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## Shakespeare's Dramaturgy in the History of Arab Theatre

### Abstract

The studies and monographs published over the years leave no doubt as to the great significance of Shakespeare's works for Arabic drama and theatre. The Lebanese writer Michail Nuayma went so far as to say "Shakespeare remains a Ka'ba to which we make pilgrimages, and a Qibla to which we turn in prayer." No doubt the words of one of the leading writers of Syrian-American school cause huge surprise and even consternation. At the same time they encourage us to reflect on the ways of reading and interpreting Shakespearean drama in the Arab world.

This article aims to show the reception of William Shakespeare's plays in Arab theatre starting from first attempts of staging his works until their contemporary interpretations and attempts to formulate a response to the question of what has made Shakespeare remain continuously one of the closest Western playwrights to the Arab culture for more than a century.

Keywords: Shakespeare, drama, Arab theatre.

According to a joke that has been passed on across the Middle East by word of mouth for many years, Shakespeare was actually an Arabic writer named Sheikh Zubair. Pushing this joke further in its epoch-spanning progress, let us imagine that Hamlet is The Prince of Kuwait, who arrives in his home country from his studies in the United States to attend his father's funeral. Romeo and Juliet would be Jamil and Jamila, who come from two Arabian houses engaged in a long feud with each other. Then we can look at the fate of Dodi, the protagonist of *Doditello* who becomes entangled in a steamy affair with a British princess. Are successive Arabic versions of Shakespeare's works only an ambitious attempt to tune into the global theatrical narration, or do they express a deeply-rooted desire to interpret the truths he conveyed, in a language and cultural code of one's own?

In the words of Graham Holderness, "Shakespeare touched the Arab world astonishingly early"<sup>1</sup>. In 1608, during the third expedition organised by the British East India Company, the crew of the Red Dragon ship staged *Hamlet* on Socotra,

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<sup>1</sup> G. Holderness, *The Al-Hamlet Summit, Introduction*, Hatfield 2006, p. 9.

an island located in present-day Yemen. It is worth mentioning that the play had been published in print just five years before. It would be an overstatement to say that this event might have had any influence on the knowledge of theatre among the island's residents, let alone the whole region's. Still, the historical fact alone is noteworthy.

As a matter of fact, Shakespeare's works made their first impression on Arabic stages towards the end of the 19th Century, and formed part of a multidimensional phenomenon of Arabisation and adaptations of notable works of world literature. Shakespeare is not an isolated case here. As Abu al-Hasan Salam shows in his work *Hayrat an-nass al-masrahy* (An Astonishing theatrical play), paraphrase and travesty have played a very important role in the development of Arabic drama.<sup>2</sup> Similar opinions can be quoted from the works of Ali ar-Rai, Muhammad Mustafa Badawi, Muhammad Mandur, and Ewa Machut-Mendecka. What's more, Said an-Naji, in his book *At-Tajrib fi al-masrah* (*Experience in theatre*) goes as far as claiming "the contemporary Arabian theatre is still very much a hostage of the Western one".<sup>3</sup> Suffice to say that the contemporary or modern Arabian theatre is commonly agreed to have begun in 1847 when Marun an-Naqqash from Lebanon staged an Arabised version of Molière's *The Miser*, entitled *Al-Bachil*, in his house and before a select audience.<sup>4</sup> Although this event is more of a symbolic turning point, effecting the evolution of a specific cultural phenomenon, and is often overestimated, as analysed in detail by Muhammad al-Fil, it is still an excellent portrayal of a trend that for years dominated the world of Arabic theatre.<sup>5</sup>

Shakespeare's plays were initially the ones most commonly adapted. Paraphrased versions of his works started filling the repertoire presented by Arabic theatre groups mainly late 19th Century Egypt. In the same period, the first attempts to translate the plays of the English playwright were made. The most popular were *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. The Arabic stage managers would often use the French versions of plays and adjusted them to the tastes of audiences, paying little attention to being faithful to the original. In this context, as early as in 1929, Ismail Mazhar wrote in the *Al-Mukattam* daily that "the original characters from Shakespeare's plays are a far cry from their Arabic travesties".<sup>6</sup>

According to Mahmud ash-Shitawi *Hamlet* was first staged in Egypt by the theatre group of Sulaiman al-Qurdahi in 1893. The earliest extant edition of the play about the Prince of Denmark is the adaptation by Tanyus Abdu from 1901.<sup>7</sup> The author took the French version of the play and introduced significant changes to the plot. It is enough to mention that not only does Tanyus Abdu's

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Abu al-Hasan Salam, *Hayrat an-nass al-masrahi*, Alexandria 2007, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Said an-Naji, *At-Tajrib fi al-masrah*, Sharjah 2009, p. 141.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. E. Machut-Mendecka, *Współczesny dramat egipski lat 1870–1975* (Contemporary Egyptian drama in 1870–1975), Warszawa 1984, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Muhammad al-Fil, *Ruya wa-bayan halat al-masrah al-arabi*, Cairo 2001, p. 33–57.

<sup>6</sup> Ismail Mazhar as cited in Ramsis Awad, *Sziksibir fi Misr*, Cairo 1986, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. M. Litvin, *The French Source of the Earliest Surviving Arabic Hamlet*, "Shakespeare Studies" 2011, eds. S. Zimmerman, G. Sullivan, vol. XXXIX, p. 133; Amin Sulayman Saidu, *Al-Masrahijjat al-mutarjama wa-al-mu'arraba*, Sharjah 2003, p. 138.

*Hamlet* have features of a musical, but it also features a happy ending.<sup>8</sup> This rather liberal adaptation of the work completely departs from the form of tragedy and swerves into historical romance. A much more faithful version was Khalil Mutran's 1916 translation commissioned by George Abyad, which remained the basis for stage performances for two decades.

Of all Shakespeare's works, *Romeo and Juliet* was by far the most popular. Margaret Litvin mentions that about 1892 the play was translated into Arabic by the Lebanese-born Najib al-Haddad in Egypt.<sup>9</sup> The translator, working on a contract, made significant changes to the contents of the play, which is described both by Ramsis Awad and Muhammad al-Fil. Al-Haddad begins his version, entitled *Shuhada al-gharam (The Martyrs of Love)* with Romeo's monologue, and the last scene features the death of Friar Laurence in addition to that of the eponymous protagonists.<sup>10</sup> The famous Egyptian Salama Hijazi went even further – his musical interpretation of *The Martyrs of Love* from 1915 has a happy ending – Romeo and Juliet get married.<sup>11</sup> Later translations and interpretations of the play were much closer to the original. One of the first notable translations was prepared by Ali Ahmad Bakathir in 1940.<sup>12</sup> The young playwright made efforts to preserve the rhythm and style of Shakespearian language.

Much fewer changes in the original plot can be found in other plays by Shakespeare performed on Arabic stages in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Still, the titles were sometimes changed. This was the case with e.g. *Othello*, which, according to the *Al-Ahram* daily from 20 April 1906 was staged by the group of Sulaiman al-Qurdahi under the title *Al-Qaid al-maghribi (The Moroccan Ruler)*.<sup>13</sup>

As a matter of fact, from the very beginning, Shakespeare's place in the Arab world as a universal artiste, whose works form part of the global cultural heritage, was never questioned. He was not perceived as an author coming from a nation of colonisers, who would perpetuate the relations of submissiveness in both the political and civilisational dimensions. In 1916, in an article in *Al-Ahram*, Ahmad Lutfi as-Sayyid referred to the author of *Hamlet* as "the poet of all mankind", because, he wrote, "his works touch the essence of the human being regardless of nationality, origin, or social position".<sup>14</sup> The discussion about the translations of the Stratford master's works was gradually gaining momentum. From the early 1920s the Egyptian papers published regular theoretical articles on the subject of translation in the context of Shakespeare's works. The most extensive analysis was published by Abd al-Qadir al-Mazani. Between 1922 and 1928 he prepared a detailed analysis of translations of such plays as *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ramsis Awad, op. cit., p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. M. Litvin, *Sulayman Al-Bassam in the Arab Shakespeare Tradition*, <http://muslimvoicesfestival.org/resources/sulayman-al-bassam-arab-shakespeare-tradition> (access: 11.11.2011). Also Ewa Machut-Mendecka writes about the play's arabisation in her book *Współczesny dramata egipski...* (Contemporary Egyptian drama...), p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ramsis Awad, op. cit., p. 72 and Muhammad al-Fil, op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ramsis Awad, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Isam Bahi, *Masrah Bakathir al-ijtimai*, Sharjah 2000, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Ramsis Awad, op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

of *Venice*. It is not difficult to guess that the key issue was the ability to develop such a rendition in the target language that both the content and the form of the source would be preserved. Al-Mazani even suggested that two versions should be prepared. The first, written in prose, would accurately convey the content of the original work, while the second one would be a purely poetic text aimed at preserving the spirit of Shakespeare's play.

With the passage of time and the increasing availability of reliable translations, some of which were prepared as part of cultural projects of the League of Arab States, the interest in Shakespeare rose to such an extent that Nadia al-Bahar writes about a peculiar "transplantation" of Shakespeare into the Arab world.<sup>15</sup> A similar opinion is voiced by Margaret Litvin in her monograph entitled *Hamlet's Arab Journey. Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost*: "Shakespeare is globalized and naturalized, perceived in the Middle East as a long-ago-successful transplant from Europe rather than as a threatening import".<sup>16</sup>

In investigating the reasons for the popularity of Shakespeare's works in the Arab world, Mona Fawz Hani refers to the concept by Itmar Even-Zohar about the place of translated literature in the domestic literary polysystem. As the Israeli culture expert suggests, a translation may become a pivotal part of a system only if it fulfills the three conditions that express one and the same rule:

1. When literature is young and still in the process of formation.
2. When literature is peripheral or weak.
3. When turning points or crises occur in the history of literature, or a certain literary vacuum is formed.<sup>17</sup>

Looking at the condition of Arabic drama in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a strong susceptibility to foreign influences is readily visible – in terms of both form and content.

The enormous ideological and interpretational potential of Shakespeare's works, supported by his undisputed global renown, became extremely-attractive material for Arabic theatre.

Comparing the frequency of Arabic stagings of all Shakespeare's plays, it is easily seen that *Hamlet* has been the most popular. As for the ways in which the play was interpreted in the Middle East, they reflect the socio-political evolution of the region throughout history.

The first attempts to tackle the story of the Prince of Denmark in the Arab culture mainly consisted of looking for the middle ground between the original plot and the historical needs of the time. When Egypt was under colonial influence, the Arabic Hamlet could not ultimately fail, nor could he leave an impression that he had lost. In Tanyus Abdu's version, reprinted almost until the end of the 1920s,

<sup>15</sup> Cf. N. Al-Bahar, *Shakespeare in Early Arabic Adaptations*, "Shakespeare Translation" 1976, vol. 3, no.13, p. 13–25.

<sup>16</sup> M. Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey. Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost*, New Jersey 2011, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. I. Even-Zohar, *Miejsce literatury tłumaczonej w polisystemie literackim* (The place of translated literature in the literary polysystem) [in:] P. Bukowski, M. Heydel (eds.), *Antologia teorii przekładu literackiego* (An anthology of literary translation theory), Kraków 2009, p. 199.

the Prince is bent on revenge and his goal is not just to reveal the truth about the death of his father, but also to regain the power that is his by right. Hamlet's story presented in a pompous lyrical style harmonised very well with the traditional Arabic code of honour and the political situation of the time.

Along with the historical changes in the Middle East, the figure of Hamlet also evolved, as it found its permanent place in the Arabic theatre. From the mid 1950s the slightly-romantic image of the heroic Prince was starting to give way to a passionate revolutionary, who dies fighting for a just cause. The adaptations and paraphrases, such as Alfred Faraj's *Sulayman al-Halabi* (Sulayman of Aleppo, 1964) and Rafat al-Duwayri's *Shaksbir Malikan* (Shakespeare Rex, 1975) involve Hamlet, and, as in the latter case, even the Elizabethan writer himself in a political discussion about the independence of the Arab world posed difficult questions about occupied Palestine.

A significant shift in the image of the assimilated Hamlet occurred towards the end of the 1970s. From that time the committed freedom fighter became an incorrigible and essentially-unsuccessful intellectual. In Mamduh Adwan's play entitled *Hamlit yastaykiz mutaakhhkhiran* (*Hamlet wakes up late*, 1976), which is an attempt at an analysis of the defeat in the war of 1967, the eponymous protagonist is the symbol of the apathy and impotence of Arab leaders. Najib Surur's play *Afkar jununiyya fi daftar Hamlit* (*Crazy Ideas From Hamlet's Notebook*, 1977) is similar in tone, being an overt criticism of the corrupted and inept ruling class in Egypt. A clearly-visible crisis among the Arab intelligentsia and its complete impotence are exposed by successive adaptations – Nadir Umran's *Firqa masrahiyya wajadat masrahan fa masrahat Hamlit* (*A Theatre Company Found a Theatre and Staged Hamlet*, 1984) or Jawad al-Asadi's *Shubbak Ufilya aw Hamlit ala at-tarika al-asriyya* (*Ophelia's Window or the Contemporary Hamlet*, 1994).

In the last decade the author who has been particularly active in using Shakespeare's adaptations is the Kuwaiti-British playwright and theatre director Sulayman al-Bassam. Since 2001 he has worked on his artistic project to reinterpret *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III*, and *Twelfth Night*. In an interview, asked by Peter Culshaw what made him latch on to Shakespeare as a vehicle for ideas, al-Bassam said: "Shakespeare's world with its mixture of autocracy and feud, conspiracies, adoration of rhetoric and its feudal structures, has specific resonance for the Arab world."<sup>18</sup>

Al-Bassam is fully aware that he is dealing with particularly delicate and sensitive material here. On the one hand his projects fit the material context, which is familiar accurate and largely known due to Shakespeare's popularity. On the other hand, they draw the critical eye of the purists who are not keen on adjustments to the master's works. Still, the playwright never renounces his right to read Shakespeare his own way and he shares this right with audiences and readers. Using Shakespearian language, or rather translating it, he is looking for the most precise equivalents – not only do they adapt the original to the new historical

<sup>18</sup> Sulayman al-Bassam as cited in P. Culshaw, *Shakespeare and Suicide Bombers*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/3613157/Shakespeare-and-suicide-bombers.html> (access: 24.09.2011).

and cultural context, but they also try to harmoniously combine two worlds that are only seemingly very different. He calls his actions “transadaptation”, which is about “translating the play into a contemporary dialect and, if necessary, even adapting its imagery”.<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult to provide an answer to the question of why al-Bassam chose these and not some other plays by Shakespeare, and why *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Romeo and Juliet* are the ones that hold the keys to the Arab world. The Syrian playwright Saad Allah Wannus claimed “the theatrical experience involves looking for or establishing an original theatre that would be effective in the current social and political climate”.<sup>20</sup> The Kuwaiti-British artiste has never explained in detail why he chose these particular texts, mentioning only that they correspond to the current situation in the Middle East and the socio-economic context in the Arab world.<sup>21</sup>

Based on four adaptations by al-Bassam it is no easy task to formulate a single coherent paradigm used by the artiste in his creative work. The Egyptian playwright Alfred Faraj wrote, “In the theatre I have learnt to always start from doubt, questions, and a desire to experience”.<sup>22</sup> It seems that al-Bassam has a similar way of working. Each new production is a form of experience to him, which he approaches with a certain concept, while keeping an open mind and a readiness to innovate.

An Egyptian theatre critic, Nahad Salayha asks, “What happens to a play when it is presented in a foreign-cultural context?”<sup>23</sup> Al-Bassam is looking for a shared space between Shakespeare’s texts and his own culture. He gives an emphasis to them, accentuates them and builds his message around them. In the process, he also transcends the boundaries laid down by the traditional cognitive models that organise reality according to normative rules. The UAE playwright Umar Ghubashi wrote:

The art of theatre is not built around rigid rules, which would demarcate the scope of creative activity, and which acquires its true name by always continuing to seek that which is new. This distinctive feature of the theatre can be used to its benefit rather than its detriment, because the theatre never stops rebelling against the dominant trend of the time and goes beyond what has become commonplace in its pursuit of a new space of expression.<sup>24</sup>

One of the basic tools of artistic expression employed by the Kuwaiti-British playwright is the language in which he formulates his message. Al-Bassam provides a whole range of styles and registers, from poetic and lofty to colloquial

<sup>19</sup> Sulayman al-Bassam, <http://www.wnyc.org/articles/wnyc-news/2009/jun/11/Richard-iii-an-arab-tragedy> (access: 20.09.2011).

<sup>20</sup> Saad Allah Wannus as cited in Sa’id an-Naji, *At-Tajrib fi al-masrah*, Sharjah 2009, p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. S. Gadomski, *Szekspir w adaptacjach Sulajmana al-Bassama* (Shakespeare in Sulayman al-Bassam’s adaptations), Kraków 2012, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Alfrid Faraj, *Askar wi-haramiyya*, Cairo 1971, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Nahad Salayha as cited in Mohamed Enani, *On Translating Shakespeare into Arabic*, <http://weekly.ahram.org/2006/790/cu4.htm> (access: 21.09.2011).

<sup>24</sup> Umar Ghubashi, *Al-Masrah al-arabi wa-al-huwiyya al-muasira. Al-awlama...tahaddiyan...*, “Kawalis” 2006, 16.03.2006, p. 34.



and even vulgar. The playwright is very deft with words and smoothly goes from Shakespeare's language to his own ways of expression. Al-Bassam undertakes a complete restructuring of the linguistic layer of the source. It is difficult to find direct quotations from the original works in his adaptations. Still, he sprinkles his texts with "traces" of Shakespeare. Along with clearly-similar plot elements, they form a sort of a bridge between the two versions. This is extremely important when it comes to its reception. The clash between both texts, and the original and the paraphrased, open up a number of interpretation and reading levels for audiences and readers. Using Noam Chomsky's distinction, we could say that the tension between the deep and the surface structures of the message is accompanied by a fusion of semantic contexts. The loftiness and lyrical qualities which we find in the adaptation's monologues clearly refer to Shakespeare, but this is even more visible in the brilliant depth of thought, piercing allusion, and philosophical reflection hidden in an otherwise fleeting statement. In contrast, the clearly-contemporary political rhetoric, the structure of the discourse or the colloquial vulgarity filled with erotic metaphor give an impression of our everyday world. Al-Bassam also adds a layer of Arabic linguistic culture on top of this. This is manifested not only in the ornateness of style, but also in a great number of cultural signs conveyed within the linguistic code. The protagonists quote the Quran, fragments of Arabic literature, popular songs and their lyrics, and finally they refer to religious rhetoric and linguistic customs related to traditional religiousness, which is a common trait of the Middle-Eastern culture.<sup>25</sup>

The studies and monographs published over the years leave no doubt as to the great significance of Shakespeare's works for Arabic drama and theatre. The Lebanese writer Michail Nuayma went so far as to say, "Shakespeare remains a Ka'ba to which we make pilgrimages, and a Qibla to which we turn in prayer."<sup>26</sup> Although the words of one of the leaders of the Syrian-American school should be read as a far-reaching hyperbole, they clearly reflect the nature of Shakespeare's reception in Arabic cultural circles. The history of theatre in the Middle East shows that one of the most popular ways of reading the English playwright's works was to paraphrase. This should come as no surprise, however, because, as Shakespeare specialists Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier wrote: "adaptation lies at the heart of Shakespeare's works and of his continued presence."<sup>27</sup> Jan Kott once said that the author of *Hamlet* "is like the world, or life. Each epoch" and, we might add, each culture, "can find what it wants in his works."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. S. Gadomski, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> Michail Nuayma as cited in Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey...*, p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Fischlin, Mark Fortier as cited in A. Mancewicz, *Adaptacja jako synergia* (Adaptation as synergy) [in:] M. Borowski, M. Sugiera, A. Wierchowaska-Woźniak (red.), *Córki Leara i inne parafrazy* (Lear's Daughters and other paraphrases), Kraków 2011, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> J. Kott, *Szekspir współczesny* (Contemporary Shakespeare), Kraków 1990, p. 20.

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