demonstrate how, rather than attempting to erase themselves from the text, there are times when the translator can use their own subjectivity as a tool in the translation process. Finally, 'The Tale of the Lingering Voice' gives an account of the translator's experience of reading *after* translation; how the poems of *The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad* continued to resonate in the translator's own reading life in the months after working on the translation. This, in turn, serves as an example of how translation adds a new dimension to the collection's intertextuality.

Keywords: *intertextuality, poetry, Raquel Menéndez, The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad, translation*

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Cuentos de les 1.001 nueches: la traducción d'El llibru póstumu de Sherezade

Resume: *Esti artículu analiza la traducción del poemariu El llibru póstumu de Sherezade, de Raquel Menéndez, espublizáu por Skein Press nuna edición bilingüe inglés-asturianu col títulu The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad. Partiendo del títulu del poemariu, esti artículu adopta la estructura de Les mil y una nueches pa contar tres «cuentos». En caún d'ellos analízase un momentu distintu del procesu de traducción y un aspeutu diferente de la mesma. «El cuentu de l'ausencia d'un poema» describe'l procesu de busca d'una editorial en llingua inglesa pa la traducción, col envís d'amosar dalgunos de les torgues a les que puen enfrentase les persones traductores de lliteratura al movese pela industria editorial anglófona, les más de les veces poco trasparente. Espérase que la descripción d'esti procesu pueda resultar útil mesmu pa escritores n'asturianu interesaos en conocer cómo la lliteratura asturiana atopa un espaciu n'otres llingües que pa persones que traducen dende l'asturianu o dende otres llingües minorizaes. «El cuentu de les dos Sherezades» analiza con detalle dos determinos concretos tomaos nel procesu de traducción y la manera na que tuvieron condicionaos pola propia suxetividá del traductor. D'esta miente, quier amosase cómo, en cuenta d'intentar alloñase del testu, hai ocasiones nes que'l que traduz pue valise de la so propia suxetividá como ferramienta nel procesu de traducción. P'acabar, «El cuentu de la voz qu'aguanta nel tiempu» da cuenta de la esperiencia de llectura de la persona traductora después de la traducción y de cómo los poemas de The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad siguieron resonando nes sos propies llectures nos meses posteriores al trabayu de traducción. Esto, de la mesma manera, sirve como exemplu de cómo la traducción amiesta una dimensión nueva a la intertestualidá del poemariu.*

Pallabres clave: *intertestualidá, poesía, Raquel Menéndez, The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad, traducción*

1. Introduction

Telling the story of a translation is not an easy task, even for the translator themselves; there are so many stages to the process, so many decisions, small and large, so many twists, turns and wild goose chases, that it is hard to know where to begin. Before writing this article, I decided it would be a good idea to look back over the chronology of my translation of *El llibru póstumu de Sherezade*. As my starting point, I took the moment my first translations of Raquel Menéndez's poetry appeared in print: two poems published in issue 141 of *Poetry Ireland Review* in December 2023 (Zak/Aria Eipe, 2023). It turned out that from the date those translations were first published to the day this article was due would be almost exactly 1,001 days (given a little poetic licence) and, more to the point, 1,001 nights. This seemed like too good an opportunity to let pass, so I decided that instead of trying to tell the whole story of the translation, I would take my cue from Shahrazad herself.

Below, then, I offer three tales from those 1,001 nights, each of which concerns a different stage in the translation process, roughly the 'before', the 'during' and the 'after'. More than that, however, I believe that each of these three tales will address different questions about the translation of *El llibru póstumu de Sherezade*, and literary translation in general. In 'The Tale of a Poem's Absence', I will discuss how my translation came to be published in the first place; I hope my description of this process may be useful both to writers in Asturian curious about how Asturian writing finds a home in other languages, and to other translators from

Asturian, or indeed other minoritised languages. As an emerging translator myself, I know what a Sisyphean task it can seem trying to navigate the anglophone publishing industry, and I believe there is a value in sharing our experiences. In ‘The Tale of Two Sherezades’, I will discuss, in detail, two specific decisions I made during the translation process, and how these were influenced by my own subjectivity as translator. Finally, in ‘The Tale of the Lingering Voice’, I will talk about my experience of reading *after* translation; how the poems of *The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad* have remained with me and found echoes in my reading life in the months after working on the translation.

2. The tale of a poem’s absence

Ye ehí au tán los poemas, / na falta'l poema
That’s where poems are found, / in the poem’s absence

Writing is, in a sense, always preceded by absence. A new poem, or a new book of poems, fills a space where those poems did not exist before. In the case of translation, this is a space – or an absence – in the literary landscape of the target language, and in the case of *The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad*, we might say that this absence was twofold. Not only did *these poems* not exist in English, but neither, to a large extent, did the poetry of Asturian-language writers in general. At least far as I have been able to tell, no poetry collections translated from Asturian had ever been published in full in the UK or Ireland before. Having read, admired, been moved by Raquel Menéndez’s work, I felt that her collection had every chance of being able to fill this absence, that somewhere an editor would see in her poetry the same things I had, and share my desire to bring it to an anglophone readership. This proved to be the case when poet and editor Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe decided to publish two poems from the collection in that issue of *Poetry Ireland Review*, which she was guest editing.

I had sent poems from the collection elsewhere, to other English-language literary magazines, but I was not surprised when it was an Irish magazine, and that magazine in particular, which first agreed to print them. The literature of Ireland, after all, is itself bilingual, *Poetry Ireland Review* a bilingual magazine; it seems natural that a magazine publishing work in Irish should have an attentiveness to work translated from Asturian, given the commonalities in their histories of repression and survival. And there is a history, too, of literary ties between Ireland and Asturias: in his ‘Little Canticles of Asturias’, Seamus Heaney – who spoke in defence of the Asturian language, and minoritised languages in general – wrote of “entering it as if it were home ground, / the Gaeltacht, say” (Heaney, 2001, p. 29). For an absence to be addressed, it must first be perceived. Indeed, besides Irish, English and Asturian, that same issue of *Poetry Ireland Review* also featured Morgan Leathem Ventura’s translations of Zapotec poet Héctor Pineda Santiago and Keith Payne’s translations of Galician poet Luisa Castro.

It is worth mentioning, too, that publishing with an Irish magazine greatly increased the prospects of both translator and author being paid for our work, given Ireland’s more generous funding regime for the literary arts compared to the neighbouring UK, where arts funding in general is in dire straits. I make a point of highlighting this because if translators are not remunerated for their work, translations will continue to be produced only by a narrow, privileged group; the greater the diversity of people who are able to become literary translators, the better the translations of the future will be.

After those first translations were published, I began working on a longer sample translation, consisting of about half the poems in the collection, as well as a publication proposal for the book. I spent the next year or so sending this to publishers, mostly in the UK, where I am most familiar with the poetry publishing landscape. As is commonly the case with any book-length translation project into English, there followed a long period of silence, punctuated by the occasional curt rejection email. In the end, publication would come not as a consequence of me sending the book to publishers, but from an editor reaching out to me. Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe, who had selected the poems for the magazine, is also editor of Skein Press, a Dublin-based independent publisher with a focus on “authors whose voices may otherwise have gone unheard”. Addressing absences of one or another kind of writing – be it due to the author’s background, community, or indeed language – is central to Skein Press’s publishing ethos, and they have made a commitment, in partnership with the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages Initiative, to publish poetry in translation from indigenous, endangered and minoritised languages. Having read the poems published in *Poetry Ireland Review*, Nidhi contacted me around a year later and asked to see more of the collection; as a result, Skein Press decided to publish it in full, in a bilingual edition. Then, finally, the work of translating *El llibru póstumu de Sherezade* could begin in earnest.

All of which is to say, there is a huge amount which must happen for a work to even reach this stage; many stars must align, many structural forces are at play, and the value of a healthy and properly funded literary magazine culture should not be overlooked. Magazines, whether in print or online, can act as a conduit between a translator and a publisher who sees in a collection the same qualities, the same value they do. Who knows how to find the poems in the poems’ absence.

3. The tale of two Sherezades

sinón d’otru yo, esto ye,/d’otru tu
but of another I, that is,/another you

Whether intentionally or not, every translation bears the imprint of the human being behind it; no matter how much a translator may try to erase themselves from the process, their personality, their idiosyncrasies, their reading history, their linguistic tics, all come to bear on the text in greater or lesser ways. Here, I want to give two examples of places in which, rather than attempt to disappear from the translation, I chose to embrace the differences between author and translator and use my own subjectivity as one more tool in the translation process. If, as Raquel Menéndez (2026, p. 9) writes in her acknowledgments, the original and its translation form a “deeply intimate dialogue”, then I hope these decisions have helped to make that dialogue all the richer.

One way of thinking about the process of literary translation (or translation of any kind) is as a series of choices, or decisions. Each choice made closes off another, and the accretion of these choices determines the style and character of a translation. One of the most significant, in the case of *The Posthumous Book of Shahrzad*, had to do precisely with the literary character in the collection’s title: Shahrzad herself. *The One Thousand and One Nights* has a long and complex history in English translation, and as a consequence, so do

the various renderings of Shahrazad's name in English; this is much more than a matter of spelling. Since the figure of Shahrazad is central to the collection, representing the power of language and storytelling, the persistence of memory, as well as being an avatar for the collection's multigenerational protagonists, I was conscious that this decision would carry a heavy burden of meaning.

Initially, I considered maintaining the same spelling as the original Asturian edition; though the spelling 'Sherezade' is not common in English, to carry over Raquel's iteration into the English version would have been an acknowledgment that, already in the original text, the figure of Shahrazad has been translated and transplanted into a new context, as she has so many times over the course of history. Rather than the Shahrazad of King Shahriyâr's household, this is a Sherezade of rural Asturias, telling stories of a very different kind. However, since my translation was going to be published bilingually, Menéndez's Asturian Sherezade would be there either way. The English version, instead, felt like an opportunity to mark the difference between the two texts, to say something about what was happening to the poems as they travelled from one language to the other, and about the person who was transporting them. Which of the various accepted English spellings should I choose, though?

A breakthrough came courtesy of British-Syrian translator Yasmine Seale, whose works include *The Annotated Arabian Nights: Tales from 1001 Nights*, a 2021 retranslation of the classic story collection. About the name, Seale (2021) has said:

I like Shahrazad because it makes clear the name's Persian origins. There are different theories about its etymology. One sees it as *shahr*, city, and the suffix *zad*, born. A child of the city. Shahrazad is an urban figure—worldly, streetwise, unshockable.

With these words, something seemed to click into place for me. I'm not sure I would call myself worldly, streetwise or unshockable, but I did grow up in a city, and live in one still; for all the research that goes into my translation work, I nevertheless approach the poems of *The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad* from a certain cultural and geographical distance, and here was a chance to gently acknowledge this fact in the translation.

Referencing Seale's translation felt apt in other ways, too. In the introduction to *The Annotated Arabian Nights*, editor Pablo Lemos Horta writes that Seale's translation 'breaks decisively with the masculine dynasty of English translators of the *Nights*,' while describing Seale herself as 'seeking to recover Shahrazad's voice' (2021, p. XXI). In both of these aspects, Seale's translation seemed to share a politics and a poetics with Menéndez's own work. And so I traded that Romance vowel at the end of Sherezade for the 'h' at the centre of Shahrazad. In a world where literary translation, and the arts in general, are threatened by the carbon-hungry machinations of tech oligarchies, I like to think that 'h' could stand for 'human'.

Or, perhaps, 'heteronym', which brings me to the next choice I would like to discuss, this time not about a single word, but a stanza. Whilst working on the poem 'Today was your birthday', I felt I could hear echoes of Fernando Pessoa's alter-ego Álvaro de Campos. This is the stanza in the original Asturian:

Nun quiero que na vida que t'espera
vaya dolete nada. Tu tienes en ti
tolos díes del mundu, yo nengún. (Menéndez, 2017, p. 84)

And here is Pessoa/de Campos, from the poem ‘Tabacaria’ (Campos, 1933, p. 1):

Não sou nada.
Nunca serei nada.
Não posso querer ser nada.
À parte isso, tenho em mim todos os sonhos do mundo.

The accumulation of negatives (nun, não, nada, nunca) offset by that emphatic, countervailing final line, seemed to resonate very strongly. I do not believe Menéndez necessarily intended this resonance, but in our conversations about the book we did discuss the influence of Portuguese literature on Asturian poetry – elsewhere in the collection there is a reference to Eugénio de Andrade, another Portuguese poet who has been extensively translated into Asturian. Furthermore, this particular Pessoa/de Campos poem was translated into Asturian by Xuan Bello (Campos, 1989, pp. 7–13), who Menéndez cites in her introduction to the collection.

The poem also happens to have been recently translated into English by British translator Margaret Jull Costa, working alongside co-translator Patricio Ferrari. Jull Costa was an important inspiration to me both as a teacher and translator at the beginning of my career, and I decided to mirror the phrasing of their Pessoa translation in my own version of Raquel’s poem. Where Jull Costa’s translation reads, “I have inside me all the dreams of the world” (Campos, 2023, p. 41), mine reads, “You have / all the days of the world inside you” (Menéndez, 2026, p. 34).

By referencing Jull Costa and, through her, Pessoa, in my own translation of the poem, I was inscribing both my own reading of the poem, and my own biography as translator, into the English version; yet, at the same time, I was also acknowledging the relationships forged, through reading and translation, between Asturian and Portuguese poetry, and the relationship between Menéndez’s work and an earlier generation of Asturian writers, of whom Xuan Bello was emblematic. Of course, few if any readers may spot this small gesture, but I believe it is details like this which give a translation something like the depth of meaning of an original text.

As translators, we do our best to carry across the allusions, references and resonances of the original, but by bringing it into a new language, we also add a new dimension to its intertextuality. Like an animal adapting to a new habitat, the text forms a new set of relationships, which do not replace, but complement those of the original – what form this new intertextuality takes is in part determined by the choices we, as translators, make, but it is also determined by the text’s new readers. In my final tale, I intend to explore this idea a little further.

4. The tale of the lingering voice

Quixi pensar qu’equí taría’l soníu de la to voz

I wanted to think the sound of your voice would linger here

A couple of weeks ago, whilst on holiday in north Wales, I was reading *Cafés*, a collection by the poet Holly Pester published earlier this year in the UK. Half-way through a poem titled ‘Terrible jazz as punishment’, I read the following lines (Pester, 2026, p. 55): “I was raised by women who would refuse food all day, talk loudly on the phone, then send their children to bed so they could eat from the fridge”.

Suddenly, I was catapulted from inside Pester's café and back into *The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad*: "I am preceded by women who work / with the earth itself" (Menéndez, 2026, p. 31). Here was an example of my choices as translator affecting the way Menéndez's poetry resonated with another text: if I had followed the syntax of the original Asturian (*Precédenme muyeres*) and made the women the subject of the sentence, I doubt I would have noticed any similarity between these lines. By making the speaker of the poem the subject in its English version, suddenly there was an echo to be found.

But what I am interested in here is not so much the similarity or otherwise of these lines, but that even months after I had finished working on the book, it was still deeply embedded in my consciousness, to the point that I would see its words reflected in so much else I read. This is a familiar experience to me. Translators are often described as the closest readers of a text, and yet, to my knowledge, little has been written about the experience of reading *after* translation, about the ways in which the texts stay with us long after we are done working on them.

Here, I am going to talk about my own experiences of reading *after* translating *The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad*. The reason I think this is worth talking about is because, for me at least, this is one of the answers to the question of *why* we translate. I want to know where the new readers gained in translation will take the text, what shape its new intertextuality will have, and perhaps my own experience with this book can serve as an example. In the introduction to the English edition of the book, Menéndez writes: "What does this say to world literature? Where does my individual project fit within that framework, and what might it offer to an Anglophone audience?" (Menéndez, 2026, p. 7). I am not sure I can answer those questions here, but I can perhaps offer a glimpse of how her book continues to speak to me and my own reading life in English.

Sheffield poet Angelina D'Roza's collection *Envies the Birds* was published in 2016, a year before *El llibru póstumu de Sherezade* originally appeared in Asturian, but I first read it almost a decade later, and not long after I had finished working on my translation. At the core of *Envies the Birds* is the Tibetan notion of *shul*: "the impression left after whatever made it has gone" (D'Roza, 2016, p. 59). Like Menéndez's collection, *Envies the Birds* is a work of coming to terms with silence: "This quiet is more *shul* than / nothingness and must be given due respect" (p. 59). In the poem 'Days', D'Roza writes of her experiences as a healthcare worker, of a Polish patient suffering from dementia: "a quiet language persisting between us" (p. 41). The language of her poetry is quiet, but I heard echoes of Menéndez everywhere in it:

I missed the birds, the hope of migration,
that in their bleakless absence
I'd unleaf, winter. (p. 30)

When I read those lines from 'Fairytale No. 9', I heard alongside them:

It wasn't written, but you'll fall silent,
like the leaves fall,
slowly. (Menéndez, 2026, p. 39)

Even the shape of the stanza seemed to fit like a handprint. And I heard, too:

They say that some birds
shed their feathers before taking off,
once and for all, on their migration. (Menéndez, 2026, p. 50)

While D’Roza’s “weight of nesting birds / on my chest” (D’Roza, 2016, p. 30) became Menéndez’s “bird’s beak buried in your heart” (Menéndez, 2026, p. 53). In this way the experience of reading one book became inseparable from the experience of translating the other.

And then there was Jennifer Lee Tsai’s collection *Melete*, published earlier this year; an exploration of the author’s British-Chinese identity, of family history, and of growing up in Liverpool, which also happens to be my home city. Where Menéndez uses the figure of Shahrazad as, at turns, voice and interlocutor, so Jennifer Lee Tsai adopts Melete, the Muse of meditation and contemplation, as poetic persona. Almost immediately, in her poem ‘Who is Melete?’, these two figures are brought together:

Melete reads about the Greek gods and goddesses, Icelandic
and Norse Mythology, Scheherazade, the One Thousand and
One Nights. (Lee Tsai, 2026, p. 14)

From this point on, I could not help but read the two books as in dialogue. In *Melete*, just as in *The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad*, language – its passing down, its adoption or otherwise – emerges as an important theme, specifically English and Cantonese. Lee Tsai’s poem ‘Tso Kin Tsai’ (2026, p. 63), about her grandfather, ends:

[he] said he did not mind me
writing about him in my future poems, in a language he had
never learnt nor could ever speak.

Language and literacy are so often shaped by generation, race, class, gender; there I heard Menéndez’s collection too:

In this tongue we could not read or write, we speak
of our desire to keep house and care for our livestock. (Menéndez, 2026, p. 14)

Even in their ecstatic moments, these two collections seemed to be speaking to each other. In ‘La Mystérique’, Lee Tsai writes of:

a place where consciousness does not rule, where in extreme delirium,
it descends into a raven night of flames.

Set me alight again, my love. (Lee Tsai, 2026, p. 111)

While Menéndez’s final poem reads:

Because life doesn’t end,
the sky we know goes up in flames,

our torn flesh, our resurrection,
 putting out one fire to light another. (Menéndez, 2026, p. 56)

Translating any work into English is a fraught act: you don't have to travel far from where I grew up to find languages which have struggled—and continue to struggle—to survive against the imposition of English. Yet bringing *The Posthumous Book of Shahrazad* into English also offered the chance to put it into dialogue with other writing in, or translated from, minoritised languages across the world. Returning to Menéndez's introduction (2026, p. 7), she writes:

The relationship between poetry and life writing is undoubtedly a complex one, especially when writing in a minoritised language. At the time I wrote this book, my written Asturian was far from grammatically perfect; I had never studied it formally, despite speaking it daily. This is a paradox which connects many speakers of minoritised languages around the world.

The last of the books encountered when reading *after* translation that I want to mention here, Dinara Rasuleva's *Lostlingual*, engages with that very same paradox. Her multilingual, decolonial poetry collection is an experiment in writing back to her native Tartar. Rasuleva (2025, p. 15) describes her own difficulty expressing herself in writing and, like Menéndez, her efforts to overcome:

For a long time, I was afraid to write in Tartar. It seemed impossible, since I knew the language only on a childish level. Gradually I understood that poetry is a flexible tool, allowing one to write on any language level, and even without using any words at all.

I will end with a few lines from Rasuleva's poem 'Qara' (2025, p. 33):

mother's blood
 father's blood
 grandmother's blood
 out of my mouth
 out of my oath
 in place of speech seeps out

Or as somebody else might have put it:

*Lo que s'herieda ye'l picu d'un páxaru nel corazón,
 desangrase mientres la bandada emigra.*
 What you inherit is a bird's beak buried in your heart,
 bleeding to death as the flock flies on.

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