



## Introduction

*Katherine Hennessey and Margaret Litvin*

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What – besides the boring fact that no one has ever published one – justifies a volume surveying the Arab afterlives of William Shakespeare's work? Besides putting the Arab world once and for all 'on the map' of global Shakespeare studies, we hope that the essays in this book provoke you to think in new ways about Shakespeare's plays and sonnets, about Arabic literature and Arab culture, and about the way a literary adapter negotiates the demands of his or her source material, cultural milieu and audience.

In its broad strokes, the history of Shakespeare translation and adaptation in the Arab world resembles that of most non-anglophone Shakespeare traditions, including many in Latin America and Eastern Europe. Shakespeare's plays have been known to Arab audiences since the late nineteenth century. They entered through French, not as literary works but as script fodder for the Egyptian stage, where francophone Syro-Lebanese immigrants adapted Shakespeare's tragedies to suit the tastes and theatregoing habits of a rapidly emerging urban middle class. Next followed a modernist

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phase of ever-more-literary translations that served a nationalist modernizing project and fetishized fidelity to the 'original' English texts. In the postcolonial period, these highbrow translations and stiff National Theatre performances gradually made room for a simultaneous flowering of more varied, localized, transnationally attuned, ironic and politically sharpened uses of Shakespeare.

So far, so typical. It is only in the twenty-first century that the Arab Shakespeare tradition has faced pressures different from those shaping other peripheral or postcolonial theatre contexts: mainly, the sharp expansion of worldwide interest in Arab cultural production spurred by such events as the September 11 attacks, the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, and the 'Arab Spring' uprisings of 2011. This has added a globalized dimension, creating a new world market for Arabic literature and theatre including Arab adaptations of Shakespeare.

The scholarly community, too, has shown a growing interest in Arab Shakespeares. Before 2001, scholars of Arabic literature and drama were mainly passive participants in the fast-growing conversation around 'foreign', international or 'global' Shakespeare. Though aware of the edited volumes and major congresses on international Shakespeare adaptation, scholars of Arabic were seldom represented there. Studies written in Arabic on Shakespeare reception were not translated. In English, a handful of articles and dissertations represented the field. When scholars occasionally brought 'Arab Shakespeare' to their colleagues' attention, they presented it almost as a novelty. Often they did not hesitate to draw easy laughs by invoking the old legend or joke that Shakespeare was really a crypto-Arab, 'Shaykh Zubayr'.<sup>1</sup>

However, this situation has changed rapidly since the mid-2000s, as academic and theatre-world interest have fed each other. In 2006 and 2007 the World Shakespeare Congress and the Royal Shakespeare Company, respectively, welcomed their first contributions by Arab playwrights. In anglophone academia today, the curators of any Shakespeare festival, edited volume or university course with 'global' aspirations work hard to secure a contribution from an Arab perspective. They can now draw on several monographs<sup>2</sup> as well as articles by the contributors of this volume and a few other scholars.<sup>3</sup> Even a few translations of plays have seen the light.<sup>4</sup>

In 2007, Sulayman Al-Bassam's adaptation of *Richard III* became the first Arabic play to be commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare

Company. By 2012, thanks largely to the RSC's then-associate director Deborah Shaw, several Arab productions were commissioned as part of the World Shakespeare Festival timed for that summer's Olympic Games in London. Arab institutions have also re-entered the arena. At the worldwide festivities marking the quadricentennial of Shakespeare's death in 2016, for instance, one of the most ambitious events was organized by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, Egypt.<sup>5</sup>

In these years the region itself has been an inexhaustible source of drama and, alas, tragedy. The Arab uprisings of 2011, consumed as spectacle, brought the cable network CNN the highest viewer ratings in its history.<sup>6</sup> As the Grand Mechanism swung around once more, recent struggles in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen (and their repercussions in Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria) have presented dramatic instances of eloquence, pathos, heroism and carnage. Syria's civil war and the resulting wave of Arabic-speaking refugees into surrounding countries and Europe has lent a sudden, urgent power to once dusty or over-the-top violent classic texts, from Homer and Greek tragedy to Shakespeare.

Arab theatre artists seeking to metabolize recent Arab-world events in or for the West have turned persistently to Shakespeare – both from personal interest and in quest of a vocabulary their audiences (and sponsors) can understand. As state support for theatre has crumbled in many Arab countries, Shakespeare provides what Al-Bassam has called a 'playable surface', a slippery but usable platform on which an internationally mobile Arab artist can continue to produce work.<sup>7</sup> In response, artists have adapted both their texts and themselves. (Many Arab critics and scholars, fleeing abroad for safety or better working conditions, have done the same.) Topical new Shakespeare adaptations have probed the US occupation of Iraq (Al-Bassam's *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*, 2007); the wellsprings of political repression and revolt (his *The Speaker's Progress*, 2011–12); Sunni–Shi'a sectarian strife in Iraq and the rise of extremist Sunni movements (Monadhil Daoud's *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, 2012); and the threat of recurring tyranny in post-uprising Tunisia (Anissa Daoud and Lofti Achour's *Macbeth – Leila and Ben: A Bloody History*, 2012).<sup>8</sup> Still more recently, Nawar Bulbul's two projects in Jordan's Zaatar refugee camp have cast Syrian children in versions of *King Lear/Hamlet* (2014) and *Romeo and Juliet* (2015), appealing to international journalists desperate for signs of hope.<sup>9</sup> Coming full circle,

Arabic Shakespeare has even inspired work by non-Arab anglophone artists such as Irish director Padraig Downey, Cornell University drama professor Rebekah Maggor, and the California-based Arabian Shakespeare Festival.<sup>10</sup>

But what about 'local' Arab writers and directors, those who neither travel nor find international donors and audiences? Some Shakespeare adaptations, such as the Upper Egypt-themed *Lear* TV series analysed in this book, do target a relatively homogenous audience within one country. Yet as the contributions in this volume make clear, one cannot draw a clear line between 'global' and 'local' Arab Shakespeares. From the very early twentieth century, translations into Arabic have been commissioned with one eye on Europe. Directors have reworked ideas picked up at international festivals or from Arab and international travelling companies. Moreover, some productions have *regional* rather than local or global significance. (An example is the *Othello-Antar* hybrid analysed in this volume, an Omani play produced for Gulf Arab consumption.) Whether pursuing audiences 'at home' or abroad, whether seeking to civilize the audience or float to fame on its expectations, any Arab artist who works with Shakespeare does so with a purpose. That has always been true but is perhaps most evident today. In the twenty-first-century artistic climate of state withdrawal from the arts, festivalization, unpredictable funding, distracted audiences, self- and official censorship and rising social stigma around the artistic professions in some Arab countries (not to mention the major security concerns that have made it hard to keep theatres open at all), any decision to work with a canonical world source such as Shakespeare is taken strategically, for a reason; such work rewards analysis.

Perhaps more so in our out-of-joint times than ever before, 'Arab' and 'western' cultures have been constructed as mutually defining opposites, making a whole range of 'cross-cultural encounters' inevitable. Even while questioning the underlying binarism and pointing out its fairly recent emergence, this volume aims to pluck some 'trans-cultural' fruit from it. This book thus offers a variety of perspectives on the history and role of Arab Shakespeare translation, production, adaptation and criticism. With work going back to the earliest days of the Arab Shakespeare tradition, we have avoided an exclusive and ahistorical focus on the contemporary. We have also striven for balance between internationally and locally focused Arab/ic Shakespeare appropriations, and between Shakespeare's

plays and sonnets. In addition to Egyptian and Palestinian theatre and public culture, our contributors examine everything from an Omani performance in Qatar and an Upper Egyptian television series to the origin of the sonnets and an English-language novel about the Lebanese civil war. They address works produced in several languages: literary Arabic (*fushā*), Egyptian colloquial Arabic (*'ammiyya*), Moroccan colloquial Arabic (*darīja*), Swedish, French and English. They include veteran scholars, directors and translators as well as emerging scholars from diverse disciplinary and geographic locations, a testament to the vibrancy of this field.

We have divided the articles into two sections. The first section, 'Critical Approaches and Translation Strategies', lays out key theoretical concepts and influential critical approaches to the study of Arab Shakespeares and explores the challenges Shakespeare's work poses to the region's translators. The section opens with a chapter by **Margaret Litvin**, who proposes a conceptual model for Shakespeare appropriation: a 'global kaleidoscope' of sources, influences and possibilities, including not just the 'original' text and context, but also a wide variety of translations, allusions, literary traditions, and theatrical and cinematic representations, some of which may be hidden intertexts not visible on the surface of an Arab (or other) Shakespeare offshoot at all.<sup>11</sup>

**Sameh F. Hanna** examines the 1912 *Othello* translation by Lebanese-born poet Khalil Mutran (1872–1949). Fusing Shakespeare with Arab high culture (and removing objectionable references to religion and politics), Mutran's translation supported a pan-Arab political agenda. Hanna carefully examines Mutran's interpolations and revisions and analyses the enduring legacy of his translations, some of which (including *Othello*) remain in print today.

Two contrasting essays by celebrated scholar-translators **Mohamed Enani** and **Kamal Abu-Deeb** address an understudied topic: the Arabic routes (and, possibly, roots) of Shakespeare's sonnets. **Enani**, a celebrated Egyptian scholar and critic and prolific translator, analyses the daunting puzzles that Shakespeare's verse poses for dedicated Arabic language translators, generously offering a glimpse into his own intellectual process and an explication of the (often ingenious) solutions he came up with for his recently published complete translation (2016).

**Abu-Deeb**, whose own complete *Sonnets* were published in 2011, investigates the historical evolution of the sonnet form. In the

introduction to his translation, which he rewrote in English for the special issue that became this volume, Abu-Deeb lays out an argument not only that the sonnet has its roots in the Arab poetic form called the *muwashshah*, but also that the polyglot Sicilian court of Frederick II (1194–1250) was the forum in which poet Giacomo da Lentini, father of the Italian sonnet, might have heard, adopted and adapted Arabic poetry of this type.

The section concludes with a chapter by our late friend and colleague **Hazem Azmy (1968–2018)**, who brought his perspective as a scholar, teacher, dramaturge and theatre critic to bear on a suggestive reading of the Egyptian nationalist project. His analysis is framed between Shakespeare's two quadricentennials: the birth anniversary of 1964 (which also saw the founding of the iconic monthly journal *al-Masrah*) and the death anniversary commemorated in 2016. Through a Shakespearean lens, Azmy traces the rollercoaster of the Egyptian political and literary scene over those decades from postcolonial hope and euphoria to the more anxious and ambivalent present.

The book's second section, 'Adaptations and Performances', focuses on specific instances of Shakespearean adaptation and appropriation from across the Arabic-speaking world – from Morocco to Palestine, and from Egypt to Oman, in genres ranging from the novel to theatre to film and television, arranged in (loosely) chronological order. It opens with an exploration of Egyptian actress Faṭīma Rushdī's groundbreaking production and performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* in Egypt in 1930. As **David C. Moberly** argues, Rushdī's controversial decision to use a translation into Egyptian colloquial Arabic rather than erudite *fushḥā* allowed non-elite audiences access to Shakespeare's play; the production helped propel Rushdī to stardom, and the colloquial script loomed like a giantess over subsequent translations.

**Rafik Darragi** analyses three adaptations – *Richard III*, *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* – produced between 1984 and 2007 by prominent Tunisian directors Mohamed Kouka, Tawfiq Al Jibali and Mohamed Driss. Drawing on interviews with the directors as well as his long-time personal involvement in the Tunisian dramatic and literary scene, Darragi traces the varying subtexts that Tunisian directors and audiences have found in Shakespeare's plays.

**Samer al-Saber** contrasts two productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Ramallah (1995 and 2011) to test the hypothesis that 'the

Shakespeare–Palestine relationship has outgrown some colonial binaries'. Interviews with key Palestinian theatre practitioners and with the German partners of Palestine's first BA programme in theatre, and al-Saber's own experience of directing the 2011 production, illustrate the complexities of Shakespeare's postcolonial legacy, and the joys and challenges Shakespeare's texts offer to established and aspiring theatre-makers in Palestine.

While most of our contributors focus on performance, Shakespeare is present in Arab fiction as well. **Yousef Awad** provides an example from anglophone Arab literature, showing how Lebanon's civil war and Shakespearean tragedy both haunt two twenty-first-century novels by Lebanese-American writer Rabih Alameddine. Ventriloquizing Shakespeare's *Lear* and *Macbeth*, Awad suggests, allows Alameddine's characters to speak truths about the horrors of the civil war that are repressed in public discourse elsewhere, using a literary vocabulary that resonates with his anglophone readership.

Picking up on some of the threads from Awad's article, **Robert Lyons** analyses the impact of the US-led invasion of Iraq on a joint Swedish-Egyptian production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Eva Bergman in 2003. Lyons argues that the performance – an early and carefully conceived instance of Arab-European Shakespeare collaboration – became for cast and crew a means of cultural resistance to the war, and of demonstrating their solidarity with its victims.

**Bryan Loughrey** and **Graham Holderness** confront a contemporary comedy-turned-tragedy in the Gulf: a 2005 production of *Twelfth Night* in Doha, Qatar, cut short by a suicide bomb that killed its amateur director, Jonathan Adams. Juxtaposing jihadist screeds and the recollections of surviving members of the Doha Players with analysis of Shakespeare's text, Holderness and Loughrey offer not so much a formal study of 'Shakespeare and Terrorism' as a deeply empathetic meditation on both the irresponsibility of innocence and the self-defeat of excessive literalism.

**Katherine Hennessey** turns to a location less commonly represented in studies of Arab Shakespeare. Taking a recent play from Oman – *The Dark Night*, a dramatic mash-up of *Othello* and pre-Islamic epic – she explores the author's goals and strategies in fusing these surprisingly similar source texts. She argues that the 2010 performance at the Gulf Youth Theatre Festival in Qatar, and its afterlife online as a Digital Theatre project, have functioned as a

coded condemnation of racism, sectarianism and autocracy within the Gulf – one that reproduces some aspects of the sultanate's official ideology while subverting others.

Moving from stage to (small) screen, **Noha Ibraheem** examines a 2014 Ramadan television series that resituates *King Lear* in early twentieth-century Upper Egypt. Her analysis highlights the adapters' clever use of local signifiers and Shakespearean analogues to intervene in contemporary debates about Egyptian social norms. A striking irony emerges from this analysis and its focus on filial (im)piety: celebrated actor Yaḥyā al-Fakharānī suggested the *Lear* adaptation, believing that the theme of ungrateful children would resonate with Egyptian audiences, and then played the title role under the direction of his son Shādī, who reportedly made his father walk barefoot on scorching sand while filming the storm scene.

Finally, **Khalid Amine's** interview with Moroccan playwright Nabyl Lahlou illuminates a long-running Shakespeare adaptation, *Ophelia Is Not Dead*, developed from the vantage points of post-1968 France and post/colonial Morocco.

One clarification on our scope. This collection includes both 'Arab' and 'Arabic' Shakespeare, exploring work both by people of Arab ethnic background (wherever they live and whatever languages they write) and Shakespeare adaptations in the Arabic language, whatever the ethnicity of the adapters. In exploring these overlapping categories, we certainly do not wish to suggest the existence of such a thing as 'The Arab Shakespeare' or even a single unified Arab Shakespeare tradition. As the chapters in this volume abundantly demonstrate, the variety of Arab Shakespeares over the past 150 years has been rich and strange, in dialogue with a variety of intertexts from French, Russian, Italian and other literatures and media cultures. Some of the works analysed here have more in common with non-Arab/ic analogues than with each other. We hope that studying their complex historical roots and cultural backgrounds will lead you to insights not only about Arab/ic literary and theatre cultures but also about the unlikely yet apparently unending project of Shakespeare adaptation as such.



## Notes

1. See, e.g., M.M. Badawi, 'Shakespeare and the Arabs', *Cairo Studies in English* (1963/1966): 181–96, originally presented to the British Shakespeare Society on the occasion of the quadricentennial of Shakespeare's birth. Badawi begins his talk with this 'theory'. Usually invoked in jest, it holds that Shakespeare was actually an Arab Muslim living in Britain. Among the 'evidence' are Shakespeare's full lips and 'Islamic' beard; his many treatments of mistaken or doubtful identity; and his allegedly unflattering views of Jews, Turks and Englishmen (supposedly clear in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello* and the history plays). This joke's persistence, mainly in the West, suggests that it taps into some real intercultural anxiety. For a unique variation, see Wole Soyinka, 'Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist', in *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 207–11.
2. Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Sameh Hanna, *Bourdieu in Translation Studies: The Socio-cultural Dynamics of Shakespeare Translation in Egypt* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Katherine Hennessey, *Shakespeare on the Arabian Peninsula* (New York: Palgrave, 2018).
3. See, e.g., Margaret Litvin, Avraham Oz and Parviz Partovi, 'Middle Eastern Shakespeare', in *The Shakespearean World*, ed. Jill L. Levenson and Robert Ormsby, 1st ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017), 97–115; and the following by Katherine Hennessey: 'Shakespeare and the Arab World', in *A Companion to Global Shakespeares*, ed. Alexa Alice Joubin (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming); 'William Shakespeare: Worlds Here, There and Elsewhere', in *A Companion to World Literature*, ed. Christine Chism and Ken Seigneurie (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming); and 'Shylock in the Hadramawt? Adaptations of Shakespeare on the Yemeni Stage', *ArabLit* 3, no. 5 (2013), pp. 5–24. See also the entries on Arab topics by Margaret Litvin and Rafik Darragi, Noha Ibraheem, Yvette Khoury, and Katherine Hennessey in the forthcoming *Stanford Global Shakespeare Encyclopedia*, ed. Patricia Parker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, online). Useful older articles include Ferial Ghazoul, 'The Arabization of Othello', *Comparative Literature* 50, no. 1 (1998): 1–31; and Mahmoud F. Al-Shetawi, 'Hamlet in Arabic', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (1999): 43–63.
4. See, e.g., the MIT Global Shakespeares Video and Performance Archive (<https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/>, accessed 19 February 2019), the anthology *Four Arab Hamlet Plays*, edited by Marvin Carlson and Margaret Litvin with Joy Arab (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Centre Publications, 2016), and Sulayman Al-Bassam, *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* (London: Methuen, 2014).
5. See <http://www.bibalex.org/BAShakespeare400/en/Home/Index.aspx> (accessed 19 February 2019).
6. David Bauder, 'CNN Hopes Egypt Ratings Mark Start of Turnaround', *Associated Press*, 11 February 2011.
7. Margaret Litvin, 'For the Record: Interview with Sulayman Al-Bassam', in *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, ed. Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 221–40.

8. See Al-Bassam, *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*; and Margaret Litvin, Saffron Walking and Raphael Cormack, 'Full of Noises: When "World Shakespeare" Met the "Arab Spring"', *Shakespeare* 12, no. 3 (2016): 300–315.
9. For media coverage, see, e.g., Ben Hubbard, 'Behind Barbed Wire, Shakespeare Inspires a Cast of Young Syrians', *The New York Times*, 31 March 2014.
10. Maggor adapted and directed Litvin's translation of *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* by Syrian playwright Mamduh Adwan at Cornell University in November 2017. Downey directed Al-Bassam's *Al Hamlet Summit* at DUCTAC Theatre, Dubai, in November 2017. On the Arabian Shakespeare Festival, see <https://www.facebook.com/ArabianShakespeareFestival/> and <https://www.theatrius.com/2017/11/08/hamlet-fights-for-justice-at-arabian-shakespeare-festival-s-f/> (accessed 17 January 2019).
11. For an application of this model outside the Arab context, see Margaret Litvin, 'Multilateral Reception: Three Lessons from the Arab Hamlet Tradition', *Middle Eastern Literatures* 20, no. 1 (2017): 51–63.