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## 'SILENCE BLEEDS': *HAMLET* ACROSS BORDERS

The Shakespearean adaptations of  
Sulayman Al-Bassam

*This article addresses the writing and performance work of Anglo-Kuwaiti director Sulayman Al-Bassam, tracing the development of his various adaptations of Shakespeare's Hamlet into English and Arabic 'cross-cultural' versions between 2001 and 2007. Al-Bassam's work presents English as a 'language in translation'. His works move from early modern to modern English, from Arabized English to Arabic, from one linguistic and geographical location to another, their forms moulded and remoulded by complex cultural pressures. The study focuses on specific examples from three adaptations to show in practice how in these works English is 'constantly crossed, challenged and contested'.*

**Keywords** Shakespeare; Arab; theatre; Islam; translation; globalization

Sulayman Al-Bassam's experiments in the adaptation of Shakespearean drama seem at first glance to be mainly concerned with the sphere of politics. They resemble the overtly politicized adaptations of Shakespeare pioneered by Brecht and common in post-war Europe, and they persistently draw and invite parallels between the social worlds depicted in Shakespeare and political conditions in the modern Middle East. The author's own commentaries on the plays have sometimes tended to highlight the political dimension; and the critical reception afforded to his work readily assimilates it to familiar models of radical agit-prop theatre. In reception the plays tend to be read as specimens of 'counter-colonial' discourse, where, in Edward Said's words, there is a 'clear-cut and absolute hierarchical distinction . . . between ruler and ruled' (Said, 1993: 275).

At the same time Al-Bassam is clearly trying to do something else with Shakespeare, something that goes beyond political parallels and ironic commentary on the state of the Middle East. He is attempting to create new kinds of theatrical language and new forms of cultural mediation. These aspirations can be detected in his own frustration with exclusively political readings of his plays, and in his efforts to present them as plays about language and culture as well as about politics. Indeed Al-Bassam's primary motivation in turning to Shakespeare for models of adaptation, rather than simply writing more new work, is to engage with those larger questions of

ideology, philosophy and discourse that already surround the position of Shakespeare's work within the apparatus of global culture. Although the plays often hint at the 'primary Manicheism' (Fanon, 1991: 81) of colonial society, in which the ruling native authority is the puppet of an imperial world power, they also work to elude such binary oppositions, and are better understood as 'post-colonial' works, located in 'the hybrid, the interstitial, the intercultural, the in-between, the indeterminate, the counter-hegemonic, the contingent' (Hallward, 2001: xi), and investing in 'multiple identity . . . cultural synthesis and mutation' (Pieterse, 1995: 10–11).

This essay will trace the trajectory of Al-Bassam's Shakespearean work from his earliest experiments, through the award-winning production of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* in its multiple linguistic versions, and touch briefly upon his masterly *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*, which premiered at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in February 2007, and has been performed at a number of other venues worldwide.<sup>1</sup> My analysis will be focused on the process of adaptation, showing how Shakespeare has been used in different ways to create modern theatrical media, and on the linguistic and cultural, rather than the political, impact and effectiveness of the plays. In seeking to analyse this unusual hybrid cultural form I will have recourse to concepts of translation, and to theoretical definitions of authorship provided by Pierre Bourdieu's 'genetic sociology'.

In the context of 'New Englishes', Al-Bassam's work needs to be understood as a literary exercise in fashioning new relations between English, historical and contemporary, and various registers of the Arabic language. Al-Bassam speaks Arabic and writes in English. His English adaptations employ an English language with strongly Arabic undertones. Most of the works discussed here were written and performed in English. As Al-Bassam (2006: 25) has explained, some of the works, such as *The Al-Hamlet Summit* and *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* were then subsequently translated into the Arabic language, mixing old and new native forms, and carrying an English frame of reference. Where the plays are performed in Arabic, they are accompanied with a translation, displayed in projected on-screen surtitles, in the primary language of the audience. Thus when performed at Stratford-upon-Avon, *An Arab Tragedy*, spoken mainly in Arabic, carried English-language surtitles; but when performed in Athens, the surtitles were in Greek. Al-Bassam describes part of this process in terms of a linguistic 'layering': 'The texts are written in English and then produced in Arabic, undergoing a layered process of "arabization" and re-appropriation.'<sup>2</sup> But there is a further stage where the Arabic text is turned back into English, producing yet another English variation on the original Shakespeare text. Spectators of *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* at Stratford encountered the unusual experience of visiting the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) to see and hear a multi-layered performance, which invoked the familiar Shakespeare history play, but conveyed the dialogue in Arabic, which was in turn translated on video screens into a mixture of Shakespearean, modern and poetic English.

This article focuses on Al-Bassam's use of English, and on the way in which his dramatic works establish new relations between English, Arabic and other world languages. The English versions have been played in the Middle East, the Arabic in the West, and both to mixed audiences of Arabic and English speakers. It is argued that the performance of these works in 'arabized' English, and the 'bilingual' (Hutera, 2004) use of English and Arabic together in a single performance (as when a piece is

performed in Arabic with English surtitles, and with some speeches in English) is not simply 'translation' for the convenience of different audiences. Part of the meaning of the work lies in the relational interaction of different languages, in particular between Anglo-American English and Arabic: two languages that tend to inscribe and articulate a grammar of global conflict, a 'clash of civilizations', but are here put together with the aim of reciprocal recognition and mutual understanding. 95 100

***Hamlet in Kuwait***

*Hamlet in Kuwait*, a version of Shakespeare's text performed in English, was initiated in January 2001, in association with a cultural festival 'Kuwait 2001: Cultural Capital of the Arab World', an historic celebration of national independence and autonomy which marked the 10th anniversary of Kuwait's liberation from the Iraqi invasion. Al-Bassam's concerns were initially with the potential parallels that could be drawn between Shakespeare's world and his own country. Notwithstanding the context of national celebration, *Hamlet in Kuwait* also offers a deliberate irony in its title: what would Hamlet be doing in Kuwait? The immediate sense of incongruity between this icon of western culture and a festival of Arabic cultural consciousness was clearly a critical starting point for the adaptation. 105 110

Al-Bassam is the son of a Kuwaiti father and a British mother. Born in Kuwait, he was educated in Great Britain and now resides in Kuwait. Al-Bassam's position within Kuwaiti society is that of a loyal citizen, but also that of an internal émigré, capable of viewing his country with a critical scepticism. He has expressed gratitude to the United States and its allies for the liberation of Kuwait, but offers an unqualified critique of American foreign policy. Al-Bassam says 'As a Kuwaiti, there is a lot I owe to the coalition' (Culshaw, 2004); but elsewhere (Al-Bassam, 2007) he speaks critically of 'America's War on Terror', a slogan adopted by Richard and Buckingham in the play as a pretext for repression. He is committed to the cultural development of the Kuwaiti nation, but is also acutely conscious of the nation's need for radical political reform and cultural change. 115 120

Hence *Hamlet* was reoriented to highlight social and political parallels. Claudius is the Arab despot, ruling over a corrupt oligarchy. The young prince, struggling to define himself in a hostile environment, suggests a disillusioned but resourceful younger generation, resistant to authority but diffident about the possibilities of action. The Ghost is a symbol of the Gulf War, a disturbing past that still haunts the people of Kuwait. The production performed 20 times to capacity audiences, playing to a mixed audience of Arabic and English speakers. The tour climaxed in a 'Martyr's Gala' performed in the open air, with tanks and military hardware forming the backdrop to the play, presented to 500 American troops, 20 kilometres south of Kuwait's border with Iraq (Al-Bassam, 2002). 125 130

In speaking of his decision to choose Shakespeare for this exercise, Al-Bassam focuses on the political parallels that can be drawn from the plays, on the classic status of Shakespeare that provides a kind of shield or mask for the radical dramatist, and on the linguistic interrelations facilitated by the enterprise: 135

I have long harboured the feeling that the Arab world with its love of performative poetry, its adoration of rhetoric and the pre-industrial, feudal 140

structure of its societies has a lot in common with Shakespeare's world. In looking for my way in, Shakespeare seemed a natural choice. In addition to being rich, malleable and volatile material, Shakespeare guaranteed me my 'green card' past the Cyclops of the state censor and the prejudices of a largely conservative society.

(Al-Bassam, 2003: 85–6)

To some extent Shakespeare was a 'Trojan Horse' for Al-Bassam, a cultural monument that enabled him to smuggle critical views on his own society past the authorities and to the greedy intelligences of the theatre audience. *Hamlet in Kuwait* 'encoded' its meanings within a Shakespearean register 'a cultural encoding that would allow the work's meanings to override the various linguistic, cultural and political barriers in Kuwait and permit its meanings to explode in performance' (Al-Bassam, 2003: 86).

The form and style of the production bore the marks of its restricted production context. Al-Bassam wanted to avoid any association of his work with minimalism, as the 'largely bourgeois Kuwaiti audience would not distinguish between minimalism and artistic poverty'. Hence additional layers of production value were added in the form of costumes and projection screens. The production had to be accessible, therefore simplified, and had to have strong local resonances. This requirement produced 'a series of site-specific signifiers . . . including visuals of Kuwait's burning oilfields post the Iraqi invasion of 1991 and an exaggerated Claudius-Saddam parallel' (Al-Bassam, 2003: 86).

At the same time there was clearly a meta-linguistic dimension to the work, as suggested by Al-Bassam's reference to the Arab world with its 'love of performative poetry' and 'adoration of rhetoric'. This formulation seems to merge two different linguistic registers: a kind of inflated rhetoric that distorts and conceals reality, and a poetic lyricism that can offer an enhanced and heightened perception of reality. Both Shakespeare and Arab culture contain both possibilities. Shakespeare is associated with certain authoritative powers of language, and Arab culture, with its penchant for rhetoric, can be fatally captivated by that power. At the same time Shakespeare provides for the modern dramatist a register of poetic expression that facilitates new encounters between English and Arabic.

The complexity of this linguistic model matches the cultural complexity of the historical and social context. It is not simply a matter of setting the western canon against contemporary Arab experience, or the English language against Arabic. Shakespeare may be regarded as speaking for the Anglo-American supremacy that invaded and occupied Afghanistan and Iraq. Such an assumption seems to have governed the actions of the Egyptian suicide bomber who used a car bomb in an attempt to devastate the cast and audience of an amateur production of *Twelfth Night* in Qatar in 2005, killing the play's director (see Holderness and Loughrey, 2007). But native forms of authority can also be repressive, and Al-Bassam's Kuwait was liberated from Iraqi occupation by the same powers that now hold the balance in Iraq. There is more at stake in putting Shakespeare and Arab culture together than a new appropriation of the western canon, or a new annotation on the canon from a subaltern national culture. Shakespeare contains raw material and interpretative possibilities that Al-Bassam found useful for his critique of

contemporary Arab society. At the same time, his 'arabized' Shakespeare bears the traces of this cross-cultural encounter, and will never be quite the same again. 190

*The Arab League Hamlet*

Al-Bassam's next adaptation, entitled *The Arab League Hamlet* and produced first in Tunisia later in 2001, took the project much closer to the format of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*. The script used was an adapted version of the Shakespeare text, with scenes cut and rearranged, and the cast reduced to a few principal players. The revised Jacobean text is punctuated with short scenes and interspersed lines in modern colloquial English. For the first time Al-Bassam used the 'summit' setting which added much to the success of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*. The characters occupied a space akin to a political assembly, sitting at and moving around desks and chairs. In this new staging all of the characters were visible all of the time. Projection screens displayed the larger context of 'an empire desecrated by war' and the characters 'adopted the grammar of diplomatic negotiations in a fight for their own survival' (Al-Bassam, 2003: 86). 195  
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The new setting threw the emphasis on explicit political parallels between the world of Shakespeare's court and the modern Arab world, and invited response as to a piece of political theatre: 210

The Kuwait experience had taught me that Arab audiences are very quick to extract political meaning from theatrical signifiers. In fact, as a result of decades of censorship, they had grown to almost demand political significance from 'serious' work. They enjoyed searching for it, hungrily reading metaphors into scenes and digging for signs of dissent in the work – sometimes finding it where there was none intended! . . . I was actively feeding the Arab audience's hunger for political statement and controversy. Indeed, audiences and critics in Tunisia immediately read the work as a piece of radical agit-prop. 215

(Al-Bassam, 2003: 86) 220

An obvious example of this overtly political character is the dumb show from Shakespeare's Act 3. In *The Arab League Hamlet* the inner play is staged as a parody not of Shakespeare's plot, but of the Arab league setting: 225

*On stage, a number of new delegates enter and sit at the conference tables. The new delegates are the usual suspects of the Arab political scene: a man in military clothes, wearing a beret; a man in Western dress with a white shamq; a man in military outfit with a white and black shamq; a Saudi/Gulf delegate in bisht and national costume.* 230

*Claudius, Gertrude and Polonius are highly amused at seeing this witty parody of their own modus operandi.*

*The session is led by the Gulf delegate, he mimes a long discourse, the other delegates mime objections, rise from their seats and are quelled by the Gulf leader.*

(Al-Bassam, 2001) (4) 235

In his Preface to the script of the play *Al-Bassam* unreservedly makes this feature of the play explicit:

We are living in an age of political charades, where the emphasis on ‘spin’, public opinion focus groups and the so-called transparency of government hides a callous agenda of economic and political barbarism. In the recent scramble to unite world opinion behind ‘America’s War on Terrorism’, the slogan mentality that pitches good against evil, crusade against jihad presents us with a world split into two halves each baying for the other’s blood. The politicians that surround us are actors, grotesque frontmen for corporate interests and venal puppets of sham democracies.  
(Al-Bassam, 2001)

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With its modern costumes and frequent excursions into colloquial English, its background of the Gulf War and the introduction of the Arms Dealer, its identification of the fissured Danish court with the fragmented Arab community, *The Arab League Hamlet* fits easily into the category of agit-prop theatre. There is on the other hand another dimension to the play which at this stage has no verbal equivalent, and functions rather via a wordless grammar of theatrical signs. This is best described as a mythic or imaginative dimension, in which the analogies selected to effect a convergence between Shakespeare and the present take us deeper into Arabic cultural and religious sensibilities. For instance the play opens with the smart-suited delegates located in a modern political assembly; but at the centre of the stage is the burial mound of Old Hamlet the assassinated King, and the actors make formal ritual gestures towards it (laying stones on the grave). The grave formed the centrepiece of the performance and a constant reference point throughout the action.

The play’s conclusion displays a typical mixture of ‘political theatre’ styles with a deeper and more disturbing level of psychological activity:

*Then, suddenly, as Hamlet prepares to reply and Laertes is preparing to continue the dialogue, a recording of their words comes in over the loudspeakers.*

*The dialogue is taking place without them!*

*Realising this, as if it were an alarm siren telling them of imminent attack, the delegates pack up their belongings and open the crates that each of them has been given by the Arms Dealer.*

*Inside the crates they find the props required to perform the final act of the play - Hamlet and Laertes both bring out fencing foils, Claudius a pearl, Gertrude a golden goblet.*

*Armed with these things they assemble in front of their desks and walk forward, bemused, then afraid, then aghast.*

*Some of them try to keep up with the words of the dialogue, desperately trying to claw back their autonomy as characters, whilst others simply walk forward sheepishly moving towards their prearranged fates.*

*As they hear their own cries of pain on the recording, they feel these sensations at many removes: they are ghosts.*

⑦

(Al-Bassam, 2001)

Underlying this denouement we can see traces of Stoppard and Marowitz as well as the familiar theatrical conventions of absurdist and political theatre. As the

characters search for meaning they find their own voices disembodied, playing back to them as a surreal echo reflected back by an invisible and impersonal power. They desperately try to catch up with their own lines, or rummage in the prop-basket for equipment with which to realize themselves as characters. They are depicted as overwhelmed by the forces of global politics. 285

But they have also become 'ghosts', apparitions of themselves, flailing in the unreality created by their own actions. Language has become a pre-recorded playback of empty rhetoric. This is very much an Arab critic's vision of his own society, using Shakespeare as a resource. The play is of course haunted by the ghost, the burial mound lying permanently at centre stage as an unforgettable reminder of the past. Here at the end of *The Arab League Hamlet* everyone becomes a ghost: and this is not because they surrender to the authority of the text, or to a universal human condition of absurdity, as in Stoppard. This is the spectacle of characters who realize too late their own ineffectiveness, their failure to engage with and change their world, their fundamental lack of freedom. This mythological dimension, which also has religious overtones (in the Middle East the voice of religious authority is often a mechanically amplified voice) calls for a new form of language, a new interaction of Arabic and English. 290 295

When *The Arab League Hamlet* was performed in English to an invited audience in London it was far less successful. In Al-Bassam's view this was because while the Arab audiences were skilled in reading political meaning from dramatic texts, and saw the play as 'a politically hyper-loaded piece that touched at the very heart of their feelings of despair in the political process', the western audience 'regarded it as little more than a "clever" adaptation of Shakespeare'. As Al-Bassam (2003: 87) noted: 'The political overtones did not translate'. 300 305

In fact it is far more likely that the English spectators encountered the 'political overtones' not as indecipherable but as all too familiar. A 'clever adaptation of Shakespeare' using modern dress and settings, insistently contemporary parallels, back-projected newsreel footage is something of an everyday occurrence. When Peter Culshaw saw *The Arab League Hamlet*, he had no problem in reading this dimension off the very surface of the production: 310

The *Hamlet* I saw in London began with the characters seated behind desks as though at a summit, complete with name tags and headphones. This set the scene for an evening of power struggle, negotiations, compromise and tragic chaos. The overheated, incestuous atmosphere built up ('something rotten in the state of Denmark') with Claudius as a western puppet and the confused Hamlet outraged by the corruption. 315

(Culshaw, 2004) 320

Al-Bassam was correct however in surmising that the production took the British audience into Shakespeare rather than into Arab culture and psychology:

I had wanted to put the English-speaking spectator inside the head of the Arab spectator in Kuwait and Tunisia...I had wanted the English spectator to experience the same sense of strangeness in familiarity the Arab one had felt and, above all, the same degree of implication in the events presented to them on stage. 325

330 But *The Arab League Hamlet* simply did not provide the western spectator with a theatrical language powerful and suggestive enough to facilitate that cultural leap into such unfamiliar territory: 'I was wrong' (Al-Bassam, 2003: 87).

### 335 *The Al-Hamlet Summit*

The most substantial difference between *The Arab League Hamlet* and *The Al-Hamlet Summit* is that in the latter Al-Bassam deviated from the Shakespearean text and produced a wholly new script combining a much wider range of linguistic and theatrical registers. These naturally include echoes of Shakespearean verse and the modern colloquial language of a contemporary-oriented political theatre, but also new layers of poetic language derived from classical Arabic, including the Holy Quran, from contemporary Arabic poetry, and from a 'cross-cultural' poetic sensibility capable of interweaving all these strands and producing from them a new theatrical discourse.

340 *The Al-Hamlet Summit* was first performed in English as part of the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival, in August 2002, where it won awards. It was subsequently presented, again in English, at the 14th Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre, in September 2002, where it won Best Performance and Best Director Awards. Subsequently it was translated into Arabic via a commission from Japan, and performed at the Tokyo Arts Festival in 2004. The Arabic version then played during 2004 and 2005 in the UK (Bath and London), Poland, South Korea, Iran, Singapore and at Elsinore Castle in Denmark. The English and Arabic versions were published together in 2006 by the University of Hertfordshire Press (Al-Bassam, 2006).

345 The newly modernized English script, combined with the political assembly 'summit' setting devised for *The Arab League Hamlet*, played naturally into the category of political theatre. *Al-Hamlet* is if anything more overt in its agit-prop relevance and immediacy than its predecessors. Philip Culshaw said that it 'makes explicit what was implicit' (Culshaw, 2004) in *The Arab League Hamlet*. Al-Bassam (2003: 87) identified the play's themes as 'political corruption, the twisted relationship between willing puppets and their imperial masters, the rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism; suicide as a desperate form of political self-expression'. The parallel between Claudius and Saddam Hussein was further exaggerated; Ophelia is more closely linked to the Palestinian cause; and Hamlet himself more decisively characterized as an Islamic fundamentalist, goaded to violence by internal betrayal rather than by external aggression.

355 This emphasis on specific contemporary political issues offers the play to audiences as a piece of dramatic journalism, or a *roman-à-clef* from which obvious contemporary analogues to the Shakespearean characters can readily be identified. This is exactly how the play was read by many spectators:

370 Polonius is a devious spin-doctor, Hamlet moves from indecision to becoming a Bin Laden-type religious fanatic, while Ophelia ends up as a suicide bomber. CNN-type footage of burning oil wells adds to the claustrophobia.

(Gardner, 2004)

375 Hamlet becomes a religious extremist . . . Laertes joins the army . . . Ophelia is a suicide bomber . . .

(Costa, 2002)



Although the primary historical context of the adaptation is that of the invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War, it was clearly also influenced by the atrocity of 9/11, and this helped western viewers to find paradigms for understanding it: 'the play rides on the aftermath of September 11 2001, and the impact it had on Arab and Western perceptions of one another' (Anon., 2006: 205). (11) 380

Al-Bassam was however trying to do something more than this. These quotations suggest that western spectators of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* are impressed primarily with the way in which the play brings Shakespeare up to date, providing dramatic analogues for contemporary archetypes or stereotypes (the Arab dictator, the Islamic fundamentalist, the suicide bomber) that are visible daily on every television screen. But Al-Bassam wanted to move the spectator away from these temptingly easy analogies, and to that end he tried rather to 'put contemporary figures in the political landscape, within the fabric of another world, a Shakespearean world, and thereby opens up a space for dissent, or a space for another kind of annotation' (Gbadamosi, 2006). The Shakespearean dimension is there to provide a dramatic space in which contemporary events can be re-projected with something like Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, so that the present condition is estranged rather than simply recognized: 'Current political events – and our perceptions of them – hang like a misty landscape, half-perceived, in the backdrop of the play' (Al-Bassam, 2006: 25). Al-Bassam wants his western spectators to think again about contemporary political stereotypes rather than merely to identify (and implicitly endorse) them. (12) 385 390 395

He speaks of this process as a 'cross-cultural encounter': 400

The script was written from a contemporary Arab perspective. It carries many concerns and issues of today's Arab world and its relationship to the West. At the same time, it addresses these concerns to an English-speaking audience. The cross-cultural construction of the piece creates a sense of implication in the affairs of the other. 405

(Dent, 2003)

A 'cross-cultural' drama necessarily entails what Donald Hutera (2004) called a 'bilingual' dramatic discourse. Though natural enough to a dramatist who thinks, speaks and writes in more than one language, this is not a familiar accent to western theatrical spectators. Consider Al-Bassam's version of a Hamlet soliloquy from *The Al-Hamlet Summit*: 410

*Enter Hamlet, barefoot* 415

Peace be upon the grave dwellers.

I am ill, grave dwellers, I am ill,

sick with the lies of the living,

that have spread like shredded pieces of the night,

its end resembling its beginning. 420

How is the end, grave dwellers, how is it worse than the beginning?

I will pass these forty nights between you,

Your bones will be my books; your skulls will be my lights,

I will hold my tongue amongst you,  
And eat from the dreams of the dead.

(Al-Bassam, 2006: 77)

‘Peace be upon you O dwellers of the grave, may Allah forgive us and you – you have preceded us to the grave and we are following in your footsteps’ (Islamic Prayer). The stage direction indicates that Hamlet enters his father’s tomb ‘barefoot’, as a Muslim entering a sacred place. Behind the speech lies the familiar language of Hamlet’s soliloquies in the Shakespeare play, ‘To be or not to be’, and ‘O that this too too solid flesh’, and of course the ‘Graveyard Scene’ of Act 5. But Hamlet’s Christian frame of reference has been replaced by an Islamic context. Al-Bassam’s own note on this passage reads: ‘These lines echo the reported words of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) upon his visit to a cemetery, during one of the last nights of his life’ (Al-Bassam, 2006: 87).<sup>3</sup>

In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* death is the ‘undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns’. It is a realm of insoluble mystery that ‘puzzles the will’. The prospect of death engenders fear and horror. Al-Bassam’s Hamlet speaks directly to the dead in much the same way as the Prophet is reported to have spoken to the occupants of the cemetery at Medina. The peacefulness of death seems preferable to the fragmented chaos, the ‘shredded pieces’ of life. The Shakespearean Hamlet’s ‘break my heart, for I must hold my tongue’ becomes a religious vow of silence, as Hamlet enters a cloistered seclusion of books and skulls. His intention to ‘eat from the dreams of the dead’ graphically fuses the material and the spiritual, knowledge and dissolution, in a single poetic dimension.

This is Shakespeare ‘arabized’, refracted through an Islamic and Arabic sensibility. As Al-Bassam (2006: 25) puts it, ‘[t]he process of generating the Arabic performance of the text also ended up impacting on the original English text. This can be seen, for instance, with Hamlet’s “Peace be upon the Grave Dwellers monologue . . .”’ The poetic rhythms are the nuanced repetitions of Arabic poetry and the Quran rather than those of the iambic pentameter. The sense here of Hamlet’s communion with the dead is quite different from Hamlet’s agonized and anxious encounters with his father’s ghost, or the rancorous jesting of the Graveyard Scene in Shakespeare’s play. Here Shakespeare, contemporary English, and classical and contemporary Arabic come together in a new hybrid dramatic language.

Ophelia’s final speech is similarly arabized and Islamicized:

OPHELIA: Are you recording? Can I start? In the Name of God The Bounteous,  
The Merciful.

LAERTES: Ophelia!

CLAUDIUS: She is mad, Laertes.

OPHELIA: The one who has turned me into a refugee has made a bomb of me.

I have tried to speak the language of women,  
I have tried to forgive, on many nights I severed my tongue  
but my silence bleeds from my mouth.

Here I am the animal that the world forgets,

I have try to speak language of man

But lying no good no change can make to it

Of injustice in life  
 I want people outside to know this  
 That I will express with with my body what is not  
 Able for to express politics and mighty nations  
 So I go to my God pure in my soul in my dignity I am pure. (14) 475

Here Ophelia's 'madness' takes on new associations as her face appears in a back-projected image, swathed in a headscarf, and an echo of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish presses home the parallel between her dispossession ('a refugee') and the plight of the Palestinian people (Al-Bassam, 2006: 87). Her 'madness' includes the arrogation of religious authority by a woman, and her vow of martyrdom (this is in effect a 'video testament'). She has tried to speak the 'language of women', an enforced tongue-biting silence; but human pain will find linguistic expression, and her 'silence bleeds' from her mouth. She has been regarded as an 'animal'; deprived of human rights, ignored, neglected and abandoned. She has also tried to speak the language of men, but in her voice this attempt to assume an alien tongue collapses into ungrammatical fragments. Finally words are put aside altogether: 'I will express with my body what is not/Able for to express politics and mighty nations...'

She hopes that martyrdom will purify her condition and resolve her inarticulacy by translating it into a pure language of action, the silence at the core of the whirlwind of destructive violence. Compare Al-Bassam's Hamlet, who declares that 'the time for the pen is past and we enter the era of the sword' (Al-Bassam, 2006: 82). Ophelia in fact does not achieve an Islamist martyrdom, as she kills only herself; but Al-Bassam's heroine poses a stark contrast with Shakespeare's Ophelia, who helplessly and passively drifts into death. This Ophelia has all the insane clarity of a suicidal martyr. Here language becomes the subject as well as the medium of the drama. 490 495

In addition to these linguistic displacements, the impact of such texts is also a matter of the cultural readjustment required from both kinds of spectator when confronted with a Shakespeare text radically revised and reoriented. Shakespeare is both used as a repository of cultural raw material, especially of political characters and events; and simultaneously read against the grain to deliver meanings arising in the present and well beyond Shakespeare's own historical horizons. Al-Bassam was delighted when he found the Edinburgh audience responding positively to his estrangement-effects, because they were 'acutely aware of hearing a political and cultural voice expressing opinions *very different from their own*' (Dent, 2003: my emphasis). When *The Al-Hamlet Summit* was transferred back to the Arab world for performance at the Cairo Festival, again in English, it generated positive responses from some spectators, but not from all: 500 505

The reactions after the show and in the international Arab press were bi-polar and vehement. For some *The Al-Hamlet Summit* was the work of a Westernised traitor that falsely approximated between Islam and the propagation of violence. For others, and I'm happy to say the majority and particularly the young, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* gave vital and much-needed expression to today's Arab concerns and presented them to the West in a sophisticated and human form. 510 515

(Al-Bassam, 2003: 86)

Not only was there a substantial discrepancy in the reception of the plays between western and Middle Eastern audiences. Opinions within Arab society were also sharply divided and meanings hotly contested. Al-Bassam is acutely conscious of the conflicts and controversies his work generates, and of his own exposure as an artist to accusations of cultural disloyalty. His position remains firmly that of a tolerant pluralism, his aspiration to construct bridges between divided nations and communities: 'I hope that *The Al-Hamlet Summit* can make its contribution towards building those frail bridges of cultural understanding that are so easily burnt by the dogs of extremism and war' (Al-Bassam, 2003: 88).

### *Richard III – An Arab Tragedy*

Al-Bassam's most recent Shakespearean adaptation, a version of *Richard III*, was performed at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 'Complete Works' project that ran from April 2006 to April 2007. The repertory consisted of 'mainstream' productions and parallel or alternative versions ('responses'). *An Arab Tragedy* was billed as a 'response' to Michael Boyd's production of *Richard III*. The project was initially titled *Baghdad Richard* (tickets were sold under that title) with the Gloucester-Saddam parallel clearly foregrounded. Al-Bassam changed the title in response to changing events, particularly the trial and execution of Saddam, but also out of a realization that in this theatrical medium, oversimplification is a constant danger:

With the rapid change of events in the region and also as I delved more deeply into it to make that comparison really work, I reached the conclusion it would be selling both histories a bit short in trying to make a foolproof comparison between Richard III and the rise and fall of Saddam Hussein.

(Grimley, 2007)

The new title *An Arab Tragedy* suggests a broader territory, not just Iraq, and broaches wider issues of concern to the Gulf States and the Arab world in general:

In this piece, I am using a foreign (English) history to explore contemporary political anxieties in the Gulf and Arab region . . . *Richard III* offers the model of a crisis of succession that turns into a nightmare.

(Royal Shakespeare Company, 2007)

This theatrical 'nightmare' goes well beyond the interpolation of agit-prop relevance, and has the capacity to take the spectator deeper not only into Arab culture, but into language, and into territories of myth and communal emotion where trans-cultural rapprochements can more effectively take place. I will discuss one example, the murder of Clarence.

Shakespeare's Act I, Scene iv is the long scene of Clarence's murder. Clarence tells Brakenbury of the dream which anticipates his assassination. In the dream Clarence finds himself in the underworld, and is rebuked by the ghosts of his victims for his crimes of perjury and murder. The murderers then enter and engage in some

clowning before falling to their task. Clarence cannot believe that Edward would wish him killed, protests his innocence and appeals to shared Christian values: 565

I charge you, as you hope to have redemption  
 By Christ's dear blood, shed for our grievous sins,  
 That you depart and lay no hands on me 570  
 (Wells and Taylor, 1988: I. iv. 184–86)

There follows an energetic debate on the authority of kingship vis-à-vis God's law; whether or not the guilty have any rights to mercy; the proper punishments for perjury and murder. Eventually the murderers confide in Clarence the truth that they act for Gloucester. He pleads for his life, and they kill him by beating him and drowning him in the wine-butt. 575

Al-Bassam concentrates this whole sequence down to this:

– I swear there is no God but Allah. 580

God forgive my sins.

... In God's name what art thou?  
 – A man as you are. 585

– If you be hired for money go back again and I will send you to my brother Gloucester ...

... He shall reward you better for my life than the King does for news of my death.

– You are deceived, he hates you. 590

– Do not slander him.

He is kind and merciful.

– Merciful as rain on mud huts. He sent me to slaughter you. Pray now for you must die.

– Dare you counsel me to pray to God yet would war with God by murdering me? ... 595

... He who kills without due reason, it is as though he kills the whole of humanity (Q.);

– Pray!

– *And do not shed blood that is sacred by Allah's law (Q.);* 600

– Pray!

– Al Rawandi in the sources says: *beware of shedding innocent blood* –

– Pray!

– Pray!<sup>4</sup> 605

Here Clarence is presented as a devout Muslim who quotes the Holy Quran and illustrations from Islamic scholarship against unlawful killing and the violation of innocence. Not surprisingly there is no wine-butt: instead Clarence is drowned in the sacred water he has used to perform his ritual ablutions. Simultaneously the musical accompaniment deploys an old Gulf sea-song, thus invoking poetic associations of dreaming and drowning. 610

Al-Bassam has moved the narrative of Clarence's dream from this scene to an earlier scene with Richard. In the murder scene there is no detailed account of Clarence's past, or the role he has played in previous political machinations: he seems an ordinary pious man who is conscious of his sins, and prays for forgiveness. His appeal to his murderers is articulated in terms of the Islamic values they share, just as, in Shakespeare, Clarence appeals for mercy through the blood of Christ. 'All the Christian elements have been uprooted and replaced with Islamic references', observes Peter Aspden, and quotes Al-Bassam: "'it is a political play, but it happens in a very religious context... a secular, western audience would normally see that in a very historical way, but this way it becomes contemporary'" (Aspden, 2007). The Quranic quotations used by Clarence speak out against the murder of innocence, and the reference to 'the shedding of innocent blood' invokes the tradition of Ibrahim and Mohammad, the young sons of Muslim and the descendants of the Prophet, who were assassinated in a story that forms a direct and detailed parallel to the story of the Princes in the Tower. Thus Clarence as victim is shifted closer in this version to the massacre of the innocents later practised on young Edward and Richard.<sup>5</sup>

In Shakespeare's scene, Clarence's Christian language is undermined by the murderers' indictment of his crimes. Here however the issue is not Clarence's guilt – for who is guiltless? – but the moral atrocity of assassination itself. The murderers instruct him to pray, although his prayers clamour out against their actions. They decline to enter any kind of religious debate with him, thus letting the stark moral beauty and clarity of the Quranic injunctions stand in clear contrast to the act of butchery perpetrated by those who purport to share their victim's faith. This is more than a substitution of an Islamic for a Christian frame of reference. This is an attempt to draw the spectator inside an engaged but critical perspective on Islam and the violence that shadows it.

## Translation

As indicated above, Al-Bassam's work is not easy to categorize either in political, cultural or linguistic terms. Writers coming to Shakespeare from within an Arabic cultural and historical context would normally make the encounter through Arabic translations of Shakespeare, which have existed since the late 19th century. These vary greatly in terms of their relationship with what we consider the 'standard' Shakespeare text. Earlier translations were made from French versions that were already very free adaptations of the kind common in the 18th-century theatres of Europe. These sought to create from classical Arabic materials an equivalent for Shakespeare's 'high style'. Later translations rejected these traditional registers and rendered the plays into more idiomatic language (see Al-Bahar, 1976; Al-Shetawi, 1999; Hanna, 2003; Enani, 2006). As an English-speaking Arab educated in Britain, Al-Bassam came to the plays in English, but with an awareness of the considerable liberties of adaptation taken by both classical and modern translators and redactors of Shakespeare (Holderness, 2006: 9–12). *The Al-Hamlet Summit* is the product of an English-speaking Arab dramatist writing a free adaptation of a Shakespeare play,

one which presupposes Arab culture and the Arabic language as context and discursive infrastructure.

When this work was translated into Arabic, a collective activity in which Al-Bassam was involved, the theatrical text produced was clearly at two removes from Shakespeare. Similarly the kind of adaptation we see in *An Arab Tragedy*, where much of the Shakespeare text remains intact although (as in *The Arab League Hamlet*) transposed, restructured and with passages in English added, is quite unlike, in its specific collage of elements, any previous translation or adaptation. The English text used for *An Arab Tragedy's* surtitles, derived from the Arabic, was at three removes from Shakespeare.

The complexity of this genre of writing can be grasped if we pose the deceptively simple question of authorship. In what sense is Sulayman Al-Bassam the 'author', or to use Pierre Bourdieu's term the 'originating consciousness' (Bourdieu, 1993: 193) of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* or *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*? Works such as these display a complex and hybrid genealogy in which we see marks of their affinity with Shakespeare, in both English and Arabic translations; with Al-Bassam himself, who performs a number of functions – writer, translator, adapter, director, impresario, even actor (he played a role in *An Arab Tragedy* at Stratford); with generic contexts such as European political theatre, whose influence entered Arab culture from Eastern rather than Western Europe; and from contemporary Arabic writing, especially poetry. As we see, even the writer, who would seem the most fixed point in this matrix, presents a shifting and volatile subjectivity: bilingual; both originating writer and adapting dramaturge; both theatrical entrepreneur and performer; both inside and outside the productions. It is no more possible to predicate a linear relationship between writer and work than it is with Shakespeare (who was also of course both dramatist and poet, both an inveterate adapter and an original writer, both a theatrical entrepreneur and an actor in his own plays). To explain this complex set of functions we need a concept like Bourdieu's 'trajectory', 'the series of positions successively occupied by the same writer in the successive states of the literary field' (Bourdieu, 1993: 189).

Bourdieu also provides a useful theoretical paradigm for understanding Al-Bassam's work in his notion of 'genetic sociology', a relational model of cultural production that 'problematises the social conditioning of cultural works' (described here by Sameh Hanna):

It locates these practices in a social universe of available positions to be occupied by agents with particular dispositions. Thus conceived, Bourdieu's relational model guarantees a multi-directional understanding of socio-cultural practices that takes into consideration not only the objective structure of the cultural field within which they are produced, but also the trajectories of the agents who contribute to the making of these practices. Genetic sociology, in a word, takes issue with the linearity of teleological reasoning which posits that socio-cultural practice is the mechanical response to a unitary stimulus. Instead, it conceives of this practice in terms of multiple causation and as the product of the dialectical relation between objective social structures and the subjectivity of social agents.

(Hanna, 2005: 169)

At the same time, since we are dealing here with writing that moves between two languages, we also need access to some notion of translation. Al-Bassam is no ordinary translator of Shakespeare: but then Arabic translations are not ordinary translations. Traditional translation theory, which had its roots in the Enlightenment, was 'prescriptive'. A translation was considered a 'secondary and derivative activity' in which the criterion of success was vested in notions of fidelity or 'philological proximity' to the original. The original in turn was privileged as an authoritative source, so 'the assumption was that all translation was in some way destined to fail the original'. Now however translation is understood as not prescriptive but transitive: 'translation is a teleological activity of a profoundly transformative nature' (Heylen, 1993: 2–5). If translation seeks to suppress and render invisible its own transactions with the original, this can be exposed as an ideological operation, the invocation of what Frederic Jameson (1981: 58) called a 'master-code'. Lawrence Venuti (1995), for example, argues that the master-code of Anglo-American translation is 'consumability', an invisible fluency that reproduces the capitalist mode of production.

Clearly different conventions operate between translation for everyday communication and 'literary translation'. Heylen calls the latter 'a creatively controlled process of acculturation' (Heylen, 1993: 25), in which the translator can adapt an original text to 'a dominant poetics or ideology in the receiving culture'. But translators do not need to simply acculturate the original. They can seek a compromise between the two cultures; or attack the dominant poetics of the imported culture; or use the foreign import to disrupt the receiving culture. Earlier Arabic translations of Shakespeare were examples of acculturation, with Shakespeare domesticated into an Arabic high style. Later more vernacular translations represent a form of compromise between the two languages and cultures. Al-Bassam's hybrid productions offer an implicit critique of the imported culture by forcing Shakespeare into the present, and disrupt the receiving culture by showing Arab society its own reflection refracted through the Shakespearean glass. Here then translation is a form of cultural negotiation, and the works themselves a fertile and disturbing form of intercultural communication.

These works are 'hybrid' in a number of senses. They display a bilingual coupling of divided cultures. They secure a rapprochement between a familiar antiquity, and an estranged vision of the contemporary world. As stage works they show themselves capable of securing intelligibility for audiences of differing language, culture and literary knowledge. *The Al-Hamlet Summit* has worked successfully on stage in the Arab world but also in Britain, Europe, America and the Far East. It is therefore a global commodity that can transcend national, ethnic, cultural and linguistic barriers. But it is at the same time a form of cultural production that carries a sharp critique of the terms on which globalization is usually proffered.

The writing of *Al-Hamlet* began with the experience of globalization:

I was in Cairo with an exiled Iraqi theatre director and a Palestinian theatre troupe from Ramallah drinking coffee in the bazaar when a boy came running past us, chanting: '*Al-Kull murtabit/Am-reeca qarabit*' ('Everything is linked/America just got closer . . .'). It was September the 11<sup>th</sup> and news from New York was just beginning to stream across the television screens. In all the confusion of that



night, I remember the words of one of the Palestinian actors: 'The hell in New York today will bring hell to Ramallah tomorrow.

(Al-Bassam, 2003: 85)

755

9/11 is the supreme instance of globalization. The boy's chant celebrates the shrinking globe and the ease with which Islamic terrorism can reach to the very heart of America's political and economic institutions. The Palestinian actor thinks ruefully of the consequences, immediate reprisal not from America but from Israel, and against the Palestinians. Global events know no barriers of time and space.

760

In an article on 9/11 former British Prime Minister Tony Blair echoed these sentiments exactly. 9/11 'brought home the true meaning of globalization':

In this globalised world, once chaos and strife have got a grip on a region or a country, trouble is soon exported. . . . It was, after all, a dismal camp in the foothills of Afghanistan that gave birth to the murderous assault on the sparkling heart of New York's financial centre.

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(Blair, 2002: 119)

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This is the negative side of globalization. But globalization also provides the potential solution to such problems. Blair (2002: 119) reflects that the West can 'use the power of community to bring the benefits of globalisation to all' in the form of truly universal values: '. . . values of liberty, the rule of law, human rights and a pluralist society . . . Values that are universal and worthy of respect in every culture' (Blair, 2002: 121).

775

Al-Bassam clearly intended the *Al-Hamlet* as an intervention into this fraught conversation:

The globalisation of politics is deceptive. Every Arab knows that George Bush said 'either you are with us or you are against us' and everyone in the West now knows that Saddam is bad. This is globalisation of politics, but it does very little to increase dialogue between cultures. All it does it promote vacuous 'world views'. This is where culture and theatre become vital. They permit complexity and difference and they permit the weak to be other than pitied and the cruel to be other than hated. Theatre challenges the accepted world views and breaks the mirrors of authority. Shakespeare understood that power very well.

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(Dent, 2003)

Globalization is not only inevitable but desirable, since it is the only route to mutual understanding and a stable world. The problem is how to develop those links without conflict and violence; without the supremacy of the West; without the suppression of alternative cultures and consequent global homogenization. In this process theatre has a critical role to play. This is quite a different approach from Tony Blair's vision of globalization as a universalization of enlightenment values. The 'hybridity' of Al-Bassam's work, its investment in 'cultural symbiosis' is clearly designed to form a ground of constructive dialogue between East and West.

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Silence bleeds', as Ophelia affirmed in *The Al-Hamlet Summit* (Al-Bassam, 2006: 78). To stop the bleeding there must be conversation. The conversation must be

global, therefore international, multilingual and intercultural. 'Everything is linked' in the globalized world, either through violence or through an acceptance of reciprocal 'implication'. For nation to speak peace unto nation, we need such new hybrid cultural forms; such a new transnational theatre; such a new English. The last word belongs appropriately to Fayeze Cossack, the Syrian actor who plays Richard in *An Arab Tragedy*: 'Whenever I sing you my song, and you sing me your song, then we become relatives on this earth. Otherwise we will be enemies' (Grimley, 2007).

## Notes

- 1 *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* played at the Pallas Theatre in Athens (May 2007) as part of the Athens Festival, and was scheduled to play in early 2008 at the Bouffes du Nord, Paris, and in Amsterdam.
- 2 Personal communication from Al-Bassam to the author (5 May 2007).
- 3 Muslims use the ritual phrase 'Peace and Blessings Upon Him' (PBUH) when referring to the Prophet.
- 4 From the English text used for surtitles displayed on video screens in the Stratford production. I am grateful to Sulayman Al-Bassam for supplying me with this material.
- 5 There are many resemblances between the two stories, which clearly have deep folk-tale roots. The Sons of Muslim are held in a dungeon; the sight of them praying together moves the jailer so much he releases them; they are killed successively but remain united in death. The mausoleum of the Sons of Muslim can be seen at in Moosayab near Karbala in Iraq.

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885

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