

Introduction

Katherine Hennessey and Margaret Litvin

When the first *Critical Survey* special issue on Arab Shakespeares (19, no. 3, Winter 2007) came out nearly a decade ago, the topic was a curiosity. There existed no up-to-date monograph in English on Arab theatre, let alone on Arab Shakespeare. Few Arabic plays had been translated into English. Few British or American theatregoers had seen a play in Arabic. In the then tiny but fast-growing field of international Shakespeare appropriation studies (now ‘Global Shakespeare’), there was a great post-9/11 hunger to know more about the Arab world¹ but also a lingering prejudice that Arab interpretations of Shakespeare would necessarily be derivative or crude, purely local in value.

A great deal – perhaps even the prejudice? – has changed. In anglophone academia, 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,² as well as the articles in that first *CS* special issue and many more in other publications, including several top journals on Shakespeare, theatre and literature. 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 this year, for instance, one of the most ambitious events was organized by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, Egypt.³

In these years the region itself has been an inexhaustible source of drama and, alas, tragedy. The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, consumed as spectacle, brought the cable network CNN the highest

viewer ratings in its history.⁴ 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 Arab refugees into surrounding countries and Europe have lent a sudden, urgent power to once dusty or over-the-top violent classic texts, from Homer and Greek tragedy to Shakespeare.⁵

Arab theatre artists seeking to metabolize recent Arab-world events in or for the West have turned persistently to Shakespeare in particular – 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.⁶ 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).⁷ Still more recently, Nawar Bulbul's two projects in Jordan's Zaatari refugee camp have cast Syrian children in versions of *King Lear/Hamlet* (2014) and *Romeo and Juliet* (2015), transfixing international journalists and others desperate for signs of hope.⁸

But what about 'local' writers and directors, those who neither travel nor find international donors and audiences? Some Arab Shakespeare adaptations, such as the Upper Egypt-themed *Lear* TV series analysed in this issue, do target a relatively homogenous audience within one country. Yet as the contributions in this issue make clear, one cannot draw a clear line between 'global' and 'local' Arab Shakespeares. From the very early twentieth century, translations into Arabic, whether literary-modernist or popularizing-vernacular, 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 issue, 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.

This special issue offers a variety of perspectives on the history and role of Arab Shakespeare translation, production, adaptation and criticism. With two essays and an interview focused on the twentieth century, we have avoided an exclusive and ahistorical focus on the present. We have also striven to strike a balance between internationally and locally focused Arab/ic Shakespeare appropriations, and between Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets. In addition to Egyptian and Palestinian theatre, our contributors examine everything from an Omani performance in Qatar and an Upper Egyptian television series to the origin of the sonnets to an English-language novel about the Lebanese civil war. They address materials produced in several languages: literary Arabic (*fushā*), Egyptian colloquial Arabic (*‘ammiyya*), Moroccan colloquial Arabic (*darija*), 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 begin with 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 *fushā* allowed non-elite audiences access to Shakespeare’s play; the production helped propel Rushdī to stardom, and the colloquial script cast the shadow of a giantess over subsequent translations.

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.

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 M.M. 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.

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.

Turning back to Egypt, Hazem Azmy brings his perspective as a scholar, teacher, dramaturg and theatre critic to bear on a suggestive reading of the Egyptian nationalist project through a Shakespearean lens. His analysis is framed between Shakespeare's two quadri-centennials, the birth anniversary of 1964 (which also saw the

founding of the iconic monthly journal *al-Masrah*), and the death anniversary celebrated this past year. Amid today's much less euphoric political climate, he shows, *The Taming of the Shrew* resonates in unexpected ways in a contemporary Egyptian university classroom.

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 newly published complete translation (2016).

Abu-Deeb, whose own complete *Sonnets* were published in 2011, investigates the historical evolution of the sonnets. In the introduction to his translation, which he has rewritten in English for this special issue, 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.

To fill out the picture, a section in the online edition of this issue gathers some shorter items related to Arab Shakespeare worldwide: performance reports, book reviews and an interview. **Robert Lyons** analyses a joint Swedish-Egyptian production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Eva Bergman in 2003 – an early and carefully conceived instance of Arab-European Shakespeare collaboration. **Rafik Darragi** explores three Egyptian films based on *Romeo and Juliet*. Book reviewers assess a new anthology of translated Arab *Hamlet* plays (reviewed by **Karma Sami**); a new monograph on the sociocultural conditions of Egyptian Shakespeare translation (reviewed by **Nahrain al-Mousawi**); an argument that Britain's history since Queen Elizabeth is inseparable from the Muslim world (reviewed by **Joseph Khoury**); and a recent volume of essays on Shakespeare and tyranny (reviewed by **Safi Mahfouz**). Finally, an interview with Moroccan playwright Nabyl Lahlou (by **Khalid Amine**, in both the print and online editions) illuminates a long-running Shakespeare adaptation developed from the vantage point of post-1968 France and post/colonial Morocco.

A note on transliteration: where original Arabic textual sources are central, we have used a modified Library of Congress system with full diacritics. Where texts are in English or proper names are well known, we have opted for the most recognizable spelling. We have aimed to transliterate words from colloquial Arabic (e.g. Moroccan or Egyptian dialect) as they are pronounced.

Naturally, there are many angles and manifestations of Arab/ic Shakespeare this collection leaves unaddressed, many avenues for future work; we have aimed for comprehension, not comprehensiveness. But in sum, it is a rich harvest. We thank Graham Holderness for inviting us to edit this special issue. We are grateful to our contributors for their diligence and to our peer reviewers for their insight. We believe that, taken together, the diverse fruits of their efforts constitute not only a set of new data points about how Arabs do Shakespeare but also a significant analytical contribution to the study of Shakespeare in translation and performance.

Notes

1. For instance, the University of Brisbane, Australia, commissioned a translation and rehearsed reading of Jawad Al-Assadi's *Forget Hamlet* for the 2006 World Shakespeare Congress. See Jawad Al-Assadi, *Forget Hamlet*, translated from the Arabic and introduced by Margaret Litvin. (Brisbane: Faculty of Arts, University of Queensland, 2006). For research on a 2003 Arab-Swedish Shakespeare collaboration, see Robert Lyons' report in the online version of this issue.

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, 2017).

3. See <http://www.bibalex.org/BAShakespeare400/en/Home/Index.aspx>.

4. David Bauder, 'CNN Hopes Egypt Ratings Mark Start of Turnaround', *Associated Press*, 11 February 2011.

5. In Arabic, the works of Syrian playwright Sa'dallah Wannus (1941–97) have also returned with new urgency.

6. 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.

7. For texts of the first two, see Sulayman Al-Bassam, *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* (London: Methuen, 2014). On the last two, see Margaret Litvin, Saffron Walkling and Raphael Cormack, 'Full of Noises: When "World Shakespeare" Met the "Arab Spring"', *Shakespeare* 12, no. 3 (2016): 300–315.

8. For some journalistic responses, see Ben Hubbard, 'Behind Barbed Wire, Shakespeare Inspires a Cast of Young Syrians', *The New York Times*, 31 March 2014; J.A., 'Shakespeare Syrian Style: A Special Performance', *The Economist*, 18 February 2014; The Syria Campaign, 'The Refugee Camp Filled with Child Stars', 8 August 2014 (all online); Sara Elizabeth Williams, 'Romeo, Wherefore Art Thou, Romeo... I'm in Amman, Skype Me', *The Times*, 18 April 2015, 38 (print). For Bulbul's most recent project, performed in April 2016, see <https://www.ulule.com/love-boat/> and <http://www.shubbak.co.uk/new-commissions-from-syrian-artists/>.

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