Editorial

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To my knowledge, this is the first essay collection in any language to be devoted to Arab appropriations of Shakespeare. Studies of international Shakespeare appropriation have mushroomed over the past fifteen to twenty years. Excitement began to build in the 1990s, as several lines of academic inquiry converged. Translation theorists found in Shakespeare's plays a convenient (because widely known and prestigious) test case. Scholars in performance studies, having noted how sharply local context could influence a play's staging and interpretation, saw a need to account for 'intercultural' performances of Shakespeare in various languages and locales. Marxist scholars became interested in the fetishisation of Shakespeare as a British cultural icon which, in turn, was used to confer cultural legitimacy on the project of capitalist empire-building. Scholars of postcolonial drama and literature explored how the periphery responded. The 'new Europe' provided another compelling set of examples. All this scholarship has developed quickly and with a great sense of urgency. Shakespeareans in many countries have contributed. By now there is a rich bibliography on Shakespeare appropriation in India, China, Japan, South Africa, Israel and many countries in Latin America and Eastern and Western Europe.

Until recently, scholars of Arabic literature and drama were mainly passive participants in this growing Shakespeare conversation. The Arab world went unnoticed in the numerous edited volumes on international Shakespeare reception and appropriation. Though often aware of the major congresses on the subject, Arab scholars were rarely represented there. The World Shakespeare Bibliography Online, which catalogues materials in 118 languages, has had only one active Arabic-speaking contributor in the past decade. Interesting studies of Shakespeare reception written in Arabic have not been translated. In English, a handful of articles and dissertations has

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represented the field. When scholars in Europe and the United States have occasionally mentioned 'Arab Shakespeare' to their colleagues, they have presented it almost as a novelty. Sometimes they have not hesitated to draw easy laughs by invoking the old legend or joke that Shakespeare was really a crypto-Arab, 'Shaykh Zubayr'.[1]

However, this situation is changing quickly. In 2006 and 2007 the World Shakespeare Congress and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), respectively, welcomed contributions by Arab playwrights. Shakespeareans and scholars of Arab drama and literature are getting better at talking to each other. (I should note that Graham Holderness has personally done much to help this trend with his involvement and encouragement over the past two years.) And as the articles in this issue will attest, Shakespeareans and Arabists alike are taking a variety of approaches to the question of what Arab readers, translators, rewriters, producers, directors, critics and audiences do with Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's plays have been known to Arab audiences since the late nineteenth century. The first encounter was not through literature but through the Egyptian stage, where French versions of Shakespeare's tragedies were adapted to suit playgoers' habits and tastes. Mark Bayer traces an early version of *Romeo and Juliet* called *Shuhada' al-Gharam* [The Martyrs of Love], adapted by Najib al-Haddad around 1890 and performed for over twenty years. Rather than evaluate this show on its (in)fidelity to Shakespeare, Bayer argues, it is more fruitful to ask how its adapter, producers and stars made it such a hit. Mixing high and pop culture, *The Martyrs of Love* met Cairo audiences halfway by incorporating familiar singing styles, literary tropes and 'more of a love story' than Shakespeare had provided. By responding to market needs, the play helped to popularise Shakespeare and to develop a *habitus* of theatregoing among 'the growing class of Egyptians with the time and the disposable income to attend'.

Continuing in the Bourdieusian vein, Sameh F. Hanna examines Shakespeare's *de*commercialisation at the hands of Khalil Mutran (1872–1949), a Lebanese-born translator whose 1912 *Othello* set a new standard for Arabic versions of Shakespeare. Unlike earlier adapters, Hanna argues, Mutran enjoyed a high social standing and did not depend on translation for a living. Instead, he invested in the cultural capital of classical Arabic, turning Shakespeare into Arab high culture to serve a pan-Arab political agenda. As a result, Hanna shows, Mutran's *Othello* not only omits all references to ethnicities

and religions (Turks, Christians etc.) but also turns Othello into an eloquent speaker, smoothing over his moments of incoherence and psychological collapse.

Khalid Amine analyses a more overtly playful instance of Shakespeare appropriation: *Ophelie N'est Pas Morte*, an absurdist play written in 1968 in Paris by the Moroccan playwright/director Nabil Lahlou. Amine examines how Lahlou places two 'voluntarily paralysed' characters named Hamlet and Macbeth into a Beckettian frame, using a pattern of 'microdramas' to comment on the 'aggression, fear and longing' characteristic of the postcolonial condition. In so doing, Amine argues, Lahlou revises Beckett as well as Shakespeare from a postcolonial perspective.

Margaret Litvin briefly surveys the post-1952 Arab *Hamlet* tradition and proposes a new model of Shakespeare appropriation that helps to explain its trajectory. Rather than imagine a direct bilateral exchange between Shakespeare and his rewriter, this model emphasises the 'global kaleidoscope' of *indirect* sources and models that help constitute a would-be appropriator's experience of a Shakespearean text. Litvin's example, the reception and appropriation of a 1960s Soviet *Hamlet* film in Egypt, points to the (now overlooked) significance of Soviet and Eastern European models in Cold War-era Arab cultural production.

One of the ambitions of this volume is to showcase a range of Arab Shakespeare appropriations from the earliest examples to the present day. On the contemporary side, Rafik Darragi analyses three adaptations, *Richard III*, *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, produced between 1984 and 2007 by the prominent Tunisian directors Mohamed Kouka, Tawfiq Al Jibali and Mohamed Driss. Drawing on interviews with the directors as well as his longtime personal involvement in the Tunisian dramatic and literary scene, Darragi traces the different subtexts that directors and audiences have found in Shakespeare's plays. For instance, an antifundamentalist satire presented through *Richard III* was lost on audiences in 1984 but had gained resonance by 1992. Meanwhile, two very different recent *Othello* offshoots (a two-character modern dance piece and a 'faithful' dramatic production) both used intercut video footage to stress the interconnection of racism, power and war.

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. The 'Doha atrocity' pushes them to reread *Twelfth Night* from the perspective of Malvolio, who 'places himself outside the newly integrated community of the play, and casts a shadow over its delicately achieved balance of concord and reconciliation: which, we recognise, has been attained only at the cost of ejecting an inassimilable fragment'. After hearing him out, they argue, it becomes 'harder to view a performance of *Twelfth Night*, in Qatar, on the second anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, as harmlessly innocent'. And yet, they note, Omar Ahmed Abdullah Ali's bomb pre-empted not only Feste's speech, but Malvolio's as well.

Finally, Graham Holderness looks at the first Arabic-language play commissioned by the RSC: Sulayman Al-Bassam's *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* (2007). Al-Bassam's play, set in a contemporary Gulf Arab context, dramatises the 'nightmare' of a succession crisis complicated by military/civilian struggles, oil wealth, religious demagoguery and a meddling foreign (U.S.) power poised to invade. Holderness reads *An Arab Tragedy* against the background of Al-Bassam's earlier adaptations of *Hamlet*. In contrast to *An Arab Tragedy*'s British critical reception, which evaluated the play on its exoticism and its cleverness in finding correlatives for Shakespeare's text, Holderness argues 'that the true achievement of *Arab Tragedy* lies less in its astute political parallels and historical comparisons, and more in the crosscultural encounters it sets up between Western and Arab societies'. Al-Bassam's drama, Holderness finds, 'has the capacity to take the spectator deeper not only into Arab culture, but into territories of myth and communal emotion where transcultural rapprochements can more effectively take place'.

In our out-of-joint times, 'Arab' and 'Western' cultures are being constructed for us, more than ever before, as mutually defining opposites. A whole range of crosscultural encounters is now inevitable. Even while questioning the underlying binarism, projects like this volume aim to pluck some transcultural fruit from it. One clarification would be made on the scope of this issue. This collection sets out to address 'Arab' rather than 'Arabic' Shakespeare; the former is loosely an ethnic category (people of Arab background, wherever they live and whatever they speak), the latter a linguistic one. Two of the

contributions – by Khalid Amine and Graham Holderness – discuss Arab Shakespeare appropriations in other languages: Lahlou's play is in French, and Al-Bassam's *Al-Hamlet Summit* began its career in English. But by referring instead to 'Arab' Shakespeare, this issue's contributors do not imply any attempt to represent the Arab world comprehensively (just for a start, we have not touched on Syrian or Lebanese Shakespeares, Arab-American Shakespeares, Shakespeare in Arab poetry or film …). Nor do we wish to posit any unified 'Arab' style of appropriating Shakespeare's work. Such a claim would ignore the geographical and historical specificities that are precisely the point of this enterprise.

Note

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 opens his talk with this 'theory'. Usually invoked in jest, it holds that Shakespeare was 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 the British (supposedly clear in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello* and the history plays). Badawi and Ferial Ghazoul trace the 'theory' to a mid-nineteenth-century Lebanese comic writer, Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyaq; it was later taken up in earnest by Iraqi scholar Safa' Khulusi and then painstakingly refuted by Ibrahim Hamada in an extended essay, 'The Arabness of Shakespeare'.The Shaykh Zubayr story has not drawn headlines since Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi invoked it (perhaps jokingly) in 1989. But it has continued to catch the imaginations of intercultural Arab writers in the United States and Britain, including Diana Abu Jaber and Sulayman Al-Bassam. This joke's persistence, mainly in the West, suggests that it taps into some real intercultural anxiety. See Ferial J. Ghazoul, 'The Arabization of *Othello*', *Comparative Literature* 50.1 (1998), 9; and Ibrahim Hamada, *Urubat shiksbir: dirasat ukhra fi al-drama wa-al-naqd* [The Arabness of Shakespeare: Other Studies in Drama and Criticism] (Cairo: Al-Markaz al-Qawmi lil-Adab, 1989). 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, 1988), pp. 147–62.